

Breath Mints / Battle Scars

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Breath Mints / Battle Scars

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Summary

For a moment, she's almost giddy. Because Draco Malfoy's been ruined by this war and he's as out of place as she is and — yes, he has scars too. He's got an even bigger one. She wonders whether one day they'll compare sizes.

I

August 1st, 1998

~~Dear~~ Diary,

That's fucking stupid, actually. Whoever said it had to start that way? You aren't dear to me. I don't know you. I don't want you. I'm — I'm doing this because ~~they said~~ I have to. For healing purposes. To be perfectly honest, I hate you, Diary. Just as I hate all things like you. Things that are frivolous and unnecessary, like you. You're fucking useless. Ugly. Stupid fucking book. You don't even have lines. What fucking useless sort of fucking journal doesn't have lines? Oh, because "lines will interfere with the authenticity of it." Bloody fucking hell. Fucking load of bollocks. What about a Quick Quotes Quill? No, of fucking course not! Why make anything simple for me? And now look! Now they've got me talking to you like you actually exist — like you're a fucking human being. Turning me into a fucking head case. Perfect! Here you go, you fucking knob-ends. Just for you! Some perfectly natural, unscripted, stream-of-fucking-consciousness writing. That's what you wanted, right? Here it is. Oh, you're going to fucking regret it. I'll make sure of it. You're going to want to burn this stupid, fucking, ugly, purple, fucking book until it's fucking black. I don't need this.

Fuck you.

Draco Malfoy

September 1st, 1998

She picks at a thread on the knee of her jeans — stares as it snags, starts to take other threads with it. The hole widens. Gapes. Harry and Ron have changed already, and idly she wonders how much stronger that makes them than her. She can't put on those robes. Not yet. Even as the train barrels through the last of the tunnels before Hogsmeade, leaving ten minutes — maybe — before they reach the station. Even as Ron says, "'Mione," quietly, sort of pleadingly, as if he thinks he needs to remind her. She *can't*. She can't.

Her arm itches. More than it usually does. And Harry looks strange in his Gryffindor tie. Looks... wrong. Misplaced in the clothes of a child that he is not.

The trolley witch makes her jump — makes her spine shoot up straight so quickly she almost hits her head on the back of the compartment.

The witch yanks the Honeydukes Express to a halt in front of the sliding glass door. "Anything from the trolley, dears?" Her face is plump and pink and smiling, as always. "Last sweets to tide you over before the feast?"

"Oh, I'm stuffed."

"No, no, thank you."

Harry and Ron both answer politely, but by the time Hermione even manages to form words in her head, the witch is gone. And she looks back from the door to find both boys staring at her.

"Hermione," says Harry gently. Too gently. "It'll...it'll be all right. It'll get better."

This should be a great comfort, coming from him. He went through the worst of it. Still — somehow, it isn't. She nods, though, swallowing what feels like a stone in her throat. "I'll — erm, well — I'll go get changed, I suppose." And she gets to her feet, pretending she doesn't feel the blood rush to her head, ignoring the dizziness.

She wishes she was as strong as Harry. Wishes she knew how to cope.

Wishes she could *breathe*.

It would probably be better, in some sick, morbid sort of way, if it didn't look so much like it used to. If the stones hadn't been repaired just so, if the bridge hadn't been rebuilt to look so precisely like it once had.

Maybe if they'd left some of the bloodstains on the ground in the courtyard.

It's that part of her brain. The strange, new cluster of emotions she doesn't quite understand yet. They make her think dark things, every now and again, with a bizarre, lighthearted sort of vibrance. It's gallows humor, she thinks. A coping mechanism.

Harry and Ron walk ahead of her as they enter the castle for the first time since the war. Again, she wishes she had their courage. Wishes she didn't still see those bloodstains, even when they aren't there. But she does.

She sees them *all*.

This really is the worst idea the Ministry has ever had — their takedown and capture of Muggle-borns the year previous notwithstanding. It's another coping mechanism, of course. Acting as if it all never happened. Moving on — continuing where everyone left off. But it's a worse mechanism than even hers, she thinks.

She's been through too much, seen too much — *done* too much to just fall back into routine and finish her final year. To slip back into the current and let it drag her body along. It feels wrong. Surely, she can't be the only one who feels that way? She catches herself looking around at the others as they file into the Great Hall; a sea of vaguely familiar faces and some that are far too familiar. And the wool of her robes is scratchy against her too-sensitive skin, the tie around her neck too tight. She searches desperately for someone who looks — *feels* — as out of place as she does. But the odds are not in her favor if even Harry is doing so well — acting so natural. Ron is *Ron*, still. Always. Even after losing Fred. And her eyes find Ginny, whose face is split by a rare and very real smile as she talks to what looks like old friends. Hermione doesn't remember their names. She wonders if she should. Wonders if she knew them, once. She finds Neville next, who seems to have blossomed, of all things, after the war. He's a few inches taller, but miles more confident, and he and Luna are practically joined at the hip. His voice booms over the others as it never has before, alight with some story he's telling that has Luna thoroughly entranced.

Hermione's almost certain she's it — she's the *only one* who can't move on, the only one who can't get past—

Oh.

Oh.

Her stomach drops into her shoes. She's suddenly overly conscious of the dead skin on her dry lips and the ever-present itch in her arm. She scratches compulsively at it as she stares at him, her feet

having stuttered — hiccuped to a halt.

He's sort of half in robes, half out, his shock of blond almost covered by a black, knit stocking cap. She's never seen him wear a hat before. It confuses her eyes so much that she has to blink — once. Hard. He's bundled up in a scarf, too, despite the warm September weather, and she thinks she sees the stripes of his Slytherin tie buried beneath it, but she can't be certain.

No — no, he's not in robes at all, actually. Now she's sure of it. It only takes a second more to realize. He's in an overcoat. Long and black, almost like robes. He's dressed for winter and it's not his tie, it's part of his scarf, and his face is pale as ever, his lips a sickly red-orange. The skin around his eyes is sunken and darkened, and he looks like some sort of unnatural, albino raccoon. He's leaning against the stone wall, waiting for the bulk of the crowd to pass through the gold doors first, and he's so tall he's practically looming there. Gazing down at all of his former peers and all of the giddily oblivious First Years like a very omen of death.

He does not look well.

He — he looks *awful*.

And she thinks it's that part of her brain again that somehow finds comfort in it.

Draco Malfoy looks awful. As bad — no, *worse*, than she does. The war is not gone for him, either. And yes, it's comforting. It's despicably fucking comforting. Because even if it is *him*, it means she isn't a complete lunatic. It means she isn't the weakest out of all of them because she can't move on.

It means that someone gets it. Someone's going to struggle as she does.

Even if it's *him*. Even if it's him.

His eyes flit upward then — meet hers like a car crash. A head-on collision. She thinks she actually takes a step back.

Those vacant, grey depths fill with something. Grow less empty. And she watches them squint — twitch in the smallest of movements, almost too small to catch. Then he resets his jaw, straightens his back a little, leaning fully against the wall so that he looks down on her now, too, even from their distance. One of his long, bony hands fusses over his forearm — another tiny movement she almost doesn't notice. But she sees his fingers flick — jab — scratch at the fabric over the skin for just a split second. It's the last movement she sees before their eyes disengage and he slips off the wall — slips around the edge of the doors and vanishes like a ghost.

And for a moment, she's almost *giddy*.

Because Draco Malfoy's been ruined by this war and he's as out of place as she is and — yes, he has scars too. He's got an even bigger one.

She wonders whether one day they'll compare sizes.

Ha. There it is again.

Gallows humor.

II

September 4th, 1998

Diary,

They're telling me not to swear so fucking much. I think that's asking a lot, don't you? I think that's pretty supremely fucking ridiculous. You can't make a rule book for stream-of-fucking-consciousness writing, and that's what they told me to fucking do, isn't it? If they don't like the way my consciousness looks, they can take their fucking virgin eyes elsewhere. I'll say it again. I don't fucking want their help. Hello! Yes! I'm talking to you. I don't want your fucking help. At all. I don't want to fucking do this. I don't need it. I don't—

Bollocks. Broke my fucking quill. Thank you again! Hope you get ink stains on your bloody hospital wear. Fucking knob-ends.

What am I forgetting? Oh, yes — the fucking prompt for today! Even more rules for stream-of-fucking-consciousness writing. Imbeciles. Here.

"What differences do you see in yourself following your trauma?"

Who wrote this fucking question? My trauma? I'm pretty absolutely-fucking-sure it was more than just my trauma. You mean the war? The fucking war that decimated the Wizarding World? That killed a few thousands and destroyed thousands more? That trauma? It should traumatize you too! What the fuck's the matter with you people?

But fuck it. Sure. I'll play.

I'm here at fucking Hogwarts, of all fucking places, by Ministry order, fucking taking classes and in order to get through that, let's just say I've developed a rather healthy affinity for Firewhiskey. It burns to all hell, and it's bloody fantastic.

Oh, and I don't sleep at all and I'm about fifteen pounds lighter and my fucking arm is infected. Just a few minor changes. Nothing noticeable. Happy?

Fucking fucking fuck you.

Draco Malfoy

September 7th, 1998

A week disintegrates before her eyes. It's as though she watches it from behind a glass. From outside of it.

That's how she feels. Like an outsider. Because they keep *laughing*.

Laughing and smiling and talking about nothing of consequence and passing notes in class like Second Years and joking and teasing and staying up late and *laughing* with one another. Laughing like nothing's happened. Like they've all been reunited after some sort of overlong holiday.

Not a bloody war.

She can barely stand to be in the Gryffindor common room. To be around all of it. She sits off to the side, far enough away that the light from the fireplace doesn't touch her, and tries to ignore it. Maybe it's jealousy. She admits that a part of it definitely is. She wishes she could feel that way. Behave that way. See the world that way. But it's like the war's put a special tint on everything, and it's all a little bit grayer. A little bit darker.

Seamus casts a Bat-Bogey Hex on Dean as he's sipping tea. It's a catastrophe. And it's something she would've laughed at two years ago.

There are a lot of things she would've done two years ago. Smiled back at Ron. Prattled on to Harry about what she's reading. Stayed up late in the dormitory, talking with Ginny and Parvati about Zacharias Smith's unexpected growth spurt.

But not now.

She just wants to get away from it. Just wants to focus on her classes — study even more religiously than before. Wants to get through it and get out. And she's spent the past week trying to force herself to stay in the common room in the evenings, despite it all. To be at least *moderately* social. Present. But tonight her arm is itching something awful — almost burning, and each laugh makes her stomach clench, and after about a half hour of saying, "No, thank you, I'm fine," to everyone who asks her to come over — over and over and *over* again — she can't take it any longer.

She runs. Bails. Jumps ship.

She's out of there so fast she can't even recollect the last ten seconds. Only sees the back of the Fat Lady's portrait flying out of the way and the outside corridor whipping past her line of sight. Her book is clutched like a vise to her chest — Merida Swoglot's *Magical Must-Haves for Moving On*. She's forcing herself to read it. Has to consider the logic of studying healthy coping strategies. And even so, it's nice to feel the weight of a book in her hands, especially one like this. A tome. A big, heavy affair that weighs her down to the earth like an anchor.

Several flights of stairs go by in flashes, too, and before she knows it, she's in the deserted foyer leading to the Great Hall. The torches are lit and it's as cozy and inviting as it ever was, but she can't — she can't stay, she has to keep going.

She's out on the front grass in the next instant, and the air has a chill but it feels good. She can breathe this. It isn't humid, isn't warm like the common room, and it flows down her throat effortlessly.

Still, she charges down the hill, stumbling once or twice as it gets steeper, grinding her teeth until a headache blooms in her temples and digging her shoes into the earth, and she doesn't stop until she's a few inches from the lapping shoreline of the Black Lake.

She stills. Draws in a deep, *deep* breath. Waits.

Either for her heart rate to go down or to come to her senses.

She listens to the water swell and withdraw, watches it soak into the mossy grass at its edge. The moon is a waning crescent — a spot of lonely blue in the clear black sky. She stares up at it, enjoying her first moment of peace since returning to Hogwarts.

And then she hears the water crash. Thresh. Break louder than it should. And her eyes snap down as she gasps — panics and stumbles back, falls at the sight of a figure a few meters away, half

submerged and in shadow.

Her hand is trembling as it finds her wand. "*Lumos!*"

Pale, wide eyes stare back at her, somehow surprised and disinterested at the same time. He's sopping wet and fully clothed. Well, no. Not fully clothed. He's in what look like pajamas — a t-shirt and the waistband of a pair of boxers, the rest of him underwater. The shirt looks like tissue paper, glued to his skin, completely transparent, and his hair sticks up on one end, spiky and wet. It's flattened over one eye and dripping down his face on the other side. His white skin reflects the moonlight like a mirror.

"Malfoy?" she says. It's sort of a question. Sort of a stunned statement of fact. And it's whispered like a curse.

"Granger." He crosses his arms over his chest, and his voice has a bite she guesses she should've been expecting. "Where's the rest of the Golden Trio? Out for a midnight stroll all on your own?"

She thinks about what she's seeing. Thinks about the time of night. The way he looks. The way he looked on that first day.

He went into the water with clothes on.

"Are — are you trying to drown yourself?" The words are out before she's even fully processed it. Her wand light is shaky with the trembling of her arm, casting Malfoy in a jerky, almost psychedelic light, like a strobe.

His lip curls up on one side. He sweeps the wet hair out of his face. "Rude of you to interrupt, don't you think?"

She falters. Sucks in another sharp breath, caught off guard. "You — I — *what?* You...you *were?*"

A sudden, unbidden image of Malfoy in crisis floods through her mind. It's hard to picture at first, and then it just all starts to throw itself together like a jigsaw puzzle, and she can see exactly how he'd get to this place. He's a Death Eater. For life. And his side lost. His family lost. She isn't sure what happened to their wealth and to what was undoubtedly a sizable inheritance. Was it seized by the Ministry for damages? Or are their riches simply marked with shame? The Malfoys are pariahs now. That she knows for certain.

And now he's here — surrounded by Order members and war heroes and it's...it's strange to think about.

Malfoy. In crisis. Without his father here to fix it for him.

She's so caught up in it, she almost misses his response.

"Bugger off, yeah Granger?" He's got that same, snarky drawl he's always had — and yet, there's an undertone now. It's not quite boredom, but it's something of that nature. Exhaustion, maybe. It rips her right back into the present. "I'm sort of in the middle of something here," he continues. "Privacy would be nice."

She bristles, gaping at him for a moment. What in — what the *hell?*

"I'm — *no*, Malfoy, I can't just *bugger off*—"

"Of course you can." He turns his back — faces the long dark expanse of the lake.

"You were trying to *drown* yourself. I can't just—"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Granger."

"—*leave* at a time like this. You — you need—"

"*Don't*," and his voice is so sharp it slices through the air like a knife — silences her instantly, "say the word *help*."

He's in profile now, not looking at her but not quite looking away either. Her wand light illuminates a lone drop of water as it glides down the top of his spine, disappearing beneath his shirt collar.

She lets her arm drop, and the light vanishes, plunging them into near total darkness as their eyes adjust.

"Fine," she says, deadpan, and she can barely see his outline now. "I won't." He's the same. Still the Malfoy he was before, just a little worse for wear. A part of her wonders whether she'd expected him to change. Whether she'd expected the war to deplete some of his seemingly endless reserve of bitterness and cruelty.

No. That would be stupid, wouldn't it? People don't change.

"I don't care what you do to yourself." And now her voice is haughty. Sour. "Have at it." She turns on her heel, all the peace of moments ago stolen, and she begins the long hike back up the hill — furious. Both with herself and with Malfoy. And with the Ministry and with her friends and with the whole damnable situation.

She should've stayed in the common room.

But she's about thirty paces from the Black Lake when he says it. Not quite a shout. She wonders if he even meant for her to hear, or if he just wanted to have the last word, even in his own mind.

"You don't know anything, Granger."

She pauses — has to stagger her feet to stay balanced on the hill, but she pauses for just a moment. Considers firing something back. Considers trudging all the way back down and demanding he get out of the water. Demanding he stop acting like such a *coward*. Demanding he face it like she has to.

Because if he's gone, she's the only outsider left.

She wonders if that's really the only reason she cares. Wonders if the idea of Malfoy drowning actually bothers her.

Some survival instinct sends a jolt of steel through her blood, and she stiffens — hardens. Lurches forward and starts up the rest of the way.

No. It *doesn't*.

It doesn't.

III

September 8th, 1998

Diary,

Fucking bitch.

Not you. Not this time, at least — isn't that a surprise? The object of my immediate rage is someone fucking else for a change. Not that you're off the hook.

But it's Granger. Fucking Granger. You don't know her but you'd be sorry if you did. She's — she's fucking absurd. Fucking impossible to deal with. A hellish amalgamation of every living thing I can't fucking stand. Fucking egregious, loathsome, know-it-all, stubborn, salt-in-my-fucking-eye swot. I'd been so hoping I'd be ordered to kill her during the war. So hoping. (Fucking relax, yeah? I'm reformed.)

You'd kill her too, though, if you had the chance. You'd wring that ridiculous, avian little neck before she got a full sentence out. Because she'd probably be telling you you're wrong. Probably be making you feel like your head's up your arse, when really it's the fucking broom up hers that makes everything so fucking difficult.

To make matters worse, she's sulky now. Sulky. What goblin crawled out of a hole and decided we needed that particular hex on our lives? I want to shake his hand, because it's a fucking top-notch torture method.

Granger's already a know-it-all. I can't imagine anything worse than a sulking know-it-all. Add that frizzy fucking nest on her head and you've got dinner and a show.

I hate this. I hate her. I hate all of them.

I just want to be left the fuck alone. Is that so hard? So wrong?

Another prompt for today. Tossers.

"What methods are you using to incorporate balance into your day to day life?"

Firewhiskey just might be the answer to everything at this rate. And the occasional Stinging Jinx to the face. I do it myself. Feels great. Really helps me balance.

So yeah.

Get fucked.

Draco Malfoy

September 8th, 1998

She can only pick at the peppered Italian breakfast sausage, toying with it with her fork, although it smells divine. It's the only thing on her plate, and she can't make herself take a bite. Her appetite has been missing in action for a week or so. Since returning to Hogwarts, really.

And the incident with Malfoy the night before really doesn't help.

To make matters worse, for the first half hour of breakfast, he isn't at the Slytherin table, and for twenty-nine full minutes, she thinks he's actually dead.

Harry and Ron question the distraught look on her face more than once, but she brushes them off — blames a stomach ache and keeps staring, either at the table or the doors to the Great Hall. Occasionally at the windows. The ones facing the Black Lake.

The image of a pale, floating body is far too vivid, painted on the backs of her eyelids each time she blinks.

Is it possible that he actually went through with it?

She'd thought she made up her mind on the concept. On whether or not it even matters to her. Had decided it most certainly *does not*.

But now she's not so sure. She's disconcerted, to say the least. She wonders if she can afford to blame herself for anything else.

It's an ugly Wednesday outside. The sun beats down, with no clouds to disturb its hot haze, and the light of it streaming in through the windows is starting to give her a headache. She's debating giving the rest of her sausage to Ron — making some excuse about returning a book to the Library. And she's actually, *truly* debating whether or not to skip her first class and seek refuge under her covers for an extra hour. It's an incredibly alien thought. There was a time when even if she was vomiting, she'd force herself to attend. Use her Time-Turner to escape to the lavatory every few minutes. But that feels like centuries ago, now. And truancy might be exactly what she needs in this moment.

Her fork is only halfway to Ron's plate, sausage stabbed between its tines, when a violently blond head appears over by the doorway.

She drops the sausage — narrowly misses Ron's plate, but he garbles out "Thanks, 'Mione," anyway and picks it up off the table with his fingers. Jams it in where there's no more room. He doesn't notice where her attention's gone.

Bastard.

It's the first word to come to mind. The only one that feels at all appropriate in this moment. And she stares at Malfoy with all the will in the world to stab him with her eyes. Skewer him, like that damned sausage.

Cruel, unfeeling bastard.

He has the nerve to yawn in the doorway, half-lidded eyes surveying the four tables casually, unimpressed. Hermione screws up her expression — warps it into the most furious, uncompromising glare she can muster and then locks it in place. She waits for those grey eyes — those empty, lifeless, unsympathetic *holes* in his face — to fall on her.

And they do. They skip — like a rock on water. Trip and tumble over themselves, and he does a double-take. Stares back and then straightens a little as he realizes the full, hostile weight of her gaze. He sniffs — curls his lip like he always does, and she purses hers and she doesn't notice she's digging her fork into the soft wood of the table until Harry grabs her wrist.

“‘Mione?” His voice is cautious, like he's working with a frightened animal, and it steals her

attention for just a moment. Gives Malfoy his chance to escape. He dislodges from the stand-off and finds a seat at the edge of the Slytherin table, pace brisk.

She sighs and slumps.

“It’s just Malfoy,” says Harry, and she guesses their stare off was a little more noticeable than she’d thought. “Don’t waste the energy on him.”

But she isn’t. She’s — she isn’t *wasting energy*, it’s more than that. She just watched minutes of her life get scraped off because she had to grapple with the possibility that she *let* someone *die*. Which is *stressful*. Thirty minutes of her life. Gone. So, it isn’t *just Malfoy*.

It’s more than that.

Ginny takes a seat across from them then, bright red hair tied up on top of her head. She looks fresh-faced and well-rested, and for a long moment Hermione is consumed with envy. It mixes with her rage at Malfoy and spoils her expression further, and she watches Ginny’s original smile fall off her face.

“What’s wrong?”

Harry answers for her. Says it again, damn him. “Just Malfoy.”

And Ron finally looks up from his sausage. “S’going on?”

“No — it’s nothing. Nothing,” she says, dropping her fork and wiping all the anger from her face. Clean slate. “Move off it. It’s fine.”

This is apparently the wrong thing to say.

“Did something happen?” asks Ginny, and she’s leaning in further now. Harry, too. Ron is still chewing, bless him.

“What’s going on?” Harry presses.

“*Nothing*,” and her voice comes out a little too defensive. She can see from the way Harry and Ginny’s eyes darken a bit — suspicious. Sometimes she hates that they’re so alike. “Nothing,” she says again, more calmly. “It’s just...it’s strange, seeing him here. It’s difficult. I don’t know why he came.”

“Well, he had to come,” is Ron’s first contribution. “We all did.” He buries his spoon in the jar of marmalade and starts spreading it on both the toast and the sausage.

“No, I know that — I...” she falters, can’t help her eyes from flicking back over towards the Slytherin table, “I just assumed he’d find some way to buy himself out of it, like always.”

He’s put that knit stocking cap on again, and he’s wearing a thick, sea green, cable knit sweater. It’s too big on him — too long in the sleeves, drowning his slender hands. His head is propped on them and he hasn’t even bothered to grab a plate, and this time the similarities of their situations bother rather than comfort her.

She forces her eyes away. Looks back to Ginny, whose suspicious gaze won’t ease off.

“I’m fine, Ginny. *Really*.” And then she says something honest, for the first time in what feels like weeks. “Just...having a little trouble adjusting.” And she immediately hates herself for saying it

out loud. Even though they've all undoubtedly noticed. Even though it's obvious.

But she hates the way they're looking at her now.

Ginny reaches out — takes her hand and squeezes, and it's sweet — really, it is — but she's glad when she doesn't linger. Pity is *awful*. She hates it, above almost all else. Almost above Draco Malfoy.

Her eyes flit back to him *again*, and she swears it's involuntary, but it's the unusual shock of color that holds her attention this time.

Purple, of all things.

A bright, unorthodox and violently loud shade of purple. Malfoy's got the color in his hands, and she realizes after a moment that it's a book. No — not a book, a notebook. He isn't reading, he's writing, and he's got this pinched and perturbed sort of look on his face as he does it and she is suddenly, alarmingly, *inconceivably* curious.

Some of the other Slytherins look curious as well, elbowing each other and whispering — pointing at it. Color bias is an unfortunate reality at Hogwarts, and it isn't as simple as girls with pink and boys with blue. House colors are practically sacred. Step outside those boundaries — wear green as a Hufflepuff, wear red as a Slytherin (god forbid), and you've violated some unspoken code of conduct.

Slytherin House is particularly austere in this regard. Any colors at all, really, aside from muted neutrals and the holy green and silver, are generally frowned upon.

Malfoy's breaking a lot of social rules right now. But, to his credit, he really doesn't seem to care. Doesn't even seem to notice, even with all the blatant stares and whispers — the jokes. He's concentrating hard on it, quill gripped tight, brows furrowing — creasing and smoothing every other second as he writes.

She doesn't know why, but she desperately wants to see what he's writing. He doesn't seem like the journaling sort — not at all. And if he is, then there's a side to Malfoy she's never seen. Which is — unsettling.

She drops her eyes. Almost knocks over her tea as she goes to grab it — sips it for dear life. She devotes all of her attention to the flavor of Earl Grey and vanilla bean and resolves never to think about it again, no matter how intriguing.

Curiosity has killed a great deal more than cats.

September 10th, 1998

“Millicent says he's gone completely mad. Apparently he's been seeing a Psychiatric Healer for weeks now.”

She hears it on the way to the Hospital Wing. It's her weekly scar treatment this afternoon, and she's hoping to ask Madam Pomfrey for an itching salve as well — none of her spells have worked.

But she forgets about all of it, because the two girls are Slytherins — Third Years, by the looks of it — and they're whispering in such a way that whatever they're discussing must be downright shameful.

It stops her mid-step, and she finds herself drawing off to the side. Slipping into an alcove to listen. She isn't the eavesdropping type. Really, she isn't. But she has a sense of who they're talking about, and it's a rare chance to hear the details from an inside source.

"Yes, and *I* heard it's Ministry-ordered," says the other girl. Hermione can't quite see her face, but she's twirling one of her braids and chewing on the other. "It was that or an Azkaban sentence."

Her friend scoffs. "That sounds like a rumor."

"It's *not*. Some people say *he's* the one who actually killed the old Headmaster."

"Should you really be discussing things you know *nothing* about?"

She doesn't consciously choose to say it, but it's out of her mouth regardless — and her feet follow her words. She steps out of the alcove and comes to stand before them. She isn't quite sure if she's angry, simply because they're disgracing Dumbledore's memory, or if it's something else. But it's moments like these that she wishes she'd given more thought to Professor McGonagall's proposition — her offer to be Head Girl. It would give her immense pleasure to take House points from these girls.

But things like that — taking House points and monitoring the halls — they all seem so juvenile now. She couldn't accept.

The girls stare at her wide-eyed and pink-cheeked, and then they begin to whisper to one another about her, as if she isn't standing a foot from them.

"Clear off before I find a Prefect," Hermione snaps, "and start acting your age."

They giggle and run off, and she sweeps her eyes back into her head, adjusting her bag on her shoulder and turning the corner toward the Hospital Wing.

She knows not to put any faith in rumors — just look at what they're saying about Dumbledore. But one piece of the conversation won't leave her head.

A Psychiatric Healer...

She wonders. She does.

IV

September 11th, 1998

Diary,

At the great risk of sounding like a Hufflepuff, I'll come right out and say it. It's bad again. The spell keeps wearing off prematurely, no matter what I do, and damn if it doesn't burn. Not that it means anything to you lot. What was it you said, again? The situation doesn't "qualify" for more powerful treatment?

It's infected, you fucking cunts. Can't you see it? I'm in fucking pain.

And if you see this as some sick form of belated punishment for all of it, then I shouldn't be the one writing in the bloody diary. I only want drugs. Something different. Anything. Take it away. I'm not against begging — as you've seen before.

But you don't care, do you?

Thought your side was supposed to be all about mercy. Kindness. Well, congratulations, you have them all fooled. You're just as evil as I am. Own it.

And for the love of Merlin, give me drugs.

Give me drugs give me drugs give me drugs give me fucking drugs.

Or I'll have to resort to more desperate measures.

Draco

September 14th, 1998

She doesn't know what happened. Not really. After all, she didn't even *like* Lavender.

But they're in Potions with Slughorn and they're working on Pepperup Potion. Parvati and Padma are at the desk adjacent to hers, fussing over their cauldron and Hermione's cutting up ginger root, and she just happens to look up at precisely the right moment.

Or, the wrong one.

Happens to look up when Parvati makes a joke about the smell of it — an inside joke from what she can tell — and as Padma laughs, Parvati does this little quarter-turn. A normal person wouldn't have even noticed it. But Hermione *knows*. Knows she was turning to tell Lavender. She sees the way Parvati stops herself — sees her smile falter. She gives her head a little shake and turns back to Padma. Clears her throat and continues working.

Because Lavender's gone.

And something about it doesn't sit well — digs thorns into Hermione's stomach. She feels sick. Suddenly, blindingly, dizzily sick. Her hand slips and she drops the roots in prematurely — the potion hisses and smokes. She hardly notices. Her knife clatters to the floor, and a few eyes flit her

way. More follow when she turns and dashes for the door.

“Miss Granger?” Slughorn calls, but she’s already halfway down the Dungeons corridor. And she only just makes it to the lavatory before her body loses control. Lurches. Gags.

And she retches into the nearest sink.

Maybe it was the look on Parvati’s face. Or the empty space beside her where Lavender should’ve been. Would’ve been.

No, it’s the whole idea of it. The whole concept of *loss*. Parvati’s face and Ron’s eyes when they’re in the common room and he glances over at where Fred and George used to sell their contraband sweets. Even Malfoy, stalking around on his own, and Zabini and Goyle wandering separately, with Crabbe gone. The office in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, where Professor Lupin once took his tea. The Potions classroom as a whole.

All of it.

Another convulsion ripples through her gut, and she gags again, leaning further over — trying to gather her hair up and pull it out of the way. The retches come and go for a good five minutes — empty out her stomach. And when she’s finally able to lean back, she sees her own face in the mirror.

Pale — clammy. Her eyes are tired and her cheeks are hollow and she *hates* the way she looks. Hates that the war is written all over her face. She can’t hide it. Not with a spell, not with Muggle make-up. It bleeds right through.

Another swell of nausea builds in her throat. She bites down on it and rips her wand out of her skirt pocket instead.

“*Reducto*,” she says, voice empty — quiet. But the shatter of the glass is impossibly loud. Echoes through the lavatory.

And suddenly she’s breaking the others. All of them. She follows the curve of the sinks, smashing each of the mirrors to bits as they appear before her. She turns. Splits the wood of one of the stalls. Decimates another. Sends a black, gaping crack running through the tile on the floor, all the way to the far wall. The water from the toilets starts to spray like fountains, and the image of First Year it brings to mind is unfriendly — unwanted in this moment.

“*Stop it!*” she screams to no one. To herself. She shatters the porcelain of the toilets, one by one, glass crunching under her feet with each step. “*Stop! Stop! Stop it!*” And her voice and the glass echo together now, the lavatory descending into chaos.

She’s soaking wet and the hiss of the broken sinks and toilets sounds like snakes, and she just throws her head back and screams. At the ceiling. At the world beyond it. She throws one last hex — breaks the last standing sink — before falling to her knees.

Glass slices into her skin. Buries deep. She can hardly feel it.

Crimson spreads into the water on the floor around her — slowly, beautifully. She stares at it, watching it curl and twist.

And when she looks back up, he’s watching her.

Malfoy.

Of fucking course.

He's standing in the doorway, wand drawn at his side, staring down at her sort of passively, despite it all. He looks almost like he used to, in Sixth Year, now that he's in uniform. Crisp shirt. Green tie. Blond hair almost white. But he's thinner and taller and generally less present. Like a ghost of himself. And he just stares at her. Wordless. She doesn't understand the look in his eyes.

And she doesn't move off her knees. Doesn't try to hide or fix any of it. Doesn't try to push her wet hair out of the way or wipe up some of the blood. She just looks back at him, chest heaving, tears she hadn't noticed before streaming down her cheeks, and says the first thing that comes to mind.

"This is the girl's lavatory."

Malfoy waits a long time to speak, taking a slow, careful step in past the doorway. A shard of porcelain snaps under his shoe. "It *was*," he murmurs at last. He still has that emotionless look on his face. She hates that she can't read it. Can't decipher it. She's always hated unsolvable puzzles.

"What do you want, Malfoy?"

He shrugs, looking around at the destruction. Studying it like it's some everyday thing. "Thought another troll might've gotten in — what, with all the noise." His eyes flit back to her, and he adds, "I see I'm not entirely wrong."

Hermione's on her feet in an instant, wand straight out in front of her — aimed between his eyes. "Try me, Malfoy."

And it's infuriating that his expression doesn't change — remains as cool and collected as ever. Again, almost bored, like always.

"I liked it better when you just punched me," he says. "Much more to the point."

A snarl rips out of her throat. She closes their distance, slipping on water and glass along the way. But she plants her feet in front of him, closer than she thinks she's ever been, and she jabs the tip of her wand into the smooth flesh under his chin.

"And how about if I kill you?" she hisses. The words surprise her on their way out. But it's a satisfaction all its own to watch his expression flicker — just the slightest bit. Enough. A small crack in the unfeeling mask.

He huffs out a breath — it sweeps down across her face, ice cold and spiked with peppermint. He's sucking on one. She can see it now, see the way he rolls it around under his tongue. She thought he'd just been grinding his teeth.

Suddenly, he reaches up, wrapping his hand around the length of her wand before she can wrench it away. But he doesn't try to take it. Just grips it tight and presses it harder against his own throat. "Go ahead," he says. "Do it."

And the memory of him at the Black Lake rushes up to the forefront of her mind.

Of course he would say that.

Malfoy wants to die.

She gasps. A cut, little gasp. And she staggers back, slipping her wand free of his hand. Hot blood

is leaking down her legs. Her tears are dry. His eyes are empty.

And they just stare. Stare for what feels like hours.

Then he says, “See?” and his mouth quirks up into a dark, uneven smile. “You can’t.”

His words from the other night ring in her head. She throws them back at him. “You don’t know anything, Malfoy.”

And she’s satisfied again when another crack opens up in his mask. His mouth moves — he chews on the breath mint. And then his lips part like he’s about to speak, something scathing locked and loaded on his tongue.

Shuffling feet. Something scrapes to a halt behind Malfoy. Someone.

And they both turn to find Mandy Brocklehurst and Daphne Greengrass in the doorway. Their eyes are wide, mouths agape. And Hermione suddenly realizes what it looks like.

The lavatory in shambles.

Both their wands are drawn.

The two girls are shortly overshadowed by a Professor. It’s Havershim, the new Professor of Transfiguration. And she sees their wands before they can stow them.

“Professor,” Hermione breathes. “It isn’t—”

“Miss Granger, Mr. Malfoy,” Havershim snaps — cuts her off. “Come with me this instant.”

Malfoy turns on his heel and strides out the door without a word. But Havershim has to snap at her again — “*Now*, Miss Granger,” — to get her to move.

A shaky breath exits her lungs. She swallows thickly, glancing around one more time at the destruction. And then she follows.

Out in the corridor, she falls into step behind Havershim — beside Malfoy — as the Professor leads the way to the Headmaster’s Office. Heads are poking out from Dungeon classroom doors, watching them as they walk. They heard the noise, most likely. And now they’re whispering.

She sees Ron’s red hair — just a flash of it as she passes. Doesn’t want to look at his face.

But Daphne and Mandy have been following behind, trying to collect all the juicy details. And she can’t help but hear Mandy’s words — hear what will no doubt be the story that spreads throughout Hogwarts in the coming days like Fiendfyre.

“Malfoy tried to kill her.”

McGonagall has preserved much of Dumbledore’s Office, leaving most of it as it was. Fawkes is perched where he’s always been, beak nestled under his wing as he sleeps. The portraits have been rearranged, but only slightly, so as to fit Dumbledore’s in the center. And she’s even left his dish of lemon drops on the desk.

There are only a few personal touches here and there that suggest the Headmaster has changed. A vase of deathless flowers on a pedestal by the door. The purple cushions on the chairs. A floral

teacup on a saucer rimmed with gold. Small things.

As they enter behind Havershim, McGonagall appears from around the corner, dressed in fine velvet robes. She wears her hair in a long braid over her shoulder, and her glasses are perched on the end of her nose.

“Good afternoon, Headmaster,” says Havershim, straightening up and adjusting the tilt of her green, pointed hat. “I’m sorry to be visiting under such circumstances.”

McGonagall’s watchful eyes have moved past her — settled on Hermione and Malfoy, a slightly arched brow the only shift in her expression. “And what circumstances are those, exactly?” She moves to sit at her desk, the high back of the chair much further from her head than it’d been from Dumbledore’s. Hermione is surprised she notices.

“I’m afraid I happened upon these two in the girl’s lavatory, down in the dungeons. The place was blown to bits. Sinks and toilets everywhere — and here’s these two standing in the middle of all of it. Looked as though they’d been dueling.”

At this, McGonagall’s brow furrows deeply. She motions with two fingers for them to come forward as she asks Havershim, “Do we know the cause?”

Hermione opens her mouth then, but Havershim is already speaking.

“It appears the Malfoy boy was looking for trouble.”

A noise leaps out of Hermione’s throat. Sort of an incredulous, little squeak. She whips her head around to look at Havershim — who seems quite content with her summation — and then at Malfoy, who doesn’t try to defend himself. Doesn’t even look angry, or surprised. He just sets his jaw and stares straight ahead.

“I imagine Miss Granger acted in self-defense, seeing as—”

“Professor, *no*,” Hermione manages at last. “No. You’re *wrong*.” And she turns — comes to stand at the edge of McGonagall’s desk. “Please, Headmaster, she’s wrong.”

McGonagall regards her with a calm, even gaze. “You were not acting in self-defense, Miss Granger?”

“No, Headmaster.”

“So it was you who attacked Mr. Malfoy?”

She can’t believe how twisted it’s all gotten within the span of a half hour. “No — I...no, Headmaster, it isn’t what it looks like at all,” she says, exasperated. She glances back at Malfoy, and he looks confused, if anything. Still, though, he doesn’t speak.

Hermione sighs and looks back to McGonagall. “It was me, Headmaster. I destroyed the lavatory. And — and Malfoy just happened upon me.”

“*You?*” Professor Havershim splutters. “What *ever* for?”

Hermione doesn’t answer her. Just holds McGonagall’s gaze — hopes she’ll understand, in some way, that it isn’t something she can explain. That there is no rulebook for coping. That her head is a mess and her actions are a byproduct.

“I’ll fix it myself,” is all she says. “And I’ll do detention, for however long you’d like.”

“Miss Granger—” McGonagall starts, and her eyes are starting to fill with that pity Hermione can’t bear to see.

“*Please*, Headmaster,” she breathes.

McGonagall pauses. Shuts and purses her lips. She looks between Hermione and Malfoy for another long moment and then sits back. “A week then,” she says gently. “I’ll have you brewing antidotes with Horace.”

It’s hardly a detention. Everyone in the office knows that. But McGonagall’s word is final, despite what Havershim seems to think. As she and Malfoy are dismissed, she hears Havershim start to argue with her in hushed tones.

But Malfoy has the greater half of her attention.

He’s fast. By the time she’s made it down the spiral staircase, he’s halfway across the hall. She chases after him — calls out “Malfoy, wait!” before she even knows what she plans to say. Or why.

She has to call out twice more to get him to stop, and when he does, his back is rigid. He doesn’t turn to her, even when she stops about a foot away.

“I — I’m sorry,” she says after a moment, and she wonders why she feels the need.

“What do you care?” is his clipped reply.

“I — I just am. It wasn’t fair.” She feels awkward where she stands. Overexposed and clumsy.

“Very little in this life is fair, Granger.”

“No, I *know*, I just—” Why is she stuttering? “I don’t know why Havershim thought—”

He cuts her off, face jutting to the side, in profile, “She thought. McGonagall thought. They’ll all think tomorrow.” And then he turns that last quarter of the way to meet her eyes, gaze searing. “That’s bias for you, Granger.”

She falters.

“And you should know all about that.”

A moment later he’s gone.

V

September 17th, 1998

Diary,

Saint Potter has it out for me. I'm writing this so you'll know who killed me when it eventually happens, yeah? Take notes.

He's been glaring at me all week, during meals, and I'll be honest — it would be a lot more threatening without those ridiculous glasses. I've no idea what the Weaslette sees in him. Square-faced, round-spectacled ponce. Surprised he's not on a victory tour across Europe. Soaking in the glory.

But he's here, and he's going to try and kill me, alright? And he'll make it look like an accident. He thinks I went after Granger, which is just — Merlin's right tit, don't get me started. As if I'd waste my time on something like that. I don't even have the bloody energy. Give me a little credit.

Anyhow. Here's your prompt.

"Think of some constructive mantras to help you through. List them."

1. "Drugs would be really helpful."

2. "How about some drugs?"

3. "Oh — I know! Drugs."

I'm assuming you've sent them along and the parcel's just been delayed by a wayward owl.

For your own good, that'd better be true.

Draco

September 19th, 1998

It's a bad day. She can feel it coming on, even as she wakes. The looming sense of dread. Like a heavy black curtain falling from above. She's had many mornings like these.

And so she takes counteractive measures.

She's got one more detention with Slughorn this afternoon, but otherwise it's a Saturday, and she's finished her homework ages ago.

The dappled light slipping in through the window beside her bed suggests it's as early as six o'clock. And yet she can't sleep another moment. She sits up. Slips her wand off the nightstand and casts a spell to tame her curls, feeling them right themselves around her head.

She moves quietly through the dormitory, maneuvering around the sleeping girls as she shrugs into a thick, chenille sweater — tucks her feet into a pair of boots. The days have been warm, but September mornings are anything but. And she wants to be outside. Needs to be, on a day like this.

Hogwarts is more peaceful in the morning. It has a less foreboding edge than late at night, but is equally empty. Equally calm. Even the ghosts rest, and the silence is a relief. Outside, on the Grounds, it's even better. Even quieter, and what few sounds break through are welcome ones — birds; water lapping; wind against blades of grass.

She's drawn to the Lake again. Didn't get to enjoy it properly last time, what with Malfoy...

Thinking about him brings back what he said the week before. About bias. She still isn't sure if he was accusing her of something, or if it was a comment about her blood status.

They were both right, though. Mandy Brocklehurst's spin on the story was the one that stuck, and by Wednesday of that week, the whole school assumed Malfoy had made an attempt on Hermione's life. Mind you, it changed very little about his reputation. His family is disgraced. Just like the Goyles and the Parkinsons. People will talk no matter what fuel they're given.

It doesn't make her feel better — but she squashes the thought before she has the chance to feel sorry for him. Reminds herself that he's a Death Eater. He chose this life. He comes from a family of *murderers*, and with any luck he would've joined them. So that's that.

She itches at her scar, then remembers what Madam Pomfrey said and gives it two sharp smacks instead. Itching inflames. Sharp pressure, though — it distracts from the pain a little better.

The grass grows soggy underfoot as she stops at the edge of the Lake, day breaking over the distant mountains like a bright eye peering through the crack of a door. She casts a drying spell. Pulls the wool blanket from her bag and lays it out, sitting cross-legged and drawing in a deep breath of crisp air.

In the distance, the Giant Squid flicks up one of its arms, breaking the surface and sending small waves lapping toward her.

This. This is what she needed.

She practices charms for a while. Conjures a ring of flowers and pastel-colored mushrooms around her blanket. The dandelions have yawning lion's heads and snap at one another, and the roses change colors every other moment. She creates a small whirlpool in the lake in front of her. Sends flower petals swirling through it. Conjures a weeping cherry tree, off to the side.

Little by little, birds begin to discover her small oasis. They hover over the flowers. Perch themselves in the tree and sing to her.

There's a Muggle thermos in her bag. She doesn't know why, but she brought it with her. Something tangible, from home. From her parents. It's dented and cracked, the color faded to an off-brown, but having it gives her a melancholy sort of comfort.

With a flick of her wand, the thermos fills with coffee, sweet-smelling and steaming in the cold air. Warming the tip of her nose. She takes a sip, and it's nice — it's gentle. But it's not enough. Which is precisely why she slipped a nip of Baileys Irish Cream into her bag as well.

And that's how he finds her. Dosing her coffee with whiskey at half past six in the morning.

She hears him before she sees him — the crunch of his shoes. Knows it's him. Who *else* would it be? At this hour, and with her rotten luck? Who else?

"Malfoy," she says — an acknowledgment — and she just stares straight ahead, holding the thermos up to her lips.

“Day drinking, yeah Granger?” he drawls. His voice is thick with sleep.

She sips. Swallows. Waits for him to leave.

And after a moment of silence, there’s more crunching in the grass. But it’s louder. He takes a seat on the wool at her side, and she has no idea why, but he’s there, and his weight tugs some of the blanket out from under her and she can’t help but sneak a glance at him out the corner of her eye.

He’s in the stocking cap again, and a thin, overlong sweater, the color of dark chocolate. He’s also barefoot, of all things, and the skin on his feet is a pale blueish shade.

“Where are your shoes?” she asks primly, taking another sip.

He doesn’t answer. Leans forward instead and thumbs one of the purple mushrooms. Taps and flicks at it until it snaps in half.

She sighs. “What do you *want*?”

“You don’t own the Lake, Granger.”

“Yes, but I do own—” she tugs roughly, to no avail; grunts, “this — *blanket*, so could you *please* —”

Malfoy sits back, sprawling his legs out and crossing them at the ankles. He flexes his toes against the petals of the flowers and scoffs, “What exactly is all this?”

“Something I was supposed to have to myself.”

“Sharing is caring, Granger.” He shoots her a tainted smirk. “Isn’t that what you Muggles always say?”

She splutters. “I am *not* a—”

“Oh, sorry — right. I meant Mud—”

She casts a wordless *Accio*. Yanks the blanket out from under him, and he slips, sliding down the hill a bit until his feet splash into the water.

And then he laughs. Sticks his feet in further until the legs of his trousers are wet. “Always *were* good with spells.”

She takes a large swig of coffee in favor of saying anything else. Decides he doesn’t deserve a response. And she glares unhappily at her ring of flowers. They start to wilt as her mood sours. The mushrooms grow deformed. How many more moments is he planning to ruin?

He can’t even let her throw a proper fit without showing up and taking all the credit. *She* decimated that bathroom. *She* did.

Fucking *bastard*.

He doesn’t try to sit next to her again, and instead moves himself closer to the edge of the grass. She watches him roll up the bottoms of his trousers until they’re cuffed at his knees. And then he dips both legs into the water.

The temperature must be well below freezing.

But Malfoy behaves like he's just stuck them in a bath. His posture relaxes — spine slackens.

And then there's quiet.

Long quiet. Enough that one of the flowers comes back to life. Malfoy's got his eyes closed and his breathing is slow and even, and idly, she thinks that — without obscenities spewing out of his mouth every other second, without that sneer on his face — his presence is almost forgettable. Tolerable.

She casts a charm on the thermos to warm it back up, because it's old and really, it doesn't work at all. Still, she keeps it. Uses it whenever she can.

Staring at the slow sunrise, she sips and thinks. Thinks and sips. Wonders a lot. Can't help but wonder a little about Malfoy. He was barefoot to begin with, but now she can see the blue of hypothermia bleeding into his knees. His lips are purple.

But he doesn't shiver.

Doesn't anything bother him at all?

“What did you put in that?” he asks, and she jerks her eyes away. Knows he's caught her staring.

“Put in what?”

“The coffee.”

“Oh.” She takes another sip, almost compulsively, because it's relevant. “It's — erm, Baileys. Whiskey with cream.” And awkwardly she adds, “It's good.”

“It's Muggle whiskey. How good can it be?” The familiar tone is back.

Her next sip is angry. A point-making sip. “You've never tried it.”

He looks back at her then. Seems to consider her for a moment, and then he pulls something from his trouser pocket. Shows her a flask. “I only drink one kind of whiskey.”

She can smell the harsh cinnamon the moment he unstoppers it. The smokiness. As he takes a swig, she says, “You can't put Firewhiskey in coffee.”

“Can't I?”

She watches as he performs a rather impressive piece of magic. Conjures a French press in midair, which presses itself and then pours into a conjured mug. He takes it. Toasts the sky. And then he spikes it with a shot or two of Firewhiskey.

It's fun to watch him suffer. Really, it is.

His face screws up at the first sip — goes a splotchy red. And then he chokes and gasps, and hot coffee leaks from his mouth, spilling into his lap. A hand flies up to his face to cover his nose as he chokes and splutters some more. He lets the mug drop and it dissolves into smoke before it hits the grass.

“No, you can't,” she says, out of spite. It's easy — nice even — being mean to him. Sort of refreshing when she's constantly held to the standard of a golden girl. Because Hermione Granger isn't mean. Isn't spiteful. She's the one who helped Harry Potter destroy seven horcruxes. The one who stopped the Dark Lord. She doesn't take pleasure in spite.

But, oh, she *does*. If only they knew how much she does.

By the time Malfoy can gather his wits, his eyes are watering — bloodshot. He tosses the flask away like it's red hot and splashes lake water onto his face. And he does everything he can not to look at her.

"It's the caffeine," she says, finally. Relents. "It doesn't mix with flame whiskies. Becomes sort of corrosive, really."

"Do I look like I care, Granger?" He wipes his mouth, glaring straight ahead.

That's one thing she's always known about Malfoy. His ego is ever so sensitive. Fragile. And it's also one of the few things she doesn't blame him for.

It's a product of growing up with Lucius as a father, no doubt. It's the reason he couldn't show up to Quidditch practice in Second Year with a standard broom. Why he couldn't stand to be bested by Harry in Dueling Club. Why he challenged Buckbeak.

And she thinks it's why he never corrects the ones who call him a murderer. Because he failed to kill Dumbledore, and it was an embarrassment to him. To his family.

Malfoy can't bear to be embarrassed.

She's surprised when she finds herself extending an arm. Holding out the thermos to him.

He jerks to the side at first, when he sees it. Shoots her a look of shock, and then of suspicion. And then, of course, he sneers. Lets some poison out. "I'm not drinking *that*. Not when you've put your Mudblood mouth on it."

She clenches her teeth, breathing in. "Yes, and I'm letting a Death Eater touch it — can you imagine?" She holds it out further. Flares her nostrils. *Insists*.

It's one of the few times she's seen Malfoy look absolutely dumbfounded. With those sullen eyes wide and those pale lips slightly parted. Stranger yet is his response.

He shuts his mouth. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. And then he clears his throat and takes the thermos out of her hand. "Fine, then," he says. "Have it your way. Cheers, Granger."

And he takes a sip.

VI

September 21st, 1998

Diary,

Not that it matters, but Muggle whiskey doesn't taste all that bad in coffee.

Prompt: What is your favorite happy memory?

See? I hate this shit. Why do you care? You don't — that's easy. I know you don't. And for the record, I don't feel healed at all. None of this is helping me. None of it's taking any of it away. What's the point?

My favorite memory isn't even a happy memory anymore. It can't be, thanks to people like you. Thanks to your side. Because my favorite memory is my mum making lemon tarts for me when I was eight and Father was out and it was raining. She sat by me on the sofa in the parlor and let me play with my noisiest toys for hours because Father wasn't there to insist on silence. On decorum. And — and we went for a walk. In the rain. Got wet. Got covered in mud. Tracked it into the foyer and didn't care. Mum was happy. I was happy.

And now she's on house arrest and Father is in prison.

So I don't have a favorite happy memory, yeah? Hope it gives you a good laugh.

Draco

September 26th, 1998

Small mercies.

They still exist, in depleted numbers. And today, they come in the form of Madam Pomfrey.

Miss Granger,

I was informed by Professor Slughorn that it was you who assisted with the brewing of antidotes for my stores last week, and I must say I was most impressed by their strength. Should you have any interest, I would like to offer you a temporary position in the Hospital Wing. You would be working closely at my side, every other day of the week after lessons, assisting with antidotes, healing spells and experimental projects.

Headmaster McGonagall supports the idea, and should the situation arise, she says she will be happy to excuse you from lessons during periods of high volume in the Hospital Wing.

A position like this could put you well on your way to a prestigious career at St. Mungo's, if Healing is a future interest of yours.

I hope you will consider.

Sincerely,

Poppy Pomfrey

The letter is on her windowsill in the morning when she wakes, likely delivered by an owl in the night — and it's the first good news she's had in nearly a month. The first since she's been back at Hogwarts.

She reads it twice. Three times. Sets it down for a moment and reads it a fourth. Madam Pomfrey is known to be very particular about her work. Hermione has never seen a student assisting her in the Hospital Wing before.

It's a compliment — a large one, as well as an incredible opportunity. She knows that's the important part. But more than anything, to her, it's a distraction. An escape.

A chance to be at Hogwarts without trying to relive the past. A chance to do something meaningful, rather than study what she's already read — test what she already knows. It's new. It's different.

Her reply is a scrawled mess of excitement and anticipation, and it's far from subtle with regard to when she should start. She finds herself practically flying to the Owlery to send it, waking up portraits left and right from their early morning sleep.

It's a chance. A chance to feel normal again. One she can't let slip by.

She scampers up the feather-laden steps, actually able to enjoy — for once — the crisp morning air against her face. But it's short-lived. Because as she rounds the corner through the doorway, she collides with him. Knows his voice from the muffled “—*bleeding fucking hell*—” that comes out on their way down.

They hit the stone hard, landing in feathers and owl droppings, and Malfoy is back up on his feet in the very next instant. He wipes at his trousers with all the panic of an aristocrat in expensive clothes — because that's what he is, after all — but it's the flashes of purple in his hand that draw her eye.

“The fuck's the matter with you, Granger?” Malfoy snaps, dropping his arms and glaring down at her on the floor.

Her eyes follow the journal, though, dangling from his fingers at his side. The curiosity she'd felt that morning at breakfast hadn't died, as it turns out, like she'd thought. Because it's back with a vengeance now, and she finds herself subduing the peculiar urge to swipe it out of his hand.

“Oi. *Granger*. Knock a screw loose, did you?” Malfoy waves his free hand in her face.

The last time she'd seen him outside of classes had been at the Black Lake. He'd taken a tentative sip of her Baileys and coffee and been unable to hide the small spark of surprise — of interest — from crossing his face. So he'd handed it back. Wiped his mouth. Given her a strange, imperceptible nod and then he'd leapt to his feet and walked back to the castle.

Without another word.

She can't help but think he looks worse than usual today. The skin under his eyes is a darker purple than she's seen before, and he just — he seems *cold*. It practically radiates off of him. His breath steams in the air, more than hers, and his lips are blue and his nose is just the faintest shade of pink.

He distracts her from her thoughts by crouching down — pinching the letter she hadn't known she'd dropped between his pale fingers. For a moment, she does nothing, watching as he breaks the seal and unfolds it. But then, as his eyes shift back and forth, she comes to her senses.

Snatching it back, she stumbles to her feet, “You can’t just *read* other people’s letters, Malfoy.” She wipes owl feathers off her backside. “It’s rude.”

“I’d no idea your handwriting was so unrefined.” He smirks, “Unlike the rest of you. Interning with Madam Pomfrey, are you?”

“What’s it matter to you?”

Every time they speak, she finds he brings out an absurd level of defensiveness in her. She feels almost as if she needs to cover up. Hide any secrets or unpleasant truths because he’ll find them and use them. Every time they speak, it feels like a battle.

These are their war tactics.

Dismissal. “It doesn’t,” he says.

Deflection. “And what’s that you’re carrying around, anyway?” Hermione folds her arms over her chest. Turns up her nose. “*I’d* no idea purple was in your color wheel.”

Self-preservation. “It isn’t, Granger. I didn’t pick it.” The bite in his tone suddenly dies. The heat.

Idiotic, unhelpful, severely detrimental curiosity. “Then who did?”

Further deflection. “That’s none of your business, Granger.”

Intimidation. “Just let me—” She’s shocked at her own audacity, but she’s reaching for it, and her fingers only just manage to brush against its purple corner.

Attack.

Malfoy’s hand clamps down on her arm so hard that for a moment all she sees is white. Her ears ring. Her head swims. And she can barely hear her own scream. Because there’s pain. Unfathomable, searing pain shooting up her arm from the scar he’s got shackled between his fingers. Pain so different than it’s been in months. Agony. She feels her knees wobble. Thinks they might give out.

But then Malfoy lets go.

And after a moment, her vision returns — slowly, like it’s combing through a fog.

She stumbles backward, away from him, cradling her arm. The scars have opened up, and she can feel hot blood seeping through her sleeve. With watery eyes, she looks up from it. Tries to see Malfoy’s face.

And he’s stunned. Stunned to speechlessness, it seems. Until,

“*Granger...*”

The anger has melted from his expression, leaving a sort of confused and jumbled mess in its wake.

“Granger...I—” He takes a step forward.

“*Don’t*,” she snaps. Her voice is full of acid and venom. “Don’t you ever fucking touch me again.”

“Granger, I didn’t know—”

“Ever,” she hisses.

But she knows. Even as she turns on her heel and takes off down the stairs leading out of the Owlery. Even as she bursts into her dormitory, hot tears streaming down her face, startling a still-sleeping Parvati. Even as she thrusts her stinging arm under the water of the faucet in the lavatory and frantically washes away the faintest trickle of blood, she knows she’s overreacting.

She provoked a frightened animal. And it bit her. That’s the gist of it.

Still, it had felt good to scream at him. Honestly. It’d felt like unleashing all the pain and embarrassment she’d endured at his hand in a matter of seconds. And it’d felt almost as good as that punch in Third Year.

She turns off the faucet. Stares down at the freshly scabbing letters on the inside of her forearm and begins to gently trace them with the tip of her finger.

M...

It must be either very important or very private, whatever he keeps in that journal.

U...

But the Owlery is a very unusual place to write, she thinks. It smells foul, and the owls are noisy and restless. There’s no clean place to sit. No clean space to think. Why would he go there?

D...

Unless, of course, his intent is to get away from everyone — which, in that case, he picked a very good spot. Except, she found him. She did.

B...

That day at the Lake...

L...

She’d thought she’d gotten through to him, somehow. Although, in what way, she isn’t sure. Isn’t even sure if she’d *wanted* to get through to him. If that’d even been something she was trying to do.

O...

But at the very least, she’d felt she understood him a little better. That, perhaps, they’d even reached some sort of mutual understanding of one another. Their twin needs for silence and solitude. For grieving and for their own, separate coping mechanisms.

O...

It had even been nice to have the company for a moment. But then the moment ended — and he went back up to the castle. And now they’re back where they started. Back to hatred.

D...

But she doesn’t hate him, she realizes. Not really. Not anymore.

She doesn’t have the energy.

And perhaps he's no longer so worthy of hate. He's — he's despicable and arrogant and completely foul-tempered. Stubborn and crass. But he isn't trying to pretend the war never happened. Neither is he trying to pretend he wasn't on the wrong side.

She lets her arm go and collapses into a sloppy seat on the tile floor of the lavatory.

It's difficult to come to grips with the fact that Malfoy may be more honest than all of them, these days.

Parvati pokes her head around the corner, hair tousled with sleep, falling from its braid.

"Hermione? Are you alright?"

She sits up quickly, dragging her sleeve down over her scar. "Oh — erm, sorry, Parvati. Yes. Yes, I'm fine. I'm sorry I woke you."

"Are you hurt?"

She twists the sleeve away from her sight. "Just an old wound." And she gets to her feet, suddenly, deeply, horribly ashamed of her behavior in these past ten minutes. "I'll have Madam Pomfrey take a look at it."

And it's only after Parvati leaves and she's looking sideways at herself in the mirror that she realizes she left her letter on the Owlery floor.

VII

October 1st, 1998

Diary,

At least it's colder. The charms don't wear off as quickly.

That's the only positive thought I can give you, so take it or leave it. Starting another month here feels like torture. It's like looking a hangman's noose in the face. Like being condemned. These walls are too thick and too stained with fucking memories and I feel like I'm in a bloody prison.

Technically speaking, it is a prison. I'm not here of my own volition. I'm not free to leave if I like. If you really think about it, a magical contract is a lot like prison. Only, this way, more people stare.

Why didn't you lot put me on house arrest, too? With my mum? I don't care about finishing school. About furthering my education. No one will hire an ex-Death Eater as it is, so what's the point? Is it that you think we'll conspire against the Ministry together? Come up with some dastardly plan to break my Father out and escape to the further reaches of this bloody Earth?

Like I said, I don't have the energy.

I think you know that, too — which leads me to believe that it's most definitely punishment you're after.

Well, more power to you. You've made a fine choice. I feel like I'm in Hell. And if I get one more dirty look from those fucking Patil sisters or hear one more fucking word from that Irish prat, my patience will be spent.

And I've been very, very patient thus far.

Prompt: "Who makes you smile?"

Send me a new prompt, I'm not even going to bother with this one.

Draco

October 2nd, 1998

She went back for the letter later that day — didn't find it. Which just complicated everything. Because Madam Pomfrey responded the next day. Sent her a work schedule, beginning the following week.

Which meant that *he* sent it for her.

Malfoy.

And that didn't make any sense at all.

She's been wondering about it for days — wonders about it still, even now, with a half empty jug of Butterbeer dangling from one hand and Harry's arm slung around her other shoulder. They're

singing a song in the Gryffindor common room. Some drunken, boisterous revelry she doesn't know the words to, but all of the Seventh Years have joined in and even some of the Sixth Years, and it's a Friday night and somehow Harry convinced her to stay. To enjoy it.

She knows she's only capable because she starts with Madam Pomfrey tomorrow. Knows that's the only reason the ever-looming darkness isn't quite visible just now.

But she *doesn't* sing.

She just sways along with the rest of them and drinks her fair share, and for once, it's nice to forget about everything. To ignore the fact that this is just pretending. That it won't make any of it go away. That the war still happened. People — friends, *family* — are still dead.

She takes another swig of Butterbeer to chase away those thoughts. Ron smiles at her from across the circle. She gives him a half-smile back — a drunken, lopsided, not-quite smile.

“Right, you lot!” calls Seamus. “It's time for the traditional Truth—” he thrusts his bottle of Firewhiskey into the air, sloshing some of it onto the red velvet couches, “or Dare!”

And Hermione realizes abruptly that she should've been planning her escape a long time ago. Because they play Truth or Dare with Veritaserum and — well, she hates the game to begin with. Can't even imagine what it must be like to be forced to tell the truth, which is the only option she ever picks.

So, under the cover of the mass of rearranging bodies and the chaos of alcohol-fueled whoops and hollers, she takes her leave. Slips out from beneath Harry's arm, past Dean and Neville, and through the corridor to the portrait hole.

The uncrowded air of the hall is nice — she gulps it down, pleasantly surprised to find the jug of Butterbeer still clutched in her fist. She giggles down at it. Lifts it up to see it in the light, watching the warm-colored liquid swirl against the glass.

It makes her lean back too far — sends her stumbling and tripping a little. She skips to a halt. Regains her balance and begins to walk across the carpet as though on a balance beam, laughing to herself all the while. One foot across the other. Hands up at her sides. Tipping this way. Tipping that way.

She hasn't felt this light in a long time.

And she doesn't know how she gets down the stairs. But, somehow, she continues her balancing act all the way to the first floor corridor. Continues skipping and tiptoeing until she sees unusual light in the entryway to the Library.

And so she tiptoes in — careens to one side halfway across the threshold and spills a little Butterbeer on her jeans.Laughs, because it's *hilarious*. What little remains of her rational brain reminds her that the Library is closed — or should be.

But there's torchlight ahead, in the back stacks. A section devoted to the Dark Arts. She loves that section.

Following the pattern of the floor like a game of hopscotch, she makes her way over, nursing the Butterbeer. She doesn't take it far from her lips. Books re-sorting themselves fly past her and over her head. One nearly knocks her over.

But she dodges, skips again, trips and then sort of tumbles into the corner where the light is, a loud

giggle bubbling up out of her throat.

A chair screeches, but she's half-sprawled across a study table and has to right herself first to get a sense of her surroundings. She straightens. Staggers her feet for balance and thrusts her curls out of her face.

"I knew it would be you," she says bluntly, wagging a finger at him.

Malfoy is, of course, the source of the light. He's got a lantern on the table beside him, casting light across a rather large stack of books. Even in her state, she doesn't miss the pop of color — of purple off to the side. The ever-mysterious journal is here. And so is he.

He's still in his school things. White shirt. Green tie. Were it daytime, everything would look rather normal.

But it's the middle of the night.

She's startled him, and he's up out of his seat, one hand shoved into his pocket — clutching his wand, no doubt. And she really can't put together his expression, but maybe that's the Butterbeer at work.

"Are you following me, Mr. Malfoy?" she slurs. It sounds alright coming out to her ears, but she has to recognize that the world is sort of sideways at the moment. Her speech probably is, too.

"Granger," he says. Again, like a statement of fact. Why does he say it like that? And then, "What the fuck?"

She sways. Decides to lean back against the table a little. And she takes another swig of Butterbeer before setting the jug down. "The Library is closed," she says, curt. Official. But then she hiccups — and then she laughs again. Dissolves into a small fit of giggles because, really, it's *so wonderful* to laugh like this. She's missed this. This side of her. Knows that, come tomorrow, it'll be gone again.

"Granger, what the bloody hell's the matter with you?"

She sighs as the giggles fade, wiping her eyes and letting Malfoy come back into focus. "I asked first."

"Asked what?" His eyebrows are very funny when they pinch together like that. They twitch a bit with the force of his confusion. And it's rather fun to confuse him.

"Are you..." her hand finds the jug again, lifting it to her mouth, "following..." she sips but doesn't break their eye contact — swallows, "me?"

Malfoy looks nonplussed. Splutters for a moment, hand falling out of his pocket. So, she's not a threat? *Interesting*, she thinks.

"You...I—you're the one who keeps turning up everywhere I go."

She clicks her tongue at him. "Who says it's not the other way around?"

"Granger, are you completely smashed?"

She yanks the jug back up for another sip, shooting him a dirty look. "What a rude assumption to make." But after another gulp, she hears herself say, "Yes. Quite." Then she thrusts the jug out

toward him. “Here. Have some.”

Malfoy studies her for a moment — gives her a once over with sharp eyes and then wrinkles his nose when he looks back at the jug. “Butterbeer is for children.”

She snorts. A loud snort. A very un-Hermione snort. “Seems to be working just fine for me.”

His expression remains tight and suspicious for a moment longer, then goes lax and so does he. He leans back against the windowsill behind him, diamond-shaped panes making a kaleidoscope of his reflection as he moves. “I can see that.” He stuffs both hands into his pockets. “How very — *you*. To get drunk off Butterbeer.”

She sniffs at him. Sets down the jug and braces both hands on the table to heave herself up. And then she sits cross-legged, leaning on her palms. She lets her head hang back for a moment, enjoying the way it makes the world spin. “I’ve decided not to be offended by you tonight, Malfoy. Not one bit.”

“Mature of you,” he drawls.

And she thrusts her head back up too fast — feels the blood rush out and for a moment things tint black. She laughs a little as the whole room flips before her eyes, thrusting both hands out in front of her to regain balance. The Butterbeer teeters but she saves it. Saves it faster than she saved herself.

“*Phew*,” she flashes him a grin. “That was close.”

“What are you doing here, Granger?” And now his voice is all seriousness.

She shrugs. “I saw a light.”

“You weren’t following me?”

She shakes her head. Giggles — hasn’t giggled so much since childhood, maybe. “Do you know, Malfoy, I think you and I might just keep ending up in the same place at the same time.” She wiggles her eyebrows at him. “D’you know? Like —” she hiccups, “coincidence. Or—” another hiccup, “fate.”

“Fate?” His tone is skeptical. Face even more so, when she manages to look at it. But there’s something under it — maybe the hint of a laugh or a smile. The slightest hint of humor. She can’t be sure. “Just how much have you had, Granger?”

Her gaze snaps from his mouth to his eyes, and she stares at him blankly for a moment. Then she smiles. A deep, mischievous smile. She holds up the jug, which has about a centimeter left in it, and swings it in front of him, victorious.

“You’ll hate yourself in the morning,” he says.

“I hate myself every morning.”

A dull silence follows. One that’s muted and thick. She realizes she’s looking down at the surface of the table, and her cheeks are pink — not just with the flush of alcohol. She doesn’t know why she said it. Didn’t *want* to say it.

When she looks back up at him, his expression is tight once more, this time drawn in around his eyes. It’s sort of a mix of confusion and something else. Concern? No, that’s the Butterbeer again.

“Granger...” he starts.

“Mm-mm,” she shakes her head. Opens her mouth to say *I didn't mean that*, but what comes out is, “I don't want to talk about it.” And she sits back, upset with herself, brows furrowing. “That's not —” she tries again. “I'm — I'm embarrassed about it.” And then she thrusts herself off the table because that isn't what she meant to say at all.

All the while, Malfoy stares at her like he's watching a circus tent collapse in on itself. “What are you trying to say, Granger?” And he has that *tone*. That damned tone her friends like to use on her. Even some of her Professors. That tone that means they think they're dealing with a lunatic. With someone fragile and easily provoked. She hates that tone.

“I'm trying to say I'm not fine,” she splutters out. Gasps at herself. “No — I mean...no, I'm — I'm *not* fine.” She thrusts her hands into her hair, squeezing her temples. “What the *fuck*? What the fuck?” she chants. And then, “*I'm trying to say I'm sorry.*”

It's all run together like one word and she's *furiously* with herself the moment it comes out. But it's out and she can't take it back and she has to force herself to look at him some time.

So she toughens up and yanks her eyes off the table. Forces them to meet his.

His brows are at his hairline. “You're...sorry?” he repeats.

“Yeah — *and*? What of it?” she snaps, reaching for the jug. She can feel her cheeks flaming. It's making her sweat.

“Sorry for what?”

“*God*,” she says, exasperated, “just — *stop* asking me questions, I — I'm sorry for the way I treated you...the other day. For my behavior.”

And then, suddenly, it feels like a weight's off her chest. She sits up a little straighter. Head feels a little clearer. She sets the jug back down. Risks a glance at him. And his eyebrows are still sky high but a softness she's never seen has bled into his eyes. It's a confused softness. A softness he doesn't seem sure what to do with. But it's there, none the less.

That is, until he tucks it away. Hides it back behind his usual mask as he brushes it off. “Doesn't matter, Granger.”

“It *does*,” she presses, and she finds she's taken a step forward. A step toward him. “I — I was wrong. I — I just...it hurt.” Her hand absentmindedly finds her arm.

He tilts his head a little to the side, so that some of the blond falls into his eyes. “Didn't mean to hurt you,” he says. And it's a fascinating phrase. A sentence she never thought to hear from his mouth.

It surprises her.

“I know you didn't,” she says, and her voice is quieter now. Less vibrant. Less playful. The Butterbeer is wearing off, perhaps.

A long silence passes between them. All she can hear is the sifting of books as they fly across and stack themselves, and that's distant at best. They aren't really looking at each other. More like pointedly *not* looking at each other, but every now and then a mistake is made and one of them catches the other's eyes lingering.

They play this game for a good five minutes.

And Malfoy's the one to shatter the silence, when the time comes. "Drinking with Gryffindor tonight?"

"Hmm?" For a moment she can't process his question. "Oh — oh, well...drinking with myself really, *alongside* Gryffindor."

He nods.

And she just can't keep her mouth shut. "D'you know? I think this is the first time we've gone a full ten minutes without arguing."

And she's shocked when it forces a small huff of a laugh out of him. "A record, then," he says.

"Indeed."

After another, shorter silence, she finds herself offering the jug to him again, with another couple steps toward him. He opens his mouth, undoubtedly to say something else about its childishness, but she cuts him off.

"Just drink it. You liked my Muggle whiskey, so drink it."

That's about when she realizes how close she is to him. Almost as close as that day in the lavatory, but without the hostile air between them, it feels much closer. She holds the jug in two hands in front of her, and it's touching his chest on the other side.

Step back, she tells herself.

Malfoy quirks an eyebrow at her. It's a very elegant, aristocratic sort of eyebrow, she realizes, and it's a surprisingly dark shade of blond considering his hair. She follows it down as it relaxes, eyes snapping back to his when the weight of the jug transfers into his hands.

Step back.

He takes a large swig. She finds herself watching his throat as he swallows. And when he hands it back, she asks, "What about you? Why aren't you drinking with Slytherin tonight?" She sips. "I assume Friday nights are just as sacred down in the Dungeons."

"Probably more so, to be honest." He shrugs. "But I like to drink alone."

"You're drinking with me, right now," she points out.

"Well spotted." He takes the jug back.

"So, then what?"

He shrugs again. Glances away as he takes the second to last sip. "I'm not exactly well-liked, Granger."

She's almost too shocked to take back the jug. "But — I..."

He quirks that damned eyebrow again.

"Even in Slytherin?" she manages. "But...in earlier years—"

“Even then,” he says. “I think they were more afraid of my father. Afraid of him and therefore friendly to me.”

She wonders why the thought of it makes her sad. Why she feels the need to—

“I’m sure that isn’t true.”

“Yeah, well—”

“No, I’m sure it isn’t,” she insists. “Plenty of people liked you. Like Cra—” she stops herself. Fumbles for another name. “*Pansy*. Pansy liked you.”

Malfoy laughs, then. A thick, throaty laugh she doesn’t think she’s ever heard before. “Pansy liked my sizeable inheritance — as well as the highly likely possibility of an arranged marriage, at least at the time.”

“No, not just that,” she says as she sets the jug on the table behind him. “You’re handsome and intelligent and I’m sure she liked you for that, too.” And when she looks back at him, she’s quite pleased with her summation.

Until she sees the look in his eyes and realizes just exactly what she said.

His look of surprise isn’t an obvious one — his lids aren’t blown wide and his mouth isn’t hanging open. It’s a deeper sort of surprise. One that’s detectable in the slight quiver in the muscles between his brows. In the flicker in his bottomless gaze. In the way his tongue dashes out of his mouth — nervously wets his lips.

She feels the blush fan out across her face like a wildfire, and she scrambles to remedy what she’s said. “I — I, well, you see, I meant — I meant that you’re attractive. No — not conventionally, *uniquely*. No — *what? No*. I just meant that you’re beautiful and I — *oh, my god — what the fuck is — no*. Malfoy. *Draco*. God. I — I just meant that I’ve always thought you’re—” and with a little shriek, she claps a hand over her mouth. Stops the runaway train that’s on bloody *fire* at this point.

What — in — god’s — name?

Now, Malfoy’s surprise is obvious. Now it’s written all over his face.

And she forces her eyes away because she can’t bear to look at him and she stares at the jug on the table and tries to collect herself and *dear god, what was—*

She freezes. Takes in a slow, steady breath. There’s a long silence.

And her voice is low and murderous when it finally comes out. “I’m going to kill him.”

It breaks Malfoy, briefly, from his daze. “Who?”

She yanks the jug off the table — smacks it against his arm as she does but doesn’t notice. And she holds it up to her nose. Inhales.

In the next instant, she throws it to the library floor, and it shatters with a satisfying, somehow deafening crash. “*Fucking Seamus!*” she screams. She whirls around — begins to step over the shards as the tell-tale scent of Veritaserum starts to waft up at them. “*I’m going to—*”

His hand is on her wrist, then. His alarmingly cold hand, and she doesn’t understand. In the next instant, he’s yanked her back. Turned her back around with a sharp tug and his other hand is

suddenly molded against her cheek and it's just as cold and the words are ripped out of her throat and he's—

He's there.

His lips are on hers. His frozen, frosted lips. Against hers. Leeching the warmth out of them. Cold like stone. Unmoving. Just his mouth, folded over hers, waiting there.

Her pulse seems to panic. Stutters to a halt, then desperately tries to start up again. Beats too fast.

Malfoy's mouth is on hers. He's — he's not quite kissing her, but he's there. He's *right* there, and it's not kissing. Not quite, not *yet*, but—

It's her gasp that does it. Opens her mouth for him.

And *then* he's kissing her.

His hands find the edges of her jaw and he slants his mouth over hers and his lips force hers to part and — and he swallows that gasp. Swallows it and her next breath in one, and then his own breath gusts out against her lips — shaky, cold, with hints of peppermint — and his fingers bury into her curls and his nose brushes against the stretch of skin beneath her cheekbone that she'd never found important until now and he's *kissing* her.

What...what is this?

Her mind reels. Her fingers shake where they've stalled halfway from stopping him. Halfway between pushing him away — and starting something else. She...she doesn't know. Doesn't understand. Doesn't—

Oh.

His tongue brushes across the edges of her teeth. Flicks up in some erotic, enigmatic way she doesn't understand but it sends a pulse through her. Forms a knot in her lower stomach, no — *lower* — that tightens and builds tension. And he makes this sound. This quiet, little, soft sort of — she doesn't know what it is. Not a gasp, not a groan. Something subtle, something that's a mix between the two.

It does something, though. Lights up whatever nerve center that controls her hands and not her head, and she's suddenly tangling her fingers in his shirtfront. Twisting one around his tie. Pulling him in. Pulling him closer. And it's like she wakes up and falls asleep all at once.

She makes her own sound — a desperate sort of keen she didn't know she was capable of making and she wants him closer and she doesn't know why and her tongue meets his — flutters against it and it makes his hands tighten in her hair. Knot in it and draw her in further, if possible. Increase the pressure of the kiss.

And it's just about then that she realizes how much she wants this. Somewhere between his tongue delving deep and his eyelashes brushing against hers. Between the glass crunching under their feet and the chill of his touch. She — she *wants* this.

Her trembling hand leaves his tie. Finds the smooth expanse along the side of his throat. He gasps. Drops his hands from her hair. Belts his arms around her lower back instead and draws her body up against his.

He's cold. He's so cold. Why is he—

He spins them around. Presses her back against one of the bookshelves. Pulls her hips forward and slams them back against the wood as he kisses her, over and over again. And it's warm, suddenly — hot — and he tastes like — he tastes *good* — and her heart's stuttering and her brain is scrambled and heat pulses low and she doesn't — she doesn't — she can't reconcile the feel of his body against hers. The distinct, unspeakable hardness she feels against her inner thigh, and the racing pulse of his heart against her chest and—

He breaks away from her mouth, lips seeking something different, something *new*, and she doesn't know what it is to be kissed like this. But his mouth is where her pulse hammers — right beside her jugular and she idly thinks that he could rip her throat out with his teeth right now if he wanted to. Except it's his tongue — *oh* — his tongue that's tracing the veins in her neck, sweeping up and down where they run thick with blood and pausing every now and then so that he can warm the skin with his lips — suckle at it. She feels the bruises forming. Feels the rational thoughts escaping. But the sounds are wet and wanton and he's right below her ear and his hips are molded against hers and she *can't*, she can't, she can't, she—

One of the flying books misses its mark and crashes into a wall.

Malfoy stumbles back, startled and she has to grip one of the shelves to keep from collapsing without his body supporting her. Every inch of her skin prickles. Feels raw. Her lips tingle. Her chest heaves.

And she stares at him because she can't form words.

He runs a hand through his disheveled hair — did she do that? Straightens his tie and untucks his shirtfront. Drags it down over — *oh*.

He stands there, gathering breath for a long while. But when he opens his mouth to speak, the full weight of reality comes crashing down on her, and she can't bear to hear whatever he has to say. Can't bear to try and make sense of the last ten minutes.

So she runs.

VIII

Chapter Notes

My loves, I am so sorry for the wait. My life has run amok. Hopefully I'll be able to commit to a more grounded posting schedule from here on out, but I hope some of you are still with me. Thank you for all the kind words of encouragement. If you'd like to see progress updates for future chapters, feel free to follow me on Twitter and Tumblr. Enjoy!

October 3rd, 1998

Diary,

I...

Well it's really none of your business, is it? As for your prompt: "List some of the scents that bring you calm. Consider placing them around your bed at night."

Don't tell me how to organize my nightstand. But, if you must know — chamomile, teakwood and pine. I'd say mint, but I'm sick of it.

That's all I have for you. I'm sure you'll chew me out for it.

Draco

October 3rd, 1998

It's a hangover.

Not her worst, but decidedly her most recent — and it always feels like the worst in the moment. She wakes up in sticky, sweat-laden sheets with her hair damp and tangled and her temples throbbing.

It's overcast, thank *god*, but even the pale light leaking in through the bed curtains is too much. Makes her squint.

She wants to stay in bed. Lie there all day and swear off Butterbeer forever. Wants to piece together her memories of the party last night and determine exactly how much she had. Any other Saturday, and she might've.

But Madam Pomfrey is expecting her — less than an hour from now, in fact — and when she lurches out of bed, her stomach lurches too. She shuffles into the lavatory, knocking into things and cradling her head.

She doesn't truly start work in the Hospital Wing until next week, but today was scheduled as a training day. She won't allow herself to miss it because of a self-inflicted migraine.

Avoiding mirrors at all costs, she uses her wand to wash, dress and repair what is undoubtedly an owl's nest on top of her head. The stairs leading down to the common room are a much larger beast to slay, and she finds herself gripping the walls to keep her balance the whole way down.

The common room is something of a mess. Confetti and streamers litter the floor. Empty bottles clutter every surface. The stains on the ruby red carpet could be any number of things. And yet the majority of Gryffindor is already awake and sitting amongst it, talking over tea and enjoying a slow Saturday morning.

She sighs, flicking her wand to rid the room of the mess as she passes through, finding an empty sofa in the corner on which to down a few shots of espresso.

Gaze in her lap, forehead buried in her palm, she's one shot in when she first starts to feel the eyes on her.

She looks up once — quickly, expecting to pass it off as nothing. But they are *most certainly* staring. All of them. Dean, Seamus, Parvati, Harry, Ginny...every Gryffindor already awake. They aren't even trying to hide it.

She bristles, sitting up straighter. Had they never seen her drunk before? Last night can't have been that scandalous. Not enough to deserve this. Each of them look equal parts confused and shocked in their own right.

"What?" she snaps. "Have I got something on my face?"

For a long moment, no one says a word, but they have the nerve to continue to stare, unashamed. It's Harry, though, who breaks the silence at long last.

"...Little lower..." he murmurs.

It surprises her. That's it? Something on her chin or neck? What, a stain? Vomit, god forbid? Even then, there'd be no need to *stare*. Not like that. She huffs angrily, heaving herself back onto her feet as she swallows another bitter shot of espresso she's conjured.

Moving to the long, tilted mirror above the fireplace, she mutters — half to herself and half to them, "From the looks on your faces, you'd think I had some sort of gaping wou—"

It's as though a bucket of ice water is tossed over her head. No — it's as though she's been dropped into an arctic pool. The sensation of falling and the shock of cold, all at once.

She'd thought it was a dream.

A humiliating, unacceptable, bizarre fluke of a dream that she'd fully intended to bury down deep and never think of again. To repress.

And yet, there it is — cold, hard proof that she not only can't repress it, but that it's...*real*. It happened.

Proof in the form of blackish-blue love bruises lining the expanse of her throat on both sides.

She gasps. Drops her espresso and stumbles back several feet, instinctively casting a Glamour charm before another thought can enter her scrambled mind. Her hand flies to her throat, covering it for extra measure.

But they've already seen.

She risks a glance their way, horrified, and her cheeks flame as she finds Seamus chuckling and nudging Dean. “Good going, Granger — about time you had some fun.” And this makes Dean laugh and from then on the two of them are useless.

She moves her wide eyes to Harry instead, mouth opening and closing as she desperately tries to form some sort of excuse. Part of her hates herself in this moment for not being more promiscuous during earlier school years. It would’ve made this easier to pass off as nothing.

Would’ve meant they wouldn’t expect answers.

At least Ron wasn’t—

The door to the boys’ dormitory slams off to the side, and the red-headed devil himself wanders sleepily into the common room. Hermione’s stomach drops from the pit of her abdomen, straight to her feet.

“Morning...” he yawns, rubbing his eyes with one of the overlong sleeves of a Mrs. Weasley-sewn jumper. He notices the Gryffindor Inquisition a few seconds later, blinking, gaze jumping back and forth from Hermione to the group of them. “S’goin’ on?”

Please don’t, please don’t, please don’t, please—

“‘Mione’s got herself a love bite,” cackles Seamus, face going purple with laughter, and Hermione remembers in this moment that this is all his fault. Her hand tightens around her wand, and she’s prepared to hex him into the next century when Ron — her-first-fucking-kiss-Ron — “this-just-isn’t-going-to-work-Ronald-I’m-sorry”-Ron — asks the dreaded question.

“Who from?”

“Tell us, ‘Mione.” It’s the first thing Ginny’s said, but Hermione doesn’t miss the slightly hurt edge to her tone. This is the sort of thing she’d expect to be told before everyone else, it seems.

But the panic is bubbling up in her stomach and her heart is starting to stutter and her cheeks are so red she feels as though the blood might burst out. Instead, her words do, loudly and not convincingly at all: “*No one!* It’s nothing — it’s no one.”

And she’s out of the portrait hole and into the hall in fifteen seconds flat.

She can’t — she doesn’t —

She feels like she needs to hide.

No.

No.

Calm, rational Hermione steps to the forefront of her brain, pushing the jumbled mess she’s become out of the way. What she needs is to focus.

She’s meeting with Madam Pomfrey, now in less than twenty minutes. Espresso is coursing through her veins and she’ll be listening and learning and keeping her hands busy. It is the perfect distraction to have at a time like this.

So she gathers a deep breath and resets. Resets everything. Her posture, her heart rate. Sets off to the Hospital Wing with every intention of keeping her mind blank.

An hour and a half has passed and she's studiously chopping Shrivelfig as Madam Pomfrey stews antidotes when she first slips up.

She thinks about it.

It's the first time since that horrifying moment in front of the mirror that she's allowed herself to remember it. To grapple with the fact that it actually happened. It.

It, which was kissing Malfoy.

Being kissed by Malfoy.

Even as she just scratches the surface of the memory, sensations and sounds start flooding back to her. The scent of his subtle cologne. The taste of peppermint. His hands — cold and long and far too real, far too low on her hips. His mouth, frozen on the outside, hot within — his mouth *everywhere*.

Subconsciously, her fingers burst over the skin of her neck, finding it tender. Her breath hitches and she yanks her hand back down, recommitting to the Shrivelfig even as the sounds of Malfoy's low groans echo in her ears.

How could she have thought it was a dream?

How could she have forgotten that it *happened*?

She can't remember anything that happened after. She can't even remember getting back to the common room. And her memories of what happened before are foggy at best. But the in-between...

Him...

That she remembers perfectly.

Her fingers are shaking. She realizes she should be disgusted with herself. She hates him. She should hate herself for ever getting that close. For ever letting him touch her.

His own aunt was responsible for her arm — for permanent scars. His own blood.

She should find him and this whole experience *vile*.

But her traitorous mind goes elsewhere, tracking backward to the few other kisses she's had in her life.

Number one was Ron. And she'd always expected it to be Ron. Hoped it would be Ron. So much so that it had been almost predictable when it happened.

And disappointing. Wet and sloppy and rushed. Childish, like they were.

After that, it was a Muggle named David, during her drunken post-war assault on higher London. It had been nice enough. He'd kissed well. But the brief lapse in judgement had produced nothing further. No relationship. Not even a second date. Fruitless.

Then Ron again, to see if he'd improved.

He hadn't.

Then someone she'd never known the name of at another bar. Also fruitless.

And then...Malfoy. Her fifth kiss.

She realizes how swollen her lips feel. Wonders if Madam Pomfrey noticed. Wonders if her Glamour's holding up, even though she's never doubted one of her Glamours before.

She doesn't allow herself to wonder whether it was her best kiss, because she knows that it was and she doesn't want to accept it.

So instead she wonders where he is right now. What he's thinking.

Malfoy, who hates her as much as she hates him, if not more. Malfoy, disgusted by her dirty blood.

Malfoy, whose hand had toyed with the button of her jeans more than once, if she remembers it right. Malfoy, whose tongue had been only too ready to taste her.

"Miss Granger, you're shaking." Madam Pomfrey snaps her from her daze, and she finds she's been decimating the poor Shrivelfig. "We've been at it long enough for today, I think. You did well." Poppy gives her a clinical sort of pat on the shoulder. "Now get some rest."

And yet, on her way out of the Hospital Wing, she realizes that to be alone with her thoughts right now is the last thing she needs.

IX

October 4th, 1998

Diary,

I'm not bottling anything up, and I don't appreciate the metaphor. Privacy is still a thing, yeah? Don't expect me to spill my guts out onto these ugly purple pages. It won't happen.

Let's consider this arrangement strictly need-to-know.

And there are certain things you don't need to know.

Prompt: What secrets are you keeping?

I'd say nice try, but it's not.

Draco

October 4th, 1998

She didn't return to Gryffindor for the rest of that Saturday, meandering aimlessly around the grounds instead and avoiding her Housemates at all costs. Avoiding *him* above all else. She'd skipped every meal, dodged every "hello" and only crept back into the dormitory when it was well after midnight.

But nothing could keep her mind from racing.

And now that it's Sunday, she knows she can't avoid what's doubtlessly waiting just outside her bed curtains.

At least the hangover is gone.

She sits up silently, sweeping the crooked curls out of her face and sneaking a compact mirror off of the nightstand. From what she can hear, none of the girls are awake yet, so she takes this chance to examine the evidence from the safety of her four-poster.

Tilting her neck this way and that, she tries not to grimace as she studies the bruises. The Glamour has long faded and the marks where his teeth and tongue and lips have been are all too obvious. All too easy to trace. She can almost remember which kiss left what.

It's absurd.

She snaps the mirror shut and drops her head to her knees for a moment, trying to organize sentences in her head. Excuses. Alibis. She's certain the age-old "*I tripped*" scheme won't work. And a part of her really doesn't want to lie to Ginny.

The other part knows she has to.

She sits there in silence for a few minutes more before resigning herself to an ugly fate. One of her greatest fears is being caught in a lie, and now she finds herself in a position where she has no other option.

No one in Gryffindor would support what she did. What *they* did. The bias is too strong. She can't tell them. Not Harry. Not Ginny. *Especially* not Ron.

A sudden, unwelcome image of a certain redhead storming off in a rage to find a certain blond floods into her brain, and she pinches the bridge of her nose to get rid of it.

No, the truth would cause too much pain — both emotionally and physically.

And with that decided, she throws back the curtains.

She was wrong. Not only is Ginny awake, but she's sitting bolt upright on the side of her adjacent bed, and the sight of Hermione has her getting to her feet.

"Mione..." she starts, but Hermione holds up a hand, stopping her before she can say another word.

And out floods the practiced lie. The big lie. The one she won't be able to take back. "I don't know who it was. I was drunk and it was dark and now it's over."

It's done.

Ginny takes a moment to compute the words before she responds, but Hermione sees her face fall a bit in disappointment. She wonders what she'd been hoping for. A suitable person Hermione could use as a rebound from the War? A Zacharias Smith or a Michael Corner type?

Certainly not a blinding white-blond, with a green silk tie and a lip that quirks up on one side when something vicious is about to come out — the same way it does when his tongue is tracing the roof of her mouth.

A bizarre pulse materializes in her lower abdomen, and she can feel color flooding into her cheeks. She needs to redirect her thoughts, and quickly.

"I'm sorry, Gin," she says. "I would've told you, but there's not much to tell."

Ginny hides her disappointment quickly. "Well — suppose I'm just glad you're having fun." It's almost exactly what Seamus said, and it has her wondering whether they all see her as such a walking tragedy. She hates the thought of it, but it's a perfect out.

"Yeah." She forces a smile. "Me too."

They talk about other things as they dress, and for a while Hermione is relieved that the subject seems to have been miraculously dropped without much effort on her part. But they're halfway out the dormitory door to head to breakfast when Ginny says, offhandedly, "You know...we could always use a Pensieve."

Hermione stutters to a halt on the first step of the stairs. "What?"

"For your memory," says Ginny, "so we can find out who it is."

"Oh...I..." *Shit*. "I hadn't really thought of—"

"MIONE! GINNY!" It's Ron from the foot of the stairs, bless him. "Come on, we'll miss breakfast!"

And she wants to run into his arms, she's so grateful. But as they walk the halls, she has to recognize that she's only temporarily safe.

Ginny will bring it up again.

She has to perform the entire routine again at the breakfast table in the Great Hall, this time with over a dozen eager, onlooking Gryffindors.

They're disappointed too, no doubt hoping for better gossip.

If only they knew, she thinks. It'd be all the gossip they'd ever need.

"That's all it is," she shrugs. A few of them turn away immediately and start other conversations, and she breathes an inward sigh of relief.

Harry smiles at her. "Good for you, 'Mione." Him too, then. At least she has the sympathy vote.

Ron's the only one with any quips about it, which she supposes she expected.

"Should be more careful," he says around a mouthful of stewed potatoes, sort of pointedly not looking at her. "Someone could take advantage of you."

"*Ron!*" Ginny slaps his arm.

He doesn't take it back though, and Hermione doesn't argue like she normally would. Anything to drop the subject.

She's tense until Dean starts a discussion about his and Seamus's latest prank on Peeves — they've sort of appointed themselves to be the new Fred and George. A good thing, too. Hogwarts needs the lightheartedness desperately.

Still, the thought of Fred makes her gut wrench.

She devotes her full attention to the plate of spinach and eggs in front of her, reaching for the salt as she nurses a cup of pumpkin juice.

She almost chokes on it.

Malfoy. He's standing in the doorway to the Great Hall, and she's spent all this time preparing herself for her friends and their questions that she spent absolutely no time preparing for him.

Her eyes are stuck on him like a fly to spun sugar, following as he walks, hands in his trouser pockets — hands she now inadvertently knows the texture of, the weight of. He takes a seat at the edge of the Slytherin table, like always.

He doesn't look at her. Doesn't look at anyone, really, as he serves himself a plate and pulls out that ridiculously purple journal again.

And she realizes —

Like a lightning bolt to the brain, she realizes that no matter the time and effort she puts into making sure the truth never sees the light of day, she's only half of the equation.

A sticky sort of helplessness bleeds into her gut.

What if he tells someone? What if he's already *told* someone? What if — what if he's writing about in that *bloody purple journal* of his?

She's suddenly completely lost her appetite. She tells her Housemates as much as she stands on unsteady legs.

She has to do something.

She *has* to.

She can't just sit and wait for her world to go up in flames.

Smoothing down her skirt, she adjusts her path so that she's walking down the main isle toward the gold doors, swallowing down her panic with each step. Malfoy's about halfway between her and the exit, and she has half of that amount of space to catch his eye.

She slows. Walks casually — struggles not to walk strangely. Scuffs her foot on the ground to make a little noise.

But only when she has just about half a meter left in her window does he finally look up.

And meeting his eyes startles her so much that she almost forgets what she's doing. His gaze is heavy. Lidded. Sharp. Full of everything and nothing she can understand, and the expression on his face gives nothing away, as usual.

She hesitates. Messes up her careful pace and stops, for just a moment. And then she gathers her wits and does her best to cock her head toward the exit as subtly as possible.

Malfoy quirks a dark blond brow, so she does it once more, just in case, before striding past him and over the threshold into the school's entryway.

Her nerves are prickling, and the moment she's away from the thick of the Sunday crowd, she heaves out a breath, blowing out three more in quick succession, like a woman giving birth. All of her careful planning has been reduced to a few precious seconds of panic, and all because she hadn't planned for *him*.

Damn her, why hadn't she planned for *him*? Any logical person would have. And she's always fancied herself to be logical.

Bloody hell.

Somehow, she ends up in the courtyard, which is mostly empty thanks to small mercies. Still, she doesn't trust it, walking straight through and turning the corner to the hidden outdoor alcove she often finds couples snogging in.

The irony is not lost on her.

Taking a seat on the stone marble bench, she waits.

It's of course entirely possible that he isn't coming. Entirely possible that he finds her laughable and pathetic and he's still sitting there enjoying his bacon and—

“Can I make a suggestion, Granger?”

She jerks where she sits as his shadow falls over her. He's in jeans today — she can't remember ever seeing him in jeans before. Jeans and a dark blue cable-knit jumper. For once, he's dressed for the weather.

She clears her throat, crossing her arms. “If you must.”

A wry grin tugs his lips up on one end, just like she remembers, and she tries to crush the fluttering in her stomach — to rip the wings off of those butterflies — as he says, “If subtlety is your aim, then this...” He mimics the way she’d cocked her head a moment ago, although with much exaggeration, “...probably isn’t the best way to go.”

She squints up at him, flashing an unfriendly smile, “Oh thanks, I’ll keep that in mind.”

How is it so easy to fall back into their petty banter after —

After what happened.

She drops her fake smile, wordlessly making room for him on the bench and avoiding his eyes. And Malfoy takes his time sitting down. Of course he does. Takes a good while to consider it, eyes scanning her up and down — she can feel it, even if she isn’t looking. And then when he does sit, he does it so languidly it makes her want to kick him in the shin.

He should be as tense as she is, by right. But of course he isn’t. He’s Malfoy.

She can’t let herself lose sight of that fact.

“So, Granger...” he crosses one leg, ankle on his knee, “why is my breakfast getting cold?” It’s a little disconcerting — him speaking as though nothing’s happened. She wonders if he plans to deny it, and the thought sets her off balance.

Still, she powers through, beginning to deliver a speech she hasn’t even finished writing yet.

“Well, I think it’s fair to accept that we’re both human beings.”

“Well spotted—”

“This will go much more smoothly if you don’t speak until I’m finished,” she says, staring straight ahead into the distance. This bench is perfect, as it turns out. She doesn’t have to look at him as she speaks.

Malfoy huffs a laugh, but beyond that stays silent, and she pauses only a moment more before continuing.

“We’re both human beings, and we were both a bit tipsy Friday night. It is safe to say that human beings tend to give in to frivolous desires when tipsy, and I don’t think there’s any use beating ourselves up over what happened. However, for both our sakes, I think it’s incredibly important that we never speak of it to anyone, and even between us, we never speak of it again. And, of course, it can never happen again, not that that needs saying. We can cross wands on it, if you like.”

She’s quite proud of herself, when it’s all out. Thinks she’s delivered a very diplomatic and calm solution to the whole debacle. But the ever-growing length of Malfoy’s silence starts to deplete this pride and turn it rancid.

So rancid that she eventually finds herself giving in and risking a sideways glance at him.

The look on his face is, as always, unreadable.

“...Well?” she prompts after a few more seconds pass.

“Well what, Granger?” he says at last, tone equally impossible to riddle out. “You brought me all

the way out here to see if I kiss and tell?”

She’s a bit surprised. Can’t tell whether he’s offended or if he finds it funny, somehow. “Well, no — I just—”

“Wanted to go again?” His eyes meet hers so suddenly and so directly that she gasps.

“*What?*”

That wry smile makes a reappearance. “That’s why you brought me to the snogging bench, isn’t it Granger? For a repeat performance?”

She’s gobsmacked, to put it lightly, fumbling with her words, “I—how *dare* you—”

But Malfoy’s up off the bench in an instant, and so suddenly she can’t even comprehend it he has his hands on either side of where she sits and he’s leaning over her. Slanted at an angle. Almost as though he’s about to do a push-up. And their faces are only centimeters apart.

“Could’ve just asked, Granger,” he murmurs, and his voice is low and deadly, to the point where she can’t tell if it’s a seduction or a threat.

Her heart is hammering in her chest, and her breath has abandoned her. He’s so close she can smell everything she remembers from that night, and it’s bringing back sensations and other reminders of everything he did. Everything he touched.

It’s so clearly a power play. She knows he isn’t deluded enough to think she’s brought him here for more. But she’s unintentionally given him the greatest weapon he’s ever had against her.

And now he knows exactly how to pull her strings. Exactly how to make her uncomfortable.

Malfoy’s always loved making her uncomfortable.

“Step back,” she demands, but it comes out as little more than a whisper. “Someone could see you.”

“Does that scare you?” Malfoy asks, inching impossibly closer. “Being seen with me?” His breath disturbs the hair alongside her face, shrouded in mint and icy cold. “Being seen — like this...” he inches that last bit forward so that the tips of their noses brush against one another, and it’s all too familiar, “...with me?”

Hermione’s breath hitches. She holds it. Doesn’t know what else to do. Her nerve endings have caught fire and her thoughts have scattered. All she has left is her thundering pulse and her numb fingers, useless at her sides.

“Yes,” she admits at last, squeezing her eyes shut like a coward and trying to calm every loose organism flying around inside of her.

Malfoy laughs again — another deep, breathy laugh — at the way she’s grinding her teeth. Tensing her muscles. “What are you doing?”

“Ripping the wings off of butterflies,” she breathes, even though he’ll make no sense of it.

He laughs again all the same, and it’s enough to brush his top lip against hers. Her eyes fly open and she sucks in an audibly sharp breath.

“Please stop,” she hears herself wheeze, but it’s almost soundless.

And his eyes are half-lidded and his cold breath is whistling past her teeth, and she watches that lip quirk up on one side yet again as his tongue dashes out. Only for the briefest of seconds. But enough to flick up against her bottom lip.

It's enough.

Enough to have her reaching for him. Enough for her to pull him to her and open her mouth to him. Enough for her to lose all sense of control, this time without the aid of alcohol.

Except it's also the exact moment that he pulls himself away.

He straightens up like it's nothing. Like he hasn't just been a hair's breadth from kissing her again. And he's so calm and cool and collected that it makes her want to throw things.

"Needn't worry about your reputation, Granger." He stalks away. Just like that. Tosses the last bit over his shoulder. "Like you said, it can never happen again."

And she sits there, the cold of the marble leeching through her skirt — furious and trembling. A nebula of mixed emotions, a catastrophe —

Clutching that ugly purple diary from his pocket like a vise.

X

October 5th, 1998

He knows.

He has to know by now. The same way she knows now that this is the last thing she should've done. A line she shouldn't have crossed.

She spent all night flipping through it, and less than three entries in she knew it was something she wasn't supposed to be seeing. It was too personal. Too close.

And it made too much fucking sense.

Scrawled across those first few pastel lavender pages, she'd found evidence of alcoholism, abuse, self-harm and regret. So, so much regret. Unfit parents. Drug overdoses. Death.

She'd pieced it together: this wasn't so unlike Muggle parole. He has to submit these entries weekly — or perhaps even daily — to a psychiatric healer. Those moronic Third Years hadn't been entirely wrong about the situation.

But she's trapped now.

She can't give it back to him. He'll know she took it. She can't keep it from him. He'll be arrested for not submitting entries. She can't unsee what she's seen.

It's too, *too* personal.

What was merely a petty attempt at revenge has backfired violently.

I'd love to be gone. I'd give anything to be gone. Let me be gone.

The slant of his handwriting is the sort you see from psychopaths. Ink is splotched everywhere. It's almost as messy as his life, and it's riddled with things she'd never have known from looking at him.

It's also riddled with opinions about her — opinions she hadn't been prepared for.

...bitch...

...Mudblood...

No, she'd been prepared for those. But not for ones that said things like *confusing...* and *distracting curls...* and *everywhere I look, she's there...*

Those entries were of a rarer nature, and they'd sort of coagulated towards the end — the most recent. She'd been changing his mind about her.

But she's read over the entry from October 3rd over and over again, and nothing.

Nothing about the kiss.

It's childish of her to expect him to write about it. After all, it didn't mean anything, did it? But thinking about it has her remembering his antics at the snogging bench, and an unwelcome shiver

slides down her spine.

Above anything, she hates a puzzle she can't solve.

The purple binding feels hot in her hands — feels like it's burning her with guilt. She lets it fall to the sheets between her knees. Uses her wand to check the time. Six in the morning.

She hasn't slept.

How could she? With both the past and the future colliding inside her head? Thinking about the touches he's already given and the hate he's going to give when he finds out?

It's the first time she acknowledges that she doesn't want him to hate her.

It's also the first time she acknowledges that kissing him was...different. None of the sloppiness and stickiness she'd gotten from Ron. None of the fumbling hands and knocking teeth. Kissing him was clean — crisp and succinct, every movement having meaning, every touch placed where he wanted it to be — and yet at the same time entirely unclean. Dark. Demanding. Sensual. With his bold tongue and adventurous fingertips. She'd never imagined Malfoy could kiss like that.

She'd never imagined kissing Malfoy at all.

And yet now she can't imagine why.

She sits back against her pillows, tangling a nervous hand in her curls as she, for once, allows the image of him to seep into her mind unfettered. Undeterred. Why hadn't she ever thought of Malfoy in that way? His despicable attitude notwithstanding, there was never a conceivable way to pass off his looks as average. He's tall — taller than most of the boys she knows, and even though she's always told herself that height should have nothing to do with it, there's something about sinking into the inky darkness of his shadow. His hands are long...delicate. Aristocratic in every sense. There would've been no way for her to know in the past how smooth the pads of his fingers are, but after feeling them trace her naked hipbones after slipping beneath the waistband of her jeans, she knows. *Oh*, she knows.

She doesn't expect the sudden spark of arousal when it comes, but she snuffs it out quickly, ushering the image of him from her head like a disease and forcing herself to stand up. To get away from the bed, with its sheets and its pillows and its connotations.

Her eyes find the violently purple journal again, and any lasting arousal is flattened by fear and guilt.

She hasn't decided what to do yet. Part of her wants to play it by ear, but that's too open-ended. Too mysterious for a rationally-grounded brain like hers. She knows he won't believe that he dropped it — she'd had a rough enough time slipping it from such a deep pocket when he'd been leaning over her like he was.

And even if he did believe that, he'd never believe she hadn't read it.

Moments like these make her regret giving up her Time Turner.

Right now, there's nothing she can do. Nothing but wait. But it's Monday, and spending all day in bed avoiding him isn't an option. They have *classes* together. Bloody hell.

A fresh wave of panic fans out inside her chest, and she's *so fucking furious* at herself for getting into this situation. Her old self — the girl before the war — would never have done this. She

would've minded her own business and studied...hard. She wouldn't be caught dead letting Malfoy push her up against a bookcase.

Old Hermione wasn't a girl like that.

She wonders now, though. Is she a girl like that? Because no matter how many top coats of denial she slathers onto it, the base coat is and has been since Friday night that she wants more than anything to feel those cold, rough lips again.

One of the girls stirs in bed — Parvati. It jerks her into motion and out of her thoughts, and she shoves the diary under the silk of her pillow, making her bed in a rush. There'll be no more sleep this morning.

She's the first one down to the Great Hall for breakfast, and she's come armed with reading that's weeks ahead of what they're learning in class. Still, it makes her feel like her old self. And she'll do anything to chase that shadow.

It has all the makings of a nice morning. Warm porridge. A London Fog steaming beside her open books. Silence. No one to disturb her.

But, as of late, nothing that seems right stays right.

The thud of a book bag on the bench startles her. She splashes London Fog onto her hand and hisses at the burn.

And of all people, a Slytherin sits down at the table. *Her* table. It isn't the usual Slytherin. Not the one that lights up her nerve endings like fuses.

It's Theodore Nott.

And he comes with his own index of complications. He, having been the object of her First Year girlhood crush. He, having been her nemesis in academic merit for all the years following. He — sarcastic and slippery and dressed as always in a perfectly starched shirt, thrown off by an absurdly uneven tie.

They don't speak.

Until now, apparently.

"This is the Gryffindor table," she says, so childish she instantly regrets it.

Nott grins, and unlike Malfoy, it isn't a rare sight. He's been flashing her winning smiles ever since he beat her to highest score on the Potions final, second year. "I'm shocked, Granger. Shouldn't you know all about Muggle segregation? How *wrong* it was?"

She gawks at him. "Who are *you* to lecture *me* about segregation, *Death Eater*?" And even she knows it's an overreaction. She swallows and sits back a little, flushing. "Sorry," she mutters. She wonders where her filter has gone.

"Touchy, *touch-y*," he tisks. He's never had a fragile ego. Just a large one. In all the years she's known him, she's never seen Theodore Nott lose his cool.

Sweeping the chestnut brown hair out of his face, he turns and rifles through his book bag, and suddenly he's spreading parchment and quills and texts out onto the table across from her.

“What are you doing?”

“Studying.”

“Not here, you aren’t.”

“House tables aren’t exclusive. They’re suggestions, to prevent brawling.” He dips his quill into ink and starts writing, ignoring her stunned expression.

“Nott,” she snaps, and he finally looks up at her, expression bored. “Why are you sitting here?”

He bites down on the feather tip of his quill — a disgusting habit. “War’s over, Granger. I can sit where I want. Today, I wanted to sit here.”

She scoffs. Bristles. Opens her mouth to argue. Can’t think of anything.

She’s no idiot. He isn’t sitting here on a whim. But he’s also Theodore Nott, and asking him to explain himself is like asking grass to grow in winter.

All that’s clear is that he isn’t leaving.

And she feels like she’s fallen into a snake pit. So many snakes. *Too* many fucking snakes.

Transfiguration is the class she’s been dreading all day — the only class of her Monday schedule she has with *him*.

She itches at her scar as students flood into the classroom, shuffling in her seat. It isn’t just her scar that itches, it’s her very skin. Every inch of it. She can’t get comfortable. Can’t stop thinking about what’s under her pillow at this very moment.

She can’t even remember what lesson they’re supposed to be learning today.

A wave of icy cold slides down her back as she catches sight of his white-blond hair in the doorway. He’s walking with Nott, and it makes her doubly nervous. She starts to wonder if Malfoy has something to do with their run in this morning.

Luckily, their eyes don’t meet, and as the two of them take a seat at the desk behind her, she starts to relax a little.

He doesn’t suspect her. If he did, he would’ve confronted her immediately. Malfoy isn’t shy.

Havershim leaves her office and starts writing on the blackboard with her wand. Parvati walks in with a minute or so to spare, smiling at Hermione as she takes her seat beside her and gets out her books. Everything seems exceedingly normal.

Until—

“Oh, ‘Mione,” says Parvati, and she digs further into her bag. “Almost forgot.”

The color purple, up until yesterday, had never had an association with panic and despair for Hermione. It was just purple. Not her favorite. Not her least favorite. Purple as in plums. Purple as in candy hearts.

Now, though — now purple is panic. Purple is a fever dream and an electric shock. Purple is that

feeling in your gut when a parent catches you in a lie. Purple as in pain. Purple as in *perfect* — *just perfect*.

Purple is the color Parvati is handing to her.

Malfoy's journal.

"The house elf was remaking the beds this morning and found this behind your headboard. Thought you might've needed it for class. I said I'd bring it to you."

She's shaking. Parvati's holding it out to her.

She doesn't have to look to feel the searing burn of a gaze from behind, like a hot poker digging into the back of her neck. She doesn't want to take it. She stares at Parvati wordlessly until her face starts to change.

"Hermione, are you—"

Her hand closes around the binding, and she knows she's sealed her fate. "Thank you," she says, somewhat dazed.

She has to look. She can't help it. Out the corner of her eye, she sees Malfoy's stare — like the barrel of a gun. Sees the way his fist is balled on the desk.

A knot forms in her throat.

"Right — yeah, of course," says Parvati, looking at her like a bird with two heads before turning to face the front. Hermione barely hears. All she can think in this moment, of all things, is how much she regrets S.P.E.W.

Bloody traitorous house elf.

The class passes like a hallucination. She never raises her hand. Botches two spells when asked to perform them. Feels at every moment that she may vomit.

She never looks back again. The journal is sitting at the top of her desk, continuously catching her eye like a threat. Taunting her with its vibrant color. Every now and then she hears a sound from behind. Malfoy, tapping his quill against the side of the desk.

He may as well be stabbing her with it.

"Class dismissed."

Her stomach drops. The most ridiculous word flies through her brain at all sides. *Run, run, run, run, run...*

It's idiotic.

She urges rationality to come back to the forefront. Tries to think clearly as people stand and shuffle all around her. What is she so afraid of? Malfoy isn't *dangerous*. Moody, pompous, headstrong, yes. Perhaps even a little mentally unstable. But dangerous?

She's been overthinking. She can just tell him the truth.

Gathering a shaky breath, she stands slowly. She'll head back toward the Great Hall — collect her sanity, calm down a little. And then she'll go and find him and return it. Like an adult.

With a determined huff, she picks up the journal, slings her bag over her shoulder, and strides confidently out the door. She watches the flagstones pass beneath her feet as she walks, swiping her thumb along the textured cover of the diary.

Overthinking. That's all it was.

Offhandedly, she throws a glance over her shoulder. Doesn't expect to see what she sees.

Malfoy is following her.

No, not following. *Charging*. Striding swiftly, purposefully, one hand toying with the knot of his tie — loosening it — the other gathered into a fist at his side. And his eyes — his eyes are *blazing*. He knocks shoulders with other students as he walks, and even when they turn and say things like, "Hey, watch yourself, mate," his eyes never deviate from her.

She stumbles. Trips as she tries to increase her pace. Tears her eyes away as her breath falls out of her in a wave.

She does it. Does what her foolish brain has been telling her to do all along. She breaks into a run.

Coward, another side of her thinks. But she's never seen that look in someone's eyes. No — no, she's wrong. Once before, in the eyes of Bellatrix Lestrange.

Her book bag slips from her shoulder and clatters to the stone floor, spilling quills and ink across the hall, but she abandons it. Instead, her free hand goes to her wand in the pocket of her skirt.

"Hermione?" It's Harry — leaving another classroom. She doesn't see him, but she recognizes his voice. It doesn't stop her.

At every side, people are staring, but she's sprinting now. Her heart rate kicks into high gear, because she can hear Malfoy's own footfalls, heavy and fast on the stone behind her. He's running, too.

He's actually *chasing* her.

Fuck, fuck, fuck...

It's the worst scenario she could think of realized.

His legs are longer than hers. He's faster.

She only makes it as far as the statues in the entryway before he catches up, but her wand gets caught in her pocket as she turns, trying to yank it free.

And the height she'd been admiring just this morning becomes a suddenly damning disadvantage. He crowds her into the wall, backing her up until she's pressed against the rough stone beside the doorway to the Great Hall.

Her hand is stuck — pinned in her pocket, and before she can get a word out he's got one of those long, slender hands she'd once let caress her around her throat. The other holds his wand, and he places the raven-black tip of it under her chin, letting the wood press into her flesh.

Even if she could move, she wouldn't be able to. She can't even speak. Can't *breathe*.

And she just knows she was wrong. So, *so* wrong.

Malfoy is entirely dangerous.

“*Fucking* mudblood *cunt*,” he growls, jerking her once. Her head knocks back against the stone. And as she sees stars, she thinks about how she’s never heard him use that word before.

Malfoy swims back into focus, the pressure of his hand on her throat increasing. He’s as close as he was on Friday night, and her frazzled brain almost can’t discern between intimacy and violence in this moment.

The tip of his wand reminds her.

“Do you have any *fucking* idea?” he jerks her again. “*Any idea* where they’d put me? What they’d fucking *do*?” He drops his wand and reaches down to snatch the journal from her limp hand. “Do you know how fucking *important* this is?” He shakes it in front of her face, eyes like a madman.

Hazily, she sees figures approaching fast from over his shoulder. She knows they’re running. Any yet, they seem to move in slow motion. Her unfocused eyes slide back to Malfoy’s, finding them sharp like shards of ice. She knows she’s in shock. Knows she could get herself out of this if she could only shake the numbness from her hands.

But she can’t.

And she just releases one shaky breath, watching it gust up against his face. His fingers loosen around her throat. Just a fraction. Vaguely, she wonders if the new bruises will cover the old ones.

Malfoy’s dark blond eyelashes flutter as he blinks once.

But his hand has barely released her when another arm belts across his chest from behind.

“*Mate*, mate, mate — what are you *doing*?” It’s Theodore Nott again, ripping Malfoy back, and without his body pressed up against hers, her knees buckle.

She falls just as Malfoy does, yanked to the ground by Nott and dragged back. The next hazy figure to come into focus is Harry. He seems sort of torn between joining Nott in restraining Malfoy and attending to her.

Idly, she thinks that she doesn’t need *attending*.

She doesn’t even feel hurt. Just dazed. Dazed as though drugged.

Harry’s at her feet, crouched down, eyes wide. “*Hermione* — Hermione, are you hurt? Are you—”

“Stop it, Draco — *stop*,” she hears from behind him. Nott’s still got Malfoy’s arms strapped in like a straight jacket.

Everything everyone’s saying is melding together into one. Her breath still hasn’t returned, and all she can do is stare past Harry, his mouth moving but the sound not making it to her ears. She stares at Malfoy, his face red, jaw tight, fighting his friend’s grip, gaze still locked on her.

The only thing he’s held onto is the journal, clutched so tightly he seems to be denting it.

She knows now.

Knows that it represents his second chance. One that she almost stole from him.

Havershim is the third figure to approach. She seems to have seen enough to make a quick

decision, and she promptly stuns Malfoy.

The last thing Hermione sees before the world goes dark is Malfoy going limp in Nott's arms.

XI

October...6th? 7th? Maybe? It's likely still October, 1998

Scratchy sheets. That's what wakes her up. Scratchy sheets and the queasy sensation in her gut — the kind that comes with sleeping too long.

Her eyelids are sticky. Hard to open. But when she can gather the muscular force to peel them apart, the clinical white of the ceiling is all too familiar. So is the herbal scent hanging in the air. The Hospital Wing.

It's not like waking up had been with the hangover. This time she remembers everything. *Quite* clearly.

Swallowing is hard with such a dry throat. Her lips stick together, too. It takes her a second, but she manages to tilt her head to the side so she can see the rest of the Wing. The three beds next to her are empty and tightly fixed, but the fourth bed down has a body in it.

Her queasiness intensifies at the sight of blond hair. She wonders if that'll always be the first thing she recognizes about him.

For a moment, she thinks he's there because he hasn't woken up from the stunning jinx yet. But then her eyes refocus, and the color red grows more and more vibrant.

He's covered in blood.

Why is he covered in blood?

She can only see half of him, but on that half she sees a black eye and a split lip and a still bleeding gash at his temple. His white shirt is scarlet. And he's out cold.

The memory of his icy hand clasped around her throat comes flying back, and she knows she shouldn't care. She should be furious. Happy, too, that he's somehow this badly injured.

But she's none of those things.

She's sitting up.

It takes about five seconds for a pair of hands to try and force her back down, but she fights the pressure, letting out an unexpected yip of disapproval. The hands release her, and Harry's glasses move into her line of sight.

“Mione, you shouldn't sit up so fast,” he says.

“I want to — I want to sit up. I want to sit,” she replies, voice a croak, words jumbled.

Harry sits back cautiously. He's cross-legged at the foot of her cot, face a map of concern not so unlike the way he usually looks at her.

“What happened?” she asks, massaging the suddenly throbbing expanse beneath her chin.

Harry bites his lip, adjusting his glasses where they're perched on his nose. “Well, erm — Malfoy attacked y—”

“No, no,” she waves him off, “I know that part. *After*. What happened *after*?”

He seems a little surprised at her reaction. Clears his throat and messes up his already messy hair a little more. “Oh, erm...”

That's when she notices Ron over his shoulder.

Ron, who's sitting on the end of another cot, getting his hands wrapped by Madam Pomfrey. Madam Pomfrey's shaking her head and muttering to herself, but Ron is looking at Hermione. A boyish grin spreads across his face, and he pulls one half-wrapped hand away to wave at her.

His knuckles are split. Bruised and bloody.

She puts it together before Harry says another word.

“Tell me he didn't,” she breathes.

Harry sort of grimaces.

“You absolute *arse*, Ronald Weasley!” She's lobbed a pillow at him before she even considers that it could hit Madam Pomfrey. Poppy, however, has adept reflexes as it turns out, and she dodges casually, allowing it to pummel Ron directly in the face.

“Do control yourself, Miss Granger,” is all she says.

When the pillow falls away, Ron looks confused. “Mione, I—”

“*Don't*—” she holds up a hand, sharp voice echoing off the walls, “say a word. Not one bloody word.” And she's stumbling out of bed, rearranging her skirt and rolling up her sleeves.

“Hermione, you really shouldn't—”

“Quiet, Harry.”

Poppy seems keen to let her throw her little tantrum, continuing to wrap Ron's hands even as he asks to get up.

“Madam Pomfrey?” asks Harry. “Should she really be—”

“She fainted, Mr. Potter. I am certain she can walk without assistance.”

And a brief affection for Poppy blows through Hermione's brain, as though carried on a spring breeze before being swallowed up by what is otherwise a tornado. Hermione crosses the Wing at a brisk pace, all too aware of the thudding pulse in her wrist. She stops at the foot of Malfoy's cot.

There's a restraining charm around him. She can just barely see the glow of it if she squints.

She can't touch him, then. She can only stare.

Somewhere, at the back of her mind, she wonders why she thinks of touching him at all.

He's a mess. His black eye is swollen and his cheeks and neck are scattered with bruises, as though an ink pot exploded not far from his face. The gash on his temple looks like it came from hitting stone, and Hermione can easily visualize Ron — Ron, thinking he's so brave, so gallant, thinking he's protecting her — beating an already unconscious Draco Malfoy to a pulp.

She wonders how it was allowed to happen, with Havershim present.

But, then again, Havershim never liked Malfoy.

It's then that she notices the looming presence of Nott in the corner. He's standing far back from Malfoy's bedside, but he's still pretty clearly watching over him. There's blood on his uniform, too — his perfectly pressed white shirt — but no wounds.

So it's Malfoy's blood.

"Granger," he acknowledges. There's a caustic edge to his voice.

She doesn't exchange pleasantries. "Who pulled Ron off of him?"

Nott crosses his arms over his chest. "I did."

She glances back down at Malfoy, eyes tracing the bruises. "Thank you," she hears herself say.

"And just what the fuck are *you* grateful for?"

The hostility surprises her a little. She takes a step back, eyes a little more open, meeting Nott's pointed stare. "It was my fault," she says. This surprises her, too. The truth, after a long queue of lies. "The whole thing."

Nott's eyes roll back into his head. "You fucking Gryffindors. So starved for attention. So ready to take all the glory..." He steps toward the table next to Malfoy's bed — slams something down on it. The fucking purple journal. "...and the blame."

She feels Harry's sudden presence behind her.

"Ooh, is it your turn to defend her honor, Potter?" quips Nott.

"Walk away, Harry."

"Malfoy tried to fucking *strangle* her—"

"Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the white knights of the Gryffindor Princess. How *romantic*—"

"He's a fucking *psychopath*—"

"*Walk away, Harry*," she snaps again, loud enough this time to shut them both up.

"Mione..."

She turns to him, anger diminishing at the hurt look in his eyes. She sighs. Says, "I'm fine, Harry. I can handle it myself. Please...please just don't interfere."

He hesitates a long while, then nods mutely, walking backwards a few steps before turning and heading back towards Ron.

Hermione looks back to Nott. He's got an eyebrow raised. Looks maybe even a little amused. "Do they always do exactly what you say?" He makes a little whip-crack motion with his hand.

"Is it still Monday?"

He rolls his eyes again. Scoffs this time. "So fucking dramatic. Of *course* it's still Monday. You

were out for — what, maybe an hour? Just long enough for your freckle-face git of a boyfriend over there to do the dirty work. You fucking *fainted*, Granger. Get over yourself.” Then he points to Malfoy. “Him, though? Who fucking knows?”

She’s angry. Wants to throw insults, too. But she can’t seem to find the words.

“Tell me, Granger — what kind of a Gryffindor beats up an unconscious man?”

“I didn’t ask him to—”

“Doesn’t matter. Like you said, it’s your fault, right?”

She bites down on her lip. Tries to keep calm as she breathes out through her nose. “Right,” she forces out. A tense silence passes between them. Malfoy’s breath hitches in his sleep, and both of their eyes shoot to him. Hover for a moment.

When Nott meets her gaze again, the hostility is back. “Why’d you fucking take it?”

“How do *you* even *know* about it?” she rallies.

Nott tilts his head back, looking her up and down. Then he pulls something from his pocket. A lime green notebook, the same size as Malfoy’s journal.

Her stomach sinks.

“Because I’m his Crutch.”

“His what?”

“Merlin, Granger, I thought you were *intelligent* — his *Crutch*. It’s a Healer’s term. We’re in the same bloody program. I make sure he sends his letters. He makes sure I send mine. End of story.”

The same program...

He and Nott are in the Wizarding World’s version of Alcoholic’s Anonymous, except instead of alcohol it’s trauma they’re treating. She has considered how much damage the War did to their side, but never to this degree.

Something that feels a little like heartbreak throbs in her chest, swaddled in a blanket of guilt.

An argument has broken out between Ron and Harry behind them. It’s hard to hear what’s being said.

She doesn’t want to know, but she asks anyway. “What happens? ...If you don’t write?”

Nott huffs at her. A bitter laugh.

“We go to prison, Granger.” And after a pregnant silence, he adds, “Congratulations, you’ve won the War.”

She could throw a number of things back in his face. She could remind him that if his side had won, she’d probably be dead. No. Not probably — definitely. Eradicated like an insect with pesticides. Filthy mudblood, as she was. But again, she keeps her mouth shut. Glances over at the purple journal.

“You have to write daily?”

Nott doesn't bother saying yes. Just says, "The Dementors are probably already on their way."

Something twists in her gut. Her eyes find purple again.

And she makes a snap decision.

"The *fuck* are you doing?" Nott hisses as she skirts around the foot of the bed and reaches for the journal. Her wand is out and in his face before he can get too close. He stops short.

"I'm correcting my mistake," she says, voice low. "Back away."

The look in his eyes is disconcerting. It's the first time she's ever seen him appear on edge. "If you destroy it — he won't even get a trial." It's the first time she's heard desperation from his mouth, too.

Ron and Harry have stopped arguing. The Wing is silent. Tense.

"I'm not going to destroy it."

Her hand closes around the binding. She backs out of the Hospital Wing with it, wand trained on Nott, all too aware of the gapes and wide eyes of Madam Pomfrey, Harry and Ron.

Her pace is breakneck.

Halfway down the hall, she transforms the tip of her wand into a quill point, flipping through the journal with one hand and trying to hold it open with her thumb on the first blank page.

October 5th, 1998, she scrawls, and it's almost illegible.

Diary,

She took it from me. And she was wrong to do so. So wrong.

She took it because she felt helpless. Because she wanted...control? Power? Leverage? She isn't even quite sure at this point.

But she never should have done it. And she's sorry.

She's truly sorry.

Because she sees that I'm trying. That I'm dealing with the consequences of my past actions and taking them in stride. She sees that I'm struggling. She sees that I didn't deserve this.

She sees that I'm not who I used to be.

And she forgives me. Even if I never manage to say that I'm sorry. She forgives me.

Draco

Her hand is trembling when she pulls it away, and she looks up to find herself in the breezy doorway to the Owlery. She moves to the ledge, and a few owls twist their heads to stare at her.

She knows what Draco's owl looks like. Waits a good half hour for it to come in to preen. It squints at her suspiciously when she approaches, cocking its gold-flecked head to one side.

"Cygnus," she says gently — she's fairly certain that's its name. "Can you take this where it needs

to go?”

When she holds out the journal, the bird squawks in recognition. Snaps its beak once before closing it around the corner of the binding.

And only when its golden wings have disappeared on the horizon does she allow herself to sit, collapsing amongst owl droppings and plucked feathers — and she cries.

She fucking cries.

XII

October 6th, 1998

Diary,

I am apparently conscious.

I am also apparently not in Azkaban. Yet. I expect that could change at any moment.

She...

Fuck, she fucking sent in a fucking entry. In my stead. For me. After she fucking stole it. After I fucking...

After I attacked her.

Merlin, I fucking attacked her — what the fuck was I thinking?

Remember when I was writing about how preposterous the idea of that was? Yeah — I know. The irony tastes like arsenic.

She just — she makes me fucking insane. I told you. I warned you. I fucking did. It's in writing. Granger. Fucking, fucking Granger. It's always Granger. With her fucking explosive fucking hair and those fucking freckles that look like cinnamon and those fucking brown eyes.

I called her a cunt. A fucking mudblood cunt.

I've never even used that word on Pansy.

She just — she fucking —

Fuck.

I want to fucking kill her almost as much as I want to kiss her.

No. No, that's not what I want to do. I don't want to kiss her. I want to make an indentation of her body in my mattress. I want to hear those fucking sounds she makes again. And I want to ruin her life.

The things she fucking wrote — fucking Merlin.

I should rip the page out. I should pass it off as fucking bullshit.

But I like looking at her atrocious handwriting.

Don't ask me. I don't fucking know why.

Draco

October 6th, 1998

The other girls in the dormitory stare at her.

They watch her while she dresses — watch her while she brushes her teeth. Their expressions are soaked in that pity she hates. Their eyes are low though. They're looking at her throat.

She wonders why she hasn't Glamoured it away. Doesn't think she will.

There's no use in hiding this one.

Havershim and McGonagall found her in the Owlery late the previous night, curled up in droppings and feathers, asleep — filthy. Tear-stained.

She's still upset with herself for such a pathetic display of emotion. Still embarrassed by the entirety of yesterday. Nott was wrong. She isn't starved for attention, she loathes it. And she doesn't plan to encourage it by giving in to these looks of pity and crying on someone's shoulder.

She isn't even going to acknowledge how sore her throat actually is.

She's going to square her shoulders and move on. It's what she's best at.

“Mione, please — just hear me out. Hear my side—”

She's been silently ignoring him until now, but he's pushed her to her limits.

“No, Ronald — you don't *have* a side,” she snaps, startling Dean, who's sitting beside her, into spilling apple cider into his lap.

Ron has been badgering her throughout dinner, having moved from sitting next to her to sitting across from her just to force himself into her eye line. To his credit, he seems genuinely confused as to how she can possibly be mad.

He saved her, right?

She huffs to herself, loudly slurping her own cider to drown out the sounds of his excuses. Harry, who seems to have taken pity on him, chimes in with, “Really, Mione, it was just a stupid mistake. His heart was in the—”

She brandishes her fork at him like a weapon, “Harry James Potter, don't you *dare* say his heart was in the right place.” And when Harry shuts his mouth obediently — which momentarily brings her back to Nott's whip-crack motion — she aims her fork at Ron instead, whose desperation is palpable. “*You*. You have got to start thinking of the consequences of your actions. And you *must* start acting your age. What you did was cowardly, and you did it for attention. I'll ask you kindly to stop jumping into puddles to save me from drowning.”

For a moment, her speech stuns him into silence. But when the first words that follow turn out to be, “Merlin, Mione — it was only Malfoy—” she's up and out of her seat in an instant, heaving her ink-stained book bag over her shoulder.

“I'm going to study for a while,” she says. “Enjoy your dinner.”

As she leaves, she can't help her eyes from sliding over to the Slytherin table. She knows he hasn't been arrested. Knows he doesn't have detention either, as she'd used the last of her bargaining chips with McGonagall last night to somehow convince her that it was a misunderstanding.

But he isn't there.

She tries not to let herself feel disappointed. Tries to make herself see just how ridiculous that is. She should be relieved, if anything. He should *scare* her, at this point.

But she's clearly lost whatever was left of her sanity — because he doesn't.

She makes it about halfway to the Library before it occurs to her that Ron could go looking for her. And he's just humiliated enough that he might stand to be around books in order to try to apologize.

So she diverts, turning on her heel and heading back down the stairs. Heading out the front doors of the castle and making her way to what has become her favorite place.

She doesn't admit to herself that she's hoping he might be there, too — but it's the only way to explain the fluttering in her stomach. The wings of the butterflies she hasn't managed to kill yet.

It's colder than she expected outside, and she conjures a thick, knitted cardigan, slipping her arms into it as she makes her way down the grassy hill. The moon is pale and massive, looking over the castle like a white eye and illuminating her surroundings almost as well as daylight.

She watches her breath rise in the air. Folds her arms about herself. Swallows — winces at the pain — as she first notices his outline at the edge of the Black Lake. The fluttering in her stomach morphs into a whirlwind.

This is probably a terrible idea.

She knows he knows she's there. About five feet away, she sees his shoulders tense. Still, she doesn't let herself slow down, doesn't stop until she's standing beside him.

Neither wants to look first.

They stare out at the pitch black of the lake, listening to it lap and swell. She knows she owes it to him to speak first, but it takes her at least a full minute to make her voice work. To make it actually create sound.

“Hello,” she says. *How fucking ridiculous. Stupid, stupid—*

“You again,” is his response. A statement, not a question. And he gives nothing more.

She glances down at her feet, shuffling her toes inside her shoes. And then she gives in and glances over at him first.

He's still facing forward, so she studies him in profile. His face is healing, but slowly. Madam Pomfrey has done her best to counteract the handiwork of Ron's fists — the swelling is gone, and the violent red of the dried blood has been cleaned. But the bruises remain. One eye is circled in black, like a raccoon's. His lip is split.

But the longer she stares, the more she realizes that she isn't looking at the bruises. She's following the cut, angular line of his jaw. Admiring it. Studying the curve of his eyelashes.

She clears her throat and looks away. “Did — erm...did the entry make it in time?”

“Is that why you came out here?” Malfoy's voice is unfriendly. Tight. “For a ‘thank you?’”

She bristles. “That's not — no.” She pauses. Takes a moment to stop herself from reacting poorly. “I don't want you to thank me.”

“I don’t plan to.”

“Well...good.”

“Good,” he says.

She opens her mouth. Shuts it. Are they really going to be this — this *childish*?

“Look, Malfoy — I came out here to—”

“Don’t bother.”

This time she’s audibly flustered. “You — I...”

“You should leave.”

And just like that, her calm, diplomatic demeanor goes out the window.

“*Malfoy*,” she bites out. “I didn’t come out here to deal with your arrogance. Now stop sulking and be a bloody man about things! I’m trying to make amends.”

Malfoy does turn to her then, showing her the full extent of the bruises. His eyes tighten. “Be a...*man*...about things?” he hisses, voice deadly — oozing sarcasm. She regrets using that word, but she can’t back down now.

“Yes,” she says matter-of-factly, squaring her shoulders. “Grow up.”

For an extended second, he doesn’t move an inch — all she sees is the slightest flicker in his expression. The slightest spark. Then he turns his body fully to face her, leaning down to close the eight-inch gap in their heights.

“You know, I was right about you, Granger,” he murmurs, lip quirking up on one side, eyes switching between each of hers. Searching them. Then he smiles fully. A rakish, vicious, sharp-toothed grin. “You really are a *cunt*.”

There’s about a half-second gap between the time it takes for her eyes to widen and the moment her uncoordinated fist meets his face.

Pain explodes behind her knuckles, and she staggers back a step or two, swearing, just as Malfoy does the same, hand flying to his freshly bleeding mouth. She doesn’t know how to punch — has only done it once before, coincidentally to the same person — but this time she’s certain she’s broken her thumb.

“What the *fuck*, Granger?” he roars, doubling over and spitting blood into the grass.

Hermione is cradling her hand, half-angry and half-frightened, when he throws his head back up, repeatedly dabbing at the blood with his palm. His lip is split on both sides, now, and his eyes meet hers like a lightning strike.

“Is that what you fucking think I needed?! Another *punch* in the *fucking face*?”

Her only thought is to defend herself. “At least you were conscious this time!” she screams.

“Fucking *fuck*, Granger! *Fuck!*” He spits more blood out, turning in angry semi-circles as though to prevent himself from throwing her into the lake.

“You called me a — a *cunt!*” The word tastes foreign on her tongue. “*Again!*” she adds for good measure.

“You were fucking *acting like one!*” He rounds on her, approaching so fast that she backpedals, inadvertently stepping several feet into the icy shallows of the Black Lake. Malfoy follows her straight in, splashing his way through, and suddenly they’re inches apart, the water up to their knees. “You still are!” he shouts right into her face. Has to have the final word.

Blood is dripping from his lip down his chin. It glistens in the moonlight. And he stands there, breathing angry puffs of steam as her feet slowly go numb.

Neither says a word for a full minute. They only stare at one another.

And when the silence is broken, she’s the one to do it. Feels that they’ve somehow begun an invisible chess game, and it’s her move.

“Are you proud of this?” she asks quietly, lifting a hand to trace her fingers over the curved bruise on her throat — the vague shape of his palm.

Malfoy’s eyes flit down. Flicker again with some nebulous emotion, but it’s gone too quickly for her to analyze.

“No, Granger,” he answers at last, and his tone still has the slightest edge. “I’m not fucking proud.” His eyes sweep back up to hers. “But I don’t regret it, either.”

Saliva pools in her mouth. She’s trembling from the cold, but she hardly notices. “So you’re the type to hit women?”

Malfoy’s eyes narrow. A muscle in his jaw twitches — and he takes a sudden step closer, making little waves dance around her. She sucks in a breath, but doesn’t move. Doesn’t know why, but she doesn’t move.

“I don’t think I ever *hit* you, Granger,” he says, voice low. And then his lip does that thing again — tugs up on one side, and she wonders why she doesn’t hate the look of it. “But you should take it as a compliment.”

Even she can’t imagine where he’s going with this. She raises an eyebrow, face flushing with blood from the cold. Waits for him to continue.

“I see you as enough of a threat...” another step closer — there’s not enough safe space between them now, “...to feel the need to use force.”

She scoffs, reminded again of their proximity when the strand of hair dangling across his forehead blows aside with her breath. “A threat?” she intones.

But his face doesn’t change, and she realizes all too late that he’s serious.

“Yes,” he says. “A threat.”

“To *what?*”

“To everything I am. Everything I believe in. To every molecule and every strand that makes me me.” His breath gusts up against her face, warm for once, but as always tinged with peppermint, and she finds herself frozen. “Yeah, Granger...you’re a fucking threat.”

And for a moment, all she can comprehend is the thresh of the water. Loud — so incredibly loud to her ears.

The rest comes into focus in her mind slowly. Dazedly.

His hand, sweeping beneath the curtain of her hair, curling around the back of her neck, ungentle, just as he's always been. His definitive, decisive huff of a breath. The last sip of air she's given before his mouth finds hers.

And all she can think is...

This kiss is hatred.

This kiss is violence and pain and trauma, carefully wrapped in the ribbons and bows that are his lips. This kiss is his hand around her throat and the smack of her head against stone. This kiss is the hollow ache in his stomach when he reaches into a pocket to find that he's been robbed of his second chance.

This kiss is agony. It tastes like the blood still dripping from his lips — tangy and metallic. Its pressure is almost painful. His teeth pierce the flesh of her own lips. His fingers bruise. He means to hurt her.

And she wants to pull away. She wants to. She knows she should.

But as he takes out his anger — his pain and frustration — on her in a way she never thought possible, she realizes she has a choice.

She has the choice to shove him back. To walk away and wipe his blood from her mouth and to never understand. To turn her back on the unsolvable jigsaw and leave the pieces abandoned on the carpet. To cleanse the name of Malfoy from her life with bleach and bias.

Or she has the choice to kiss him back.

Just to see if the pieces fit, upside down.

Her first touch is tentative. An uncertain placement of her palm on the plane of his cheek. Clumsy fingers against icy skin. But it's enough to disturb the punishing rhythm of his lips. To cause a stutter in the violence.

He makes a sound — toneless and breathy. A confused and quiet sort of gasp. Because he's been expecting her to stop him. He's been trying to make her.

But this time he doesn't get to win.

She spreads her hand out. Grows bold. Slides the other back past his ear and into the deceptive softness of his hair. Her hand hurts from punching him. But she pulls him closer, despite all pain.

And suddenly the pieces fit.

His pressure weakens — pulls back. His teeth free the tortured flesh of her bottom lip, and his hand falls from the nape of her neck. Finds the small of her back, suddenly soft and uncertain. Barely touching.

And he becomes malleable. Gives her the turn she's earned.

Hermione stretches up onto the numb tips of her toes underwater, dragging his head down to meet

her halfway. She licks the blood clean from her lips and then searches for his. Finds them suddenly timid. Motionless.

And she kisses him with all the gentleness she knows he's never been given. Crosses her wrists behind his neck and buries herself in him, letting go of inhibitions and warnings and self-preservation. She runs her tongue along the smooth line of his teeth, asking permission — waiting as he opens for her, and their tongues meet like old friends.

And when Malfoy wakes from his shock, he's kissing her back without violence. With violence of a different sort entirely. With passion, and yet restraint. With desire.

His hands fist in the thick fabric of her cardigan, bunching it up around her waist, and he drags her against him. A welcome warmth in the cold.

He's never felt warm until now.

The water ripples beneath them. He lifts her — unexpectedly, expertly. Belts an arm beneath her as her legs encircle his waist instinctively. She gasps, and the friction is treacherous. Torturous. Sublime.

Now they're on a level playing field. And as he slants his mouth over hers, she forgets the taste of blood and the ache of the bruises beneath her chin. Forgets the past, if only for just a moment.

Forgets to hate him.

His cheeks are damp. She tastes the salt of stray tears, and for the first time she realizes that Malfoy is capable of them.

And she knows that — no matter what he does to her — she will never tell a soul.

XIII

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the wait, loves -- it's been a busy few weeks. Thank you for your lovely words and endless patience.

October 7th, 1998

Diary,

It doesn't mean anything.

Draco

October 9th, 1998

The bruises are fading, at long last.

She catches sight of herself in the mirror next to Madam Pomfrey's office, on her way out of the Hospital Wing and back to her dormitory. Finds them nearly gone. The marks of his fingertips are yellowing, and the love bites have vanished entirely.

Now the only bruises left to heal are the ones on her lips, from the night by the Lake.

She hastens away. Tries to push back the whirlwind of memories as she ascends the first flight of stairs, only to fail. And miserably, at that.

It's so hard *not* to think about it. Every time she speaks or moves her lips, a soreness bites back, and she remembers the pressure that started out so unpleasant and became so exquisite. She remembers the numb ache in her feet, hypothermic — stiff. They remained a bluish purple long after she left the lake. It took her hours, in the dead of the night, to work feeling back into them in the dormitory bathroom, using a conjured tub.

Malfoy never shivered, she realizes. Not once.

By the third staircase, she's thinking about the way he breathed. A long, steady breath, warm against her mouth — the one he let out just before stepping back. Stepping away. Without another word, he'd turned and gone, leaving her with nothing but a lingering glance and more bruises to attend to. She has not spoken to him since, and each time she sneaks a glance, she finds his eyes averted.

Stupidly, she wonders if it'll always be this way. Stupidly — because there is no *always*. There is no *it*. She has chalked these up to flukes. Murphy's Law in practice. Random, scientific phenomena. The collision of two chaotic bodies amidst more surrounding chaos. Nothing else would make her crave Malfoy's touch — and vice versa.

Malfoy is a coping mechanism.

Still, by the fifth staircase these thoughts are gone and she's once more elbow-deep in memories.

October 17th, 1998

Quidditch.

Is there any point at all?

To be fair, she's never enjoyed the sport, but now more so than ever it feels utterly meaningless. Like putting a bandaid on a knife wound — in theory, it could help, on a much smaller injury.

But Quidditch is a bandaid on the already-dead body of Hogwarts. If even Harry can't bring himself to play, she wonders why they still have matches at all.

That being said, she somehow finds herself in the stands this afternoon. Ginny's pressured her into coming along, guiltig her under the guise of, "*You just don't seem to have...recovered. You know — from...*"

From the incident with Malfoy. If only Ginny knew how many more *incidents* there were.

Still, she wanted off the subject, so she relented.

And now she's in the cold, windy Gryffindor stands on the left side of the pitch, watching a rather unexciting match between mostly Fourth and Fifth Years. The majority of students older than that have opted out, following Harry's lead. It seems they can drink, laugh and be merry, but Quidditch is crossing the line.

So far, all Hermione has learned this year is that coping mechanisms make very little sense.

She sits, disinterested, amongst a large group of Seventh Years, sandwiched between Ginny and Seamus — who she has not forgiven. But she couldn't very well go hexing him into oblivion without explaining why, and there was absolutely no chance of that.

So she's bearing her fury in silence and sour side-glances.

Sighing, she watches as the game pauses yet again due to a foul — these Fourth Years really are rubbish at Quidditch. Doubly so, considering even she can tell, and she doesn't know the rules. She realizes that the only thing that really made Quidditch bearable was cheering Harry on.

Well, that and watching Malfoy get knocked off his broom every now and again by the Weasley twins.

Her heart swells in two directions — painfully, confusingly. Aches at the thought of Fred, and yet inexplicably warms and excites at the thought of Malfoy. And she's so disappointed in herself that she tries to chase the ache instead.

She drops her chin onto her fist, almost going cross-eyed as she refocuses on the slow-moving match. The blurry blues and reds of the Quidditch uniforms zip past her line of sight, and slowly, her gaze moves to the shadowy shapes of Hogsmeade's roofs in the distance.

She's busy counting chimneys when she first sees it.

It makes her blink — clear her eyes, and for a moment she thinks she's seen a fleck of dust or the blur of something caught in her eyelash. But then, seconds later, she sees it again.

In the distance, just before Hogsmeade — somewhere along the barrier of the Grounds — she sees a ripple in the air. Like a mirage. It waves the way a body of water does, when a pebble is tossed into its depths. A small, controlled section of the atmosphere.

She sits up straight. Stares.

Her breath stops in her throat.

It's the wards.

Not a moment later, she hears herself making an excuse about a headache.

“Not again, ‘Mione,” Ginny calls after her, but she’s already cutting across the stands toward the staircase.

As she makes her way down and out of the Pitch, tripping over her own feet, she tries to remember everything she’s ever learned about wards. Thinks back to Flitwick’s lessons and the Forest of Dean.

Protective enchantments are not her best skill. But she knows enough.

An uncorrupted ward should never ripple like that.

She makes a beeline for McGonagall’s office.

In the months following the War, she’d read in the Prophet that McGonagall herself had recast the wards during Hogwarts’ reconstruction. And if they were McGonagall’s, they wouldn’t be easy wards to tamper with.

A flicker of a very specific type of fear comes to life inside her — one she hasn’t felt since Harry cast his final spell that day. It’s the fear that kept her going while they were on the run. The fear that keep her alive, kept her wary of the possibility of danger at every turn.

For a long while, it’d become something she’d expected to feel every day. Just like hunger or exhaustion or any other natural sensation.

It cannot be a good sign that it’s back.

Throughout the Castle, decorations for Halloween are being placed along the walls by House Elves and professors, but she hardly notices as she skirts past them. She doesn’t stop to wonder whether this adrenaline she’s feeling is healthy, or even necessary. Perhaps it’s the pathetic joy that comes with feeling useful — like she’s doing something that makes a difference.

After the War, nothing in daily life has quite measured up. Subconsciously, she considers she might now have a permanent attraction to danger.

That would explain Malfoy.

She shakes him away and picks up her pace, heart racing. But her brief excitement is cut short when she finds the wards in front of McGonagall’s office glowing gold.

She’s meeting with someone else.

Hermione practically skids to a halt before the statue of the griffin, suddenly having no outlet for the energy coursing through her veins.

She paces in the foyer in front of the statue for good ten minutes, flexing her hands in and out of fists, feeling restless — anxious. A weakened ward could break at any moment. Anything trying to get in from the other side could've already done so.

It sparks that flicker of familiar fear, and a moment later she's racing back the way she's come, feet slapping against the flagstone, feeling for her wand in her pocket. She's past the childhood needs for an adult to set things right.

She's been through a war. She can handle things herself.

Hermione's paced the thirty yards or so adjacent to the Quidditch Pitch for over a half hour. Traced her view from the stands to where she saw the mirage in front of Hogsmeade several times.

And she's found nothing.

The rippling she saw is nowhere to be found. Upon testing the wards with her own wand, she's discovered them to be intact.

But she isn't mad. Isn't hallucinating.

She knows what she saw.

And it bothers her so much, she stays out there until well after dark.

October 31st, 1998

She didn't want to come.

Neither did Harry, as it turns out, and yet thanks to Ginny — here they both are. In the glitz and glamor that is the Great Hall for Hogwarts' annual Hallows' Eve Ball. The room is darkly lit, with floating Jack-o-lanterns decorating the misty enchantment of the night sky. Torches line the walls, every now and again flickering with ghostly shapes. It smells of pumpkin and spiced cider and McGonagall has had no trouble at all booking the Weird Sisters as entertainment.

After all, what act would refuse to play for the savior of the Wizarding World?

Their music is loud and energetic and all around bodies are dancing and jumping and colliding. Harry and Hermione stand like stone pillars amidst it all. It's one of his worse days — she can tell. His scar aches sometimes, or so he's told her, not so unlike hers does, and she's caught him rubbing at it a few times this evening.

Overall, Harry's been doing a tremendous job of uplifting everyone — particularly Ron. He's managed not to dwell on the past and to keep spirits high, and yet it's a heavy task. One he can't shoulder every day. Which is why she doesn't ask why he didn't want to come tonight. Why he isn't smiling.

They afford one another the same courtesy.

She, having never pretended to enjoy the post-War festivities, had obvious reasons for attempting to dodge this Ball. But Ginny — tenacious Ginny — had only to lay out a costume on her

dormitory bed and flash her pleading eyes.

Now, she's here, a glass of cider in one hand, leaning against Harry. Counting the minutes until it ends. Ginny's dressed her up as a sort of harlequin; a short, corseted dress with diamond patterns and ridiculous little bells dangling from the pleats. She refused the jester's hat, so Ginny mussed up her hair rather wildly and then tied it up into a bun, with loose curls hanging alongside her face. Ginny *did*, however, insist on the make-up, conjuring dark colors around her eyes and framing them with shapes like spinning tops. Black lips, as well.

She feels absurd.

But Ginny's form of coping is revelry, and she'll do nothing to ruin that for her.

To match Ginny, Harry has been dressed as a prince, waistcoat and dashing jacket to match. Certainly not his first choice, but from the way he's looking at Ginny — gorgeous in her periwinkle princess gown — it's worth it.

It isn't long before she comes to sweep him away for a dance, and Hermione loses her partner in misery.

By no means does she want these sorts of events to stop. A war shouldn't end human happiness.

But it has for her, and being forced to partake feels — disingenuous. Fake.

She sighs, retreating back into the alcove beside a sleeping ghost, sipping her cider as she watches the dance.

"Their will shall overshadow thee. Be still — be still," the Weird Sisters croon from the stage, lyrics taken from a poem she recognizes but cannot quite place.

She remembers a time when she loved Hallow's Eve. It'd been her favorite season at Hogwarts. The decorations. The ghosts, bold and unabashed, dancing through the halls at all hours. She'd particularly loved the Ball. Had daydreamed about being asked to dance by Ron.

She huffs a laugh at herself. Can hardly believe she was once so childish.

And she sees him through the bottom of her glass as she finishes off the cider — blurry and distorted.

"I think you drink more than I do, these days," he says.

Something inside of her clenches. It's a difficult sensation to read — she isn't sure if it's unpleasant or not. But no matter what it is, it's partly nervousness. She hasn't spoken to him in weeks.

Pulling the glass away, she jumps a little when she sees him.

Malfoy has never been the sort to dress up. Least of all now — or so she'd thought.

But tonight he's fully ensconced in the garb of a corpse: torn evening suit, black leather gloves, face painted in blacks and whites like a skeleton. She probably wouldn't have recognized him if he hadn't spoken first. Not unless she'd caught sight of his blond hair, slicked back almost like he used to wear it in earlier years.

She isn't sure how to feel.

The contrast of such dark black around his light eyes is captivating. The tooth-like stripes across

his lips just draw more attention to them. The suit and the gloves —

She's lying, she does know how to feel. She just doesn't want to own up to it.

Gathering her wits, she lifts the glass and waves it at him. "It's cider. I've given up drinking." She lets the glass fall away, and it disappears in midair with a small puff of smoke.

"Have you?" drawls Malfoy.

"Yes," she says. No, she hasn't. She took two or three shots of Muggle whiskey prior to entering this room. And now she regrets it, because she has no idea how to talk to him.

She doesn't know where they stand.

The last time they interacted, her legs were wrapped around his waist. The thought of it sends a shockwave up through her spine, and she finds herself taking an unconscious half-step back.

"Always were the moral sort," he says, sipping his own glass of something that most definitely *isn't* being served by the school. "Good for you, Granger." His tone is laced with sarcasm. Mocking.

For some reason, it's almost a relief. Don't they always say that intimacy changes people?

She's dealt with so much change as of late that it's sort of nice to have something to depend on, and Malfoy's sarcasm is as constant as the ocean. Intimacy has had no effect on it.

Still, she's stunted for a response. Can't seem to form a casual sentence. And for a long while he just studies her with those icy eyes.

She wonders if he'll bring it up. Wonders if he'll gloat about it. About coaxing her into that "repeat performance" he'd mentioned as a joke. She couldn't really blame him if he did.

Her actions, of late, have been less than admirable.

Not to say that he's any better.

As the silence between them grows too thick, she forces words out of her throat. "What are you, anyhow? A dead aristocrat?"

He nurses his drink. Gazes at her with too much knowledge in his eyes and bobs a shoulder — a half shrug. "Something like that. Paying homage to my Death Eater roots."

She knows he says it to rile her up. She snatches another drink from a floating tray, gulping it down in favor of speaking.

"What about you? A clown?" He scoffs, "Honestly, I expected something a little more creative."

"I'm a *harlequin*," she hisses around the rim of her glass. "And Ginny dressed me up. If I had any choice, I wouldn't be here." Inwardly, she wonders why she's being honest. Why give him the satisfaction?

"Ah — Weaslette. I should've guessed."

"Don't you have somewhere else to be? People to mingle with?" It's a low blow on her part, considering he's already admitted he doesn't have many friends.

But Malfoy shakes it off, as cool and collected as he's ever been. "No."

Gone is the boy she'd seen the day he left those bruises, capable of such overpowering rage. In his place is the sly, persuasive Malfoy who always gets his way — familiar, and yet unfamiliar to her all the same.

"Bothering you is more interesting anyway," he says, and she bristles, swallowing down the rest of the hot cider so fast it burns her throat. With a grimace, she pushes past him.

"Haven't we done enough to each other?"

And before he can say another word, she steps onto the dance floor, allowing herself to be swept up by the tide of twirling bodies.

Firelight flashes behind her lids as she closes her eyes. She doesn't dance, but she sways with the rest of them and listens to the music. Tries to think back to a time where it wouldn't have been difficult to do this. To be loose like this. Free like this.

Now, it takes effort.

Heat crawls up around her. She feels the make-up start to bleed as she sweats. And suddenly the tune changes.

It's one they all recognize.

The Samhain Quadrille. A regency-style dance they'd been taught as First Years in preparation for their first Hallow's Eve Ball. The Weird Sisters have stepped aside to allow the orchestra to perform, Flitwick conducting.

Bodies shuffle quickly as everyone on the dance floor adjusts themselves into two long, parallel lines, facing each other. For a moment, Hermione stands stranded in the middle — torn. She doesn't want to do this. Doesn't even know if she can remember the steps.

But Harry catches her eye with a small wave. "Come on, 'Mione," he says, grabbing hands with Dean and Ron at his sides. "For old time's sake."

The overture of the Quadrille is almost over — a ghostly, minor-keyed arrangement. She glances behind her, where the girls are lined up, and Ginny and Luna are holding out their hands to her.

She decides she'll do it.

But for her own sake.

Slipping in between them, she takes their hands with moments to spare before the dance starts. Then the violins take over, and at once both lines raise their interlocked hands above their heads and prance forward several steps. They swing them back down as the two lines converge, then back up to their original positions, and Hermione finds her muscle memory to be much stronger than she'd anticipated.

When next the line of girls rushes forth, the boys raise their arms, and the girls separate and duck beneath them, turning and grabbing hold again, then repeating.

She'd forgotten how much fun this was.

People laugh as they make mistakes. As the lines disperse into circles of couples, Dean and

Seamus cause a riot by accidentally pairing up with one another. They run with it, Seamus batting his eyelashes better than any girl she knows as the couples bow to one another. Hermione is paired with Ron, and she notices the apprehension on his face.

They haven't spoken much since the incident with Malfoy.

But tonight — this dance — is turning out better than she'd expected, better than she'd hoped. She doesn't want to spoil it. So she offers him a small smile, and in turn his face lights up.

The couples portion is slower. Each pair meets at the middle of the circle, touching palms and revolving around one another before moving back into the circle. After each turn, they all grab hands and gallop together counterclockwise — a part that used to make her laugh.

Seamus manages to force it out of her tonight, too, by rapidly increasing the speed beyond its capacity and turning their spinning circle into something of a ceiling fan catastrophe.

After all the couples have met in the middle, the many circles come together again as a whole, and they repeat the portion with the lines. She finds herself laughing with Ginny and Luna as they break from the original choreography and perform a devolved, drunken mess of the can-can.

The First Years are tripping all over themselves trying to remember the steps, and the older students are being no help, herself included. Couples get jumbled and rearranged as they divide into circles again, and this time Dean is gone and Ron is paired with Luna. Harry laughs the way he used to when he's thrown into the mix with Seamus, and it makes Hermione's heart swell. Ginny and Neville skip the touching of palms and grab hands to spin in a raucous pinwheel.

And Hermione's laughing freely as she rushes forth for her turn, only to realize that if Ron's paired with Luna, then—

A mask of black and white fills her view as Malfoy steps up to meet her. Her laughter is sucked up and out of her throat as though by a vacuum.

She glances nervously to the side, finding confused faces, but none of disgust.

They don't recognize him.

Malfoy's taking her hand before she has time to prepare herself, and he sweeps her into a spin, twirling her once — twice. She roots her heel into the ground, stopping to hiss at him in a whisper, "What are you doing?" before they step back from one another and rejoin the circle.

His face is impassive as ever, skeletal lips quirked up to one side — the only evidence he's enjoying this. She glares at him over Luna's shoulder as she and Ron hook elbows and skip around.

He's taking this too far. He's toying with her.

And he's going to get them caught.

The circles split back into lines for the final portion of the dance, and she thinks she does a careful job of positioning herself to be paired up with either Ron or Harry.

"Alright, Hermione?" Luna asks dreamily, having noticed her smile missing. She turns to answer, only to have the dance charge forth before she's ready.

The lines meet in the middle, and it's absolutely *impossible* that she's miscalculated this badly. *Impossible*. Which means Malfoy slid himself between Ron and Harry at the last minute.

Making him her partner.

She opens her mouth to say god knows what, but he shocks her into silence by lacing his fingers through the cinched front of her corset and yanking her up against him. With a gasp, her hands fly to his chest, instinctively trying to push away.

“Are you *mad*? What are you *doing*?”

Malfoy’s other hand sweeps down to her lower back, pulling her closer yet, and she goes abruptly still.

“To answer your question from before,” he says, voice low as he begins to twirl her about in the dance’s final waltz, “no.”

“No what?” she breathes, limp in his grasp, forgetting all the steps. Her eyes flit to other couples as he leads, trying to see whether they’re being watched.

But Malfoy stops them short just then, dragging her close once more so she’s flush against him. It forces her breath to build at the top of her chest, and she stares up at him, lips parted, cheeks flaming, heart pounding.

“No — I don’t think we’ve done *nearly* enough to each other.”

And then his hands fan out against her waist, yanking her hips in, and he sweeps down to capture her mouth. A helpless squeak of protest is the last thing she can manage.

And of all things, she makes a mental note to ask whether he’s placed an enchantment on his lips.

Because it’s like a drug.

Her protests die in her mouth, her fighting hands go limp against him, only to come back to life to slide up to his shoulders. Her eyes fall shut and all she knows is his taste. Mint and the bitter tang of the white make-up on his lips — the black on hers.

One of his hands dives low — sweeps across the expanse of her thigh. Hooks it up around his hip. She gasps, and he takes the opportunity to reunite their tongues. Familiar old friends.

She’s lost in oblivion for the remainder of the dance, only coming to her senses when the music dies away, as does the sound of swishing skirts and pounding shoes. It’s over.

Breaking away from his lips is like pulling away from a magnet. Gravity is against her. But when she manages, flushed and panting, her thigh still gripped tight in his gloved hand, it only takes one glance to know they’re the center of attention.

Quickly, she detangles herself from him, going redder still from the stares.

She remembers she should be furious. But as her face morphs into a glare and her mouth opens, Malfoy cuts her off.

“Don’t expect me to apologize.”

And he surges forth once more to brush his nose up against her neck — to clamp his teeth down on the still tender expanse in front of everyone, ripping a hoarse, little shriek from her mouth.

Then he’s backing away. “I’m not sorry,” he says, voice even. Dark.

And he disappears into the darkness of the Great Hall, lost amongst the crowd — leaving her alone at the center of dozens of wide eyes.

XIV

October 31st, 1998

She wipes her mouth. Smears what is likely already smudges of black all over her lips and chin. The gazes of her peers are heavy — almost painfully so — and she feels all she can do is clear her throat, straighten her corset and stride quickly from the Hall.

The cool air outside the gold doors sends a chill through her blood, and she shivers as she makes her way toward the Grand Staircase. Her cheeks are flaming, her heart thudding like a mallet in her chest. Footsteps echo behind her.

Someone is hot on her heels.

“Ginny, *please*—” She whips around, breathless, only to see Theodore Nott charging up the steps after her.

“What the fuck are you playing at, Granger?”

He’s not who she expected, and she’s unprepared. “Nott?” she says stupidly, almost in a daze.

He stops on the step below her, costumeless, smelling of alcohol. His face is pink with it, and also with anger. “Answer me,” he snaps. So he isn’t drunk enough to slur.

She gathers a breath. Speaks primly, with more focus. “I don’t understand the question.” And she’s grateful her voice comes out steady. Turning, she resumes her march up the staircase, trying to calm the tremble in her fingertips, which is entirely Malfoy’s doing.

But Nott follows her up, matching her stride and taking each step simultaneously. “Don’t play dumb, Granger — you’ve never been an idiot.”

“Neither have you, so I’d assume you can tell when someone’s telling the truth,” she quips, refusing to look at him. What he has to do with anything, she doesn’t know. Clearly, he knew Malfoy’s costume tonight, but she wouldn’t have pinned him to be among the top ten most upset by their actions.

He’d have to wait in line.

“Whatever bollocks you’re trying to pull with Malfoy had best stop now.”

“Who are you? His father? What does it matter to you?” She lurches up two steps to get ahead of him, but he catches up quickly. She realizes she should be worried that he knows, even if he seems to be the only one. That’s one more mouth to keep shut.

A silent fury builds in her stomach at Malfoy. The next time she sees him, she swears she’ll—

“Like I’ve said before, Granger — I’m his Crutch. And I won’t have you fucking with his head any more than you already have. Whatever you’re doing, trying to make him trust you and what not, put a fucking end to it. *Now*.”

She stops short, so quickly Nott almost trips. “Making him *trust* me?” She pins him with what she hopes is a vicious glare.

“Yeah, Granger. That’s what I think you’re fucking doing. Either that, or this is some pathetic

'Rehabilitate the Death Eaters' project of yours. Whichever way, I know you'll come out looking like the hero, and he'll end up in Azkaban or worse."

Nott's speech surprises her. It takes her a moment to form any response at all, and when she does, it comes amidst stuttering scoffs and huffs.

"I — you...what on *Earth* are you on about? *Azkaban*? A bloody kiss will hardly put a man in Azkaban."

Nott's thick brows converge over his eyes. His gaze darkens. "That wasn't just a kiss, Granger. We've established neither of us are idiots."

She sniffs. Tries to plaster an impassive expression onto her face, even as his words make her think more than she wants to. "You're drunk," she says. "Sleep it off. And if you're this upset, why don't you speak to your bloody *Crutch* about it? He's the one causing all the trouble."

She storms off ahead, and he doesn't follow. But he calls after her, "Oh, I have, Granger."

It makes her pause mid-step.

"And you've got him wrapped around your little finger."

Nott's words echo in her head as she struggles to wash the nightmarish remains of the make-up from her face. She's scrubbing at it the Muggle way — doesn't feel like using magic. Wants to keep her hands busy and her mind occupied. But it isn't working.

"You've got him wrapped around your little finger..."

Surely, he can't be serious. The only person she can possibly picture having Malfoy in such a position is his father. The implication that she could have such an effect on him is...well, it's ludicrous.

Malfoy's left streaks of white on her upper lip. She scrubs at them the hardest, until her face feels raw and itchy.

The dormitory's been empty for too long as it is, and when at last she hears the door open, she's expecting it, even as a thick dread settles in her veins.

"'Mione?'" she hears — it's Ginny.

"In here," she says, turning the sink faucet off, resigned.

Ginny appears in the doorway, and the accusatory expression Hermione's expecting isn't there. In its place, concern. More than she's accustomed to.

"Are you alright?" she asks, toying with her lovely red braid.

Hermione nods mutely. She's almost numb. This conversation is long overdue, and while she feels she's spent weeks rehearsing it, she still isn't prepared.

Clearly not, because the first words out of her mouth are: "You'll hate me."

And then she's bursting into tears — loud, pathetic sobs, and as they stream down her cheeks her stomach sinks in horror. It seems she's far from numb, and this isn't how she wanted it to go at all.

But Ginny's an inch from her in a heartbeat, gathering her up and pressing her wet face into the shoulder of her gown. "Bloody hell, 'Mione," she says. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard." And with a sad laugh, she'd leading her out of the bathroom toward her four-poster.

She sets Hermione up against her pillows, then sits cross-legged in front of her at the foot of the bed, drawing the curtains around them. She casts a quick *Muffliato*, sets her wand aside and then fixes a pair of enormously large brown eyes onto Hermione and waits.

Hermione says nothing.

"Alright," says Ginny after about a full minute. "Well, who is he?"

Hermione makes a sound of desperation and drops her face into her hands, still stinging and raw, now swollen from crying. "That's the worst question."

"It can't be that bad—"

But Hermione's fervent nods cut her off.

"Hermione," Ginny says soberly. "No one could be anything but happy that you've found someone. I know Ron can be—"

Now she's shaking her head, and adamantly at that. "You're wrong. You're so, *so* wrong."

"Well, Ron will just have to muck up and deal with it."

"It's not just Ron. It'll be all of you. Trust me, please. Trust me." And she sounds more neurotic than she ever has. She may as well be rocking back and forth.

"Alright," Ginny holds up her hands in surrender. She picks up her wand and conjures a quick and rather impressive cup of tea, holding it out to Hermione. "Then we'll start with easier questions."

Hermione sips it while it's too hot.

"How did it start? And when?"

She speaks around the cup at her lips, her breath disturbing the steam rising from it. "A little after the start of term." Vaguely, she thinks how much this feels like two girls talking at a slumber party, beneath blankets.

If only it were that simple.

"And it started by accident, really," she continues, staring into her tea. She's afraid if she looks at Ginny, she'll lose her nerve.

"How does something start by accident?"

Her tone comes out defensive — she can't help it. "Neither of us wanted this to happen — we don't...we aren't...*right* for each other."

Ginny says nothing, waiting for her to finish.

"We just..." Hermione sighs, setting aside the tea on the nightstand, "we ended up having a lot in common. And one night, we'd had too much to drink—"

"The night you got the bruises," Ginny says — confirms, really.

She nods. "I'm sorry I lied to you. I didn't know how to explain."

"But who *is* he, Hermione? Are you honestly that afraid to tell me?"

"Yes," she admits.

"*Why?*"

Her stomach feels like it's sinking — like there's weight in it. Practically a bowling ball. She thinks it might be the sensation one feels right before they lose a friend. But she's made her decision, and now is a better time than any. She forces the words to rise up in her throat.

"Because it's—"

The door to the dormitory bursts open and laughter spills in. Shadows move from behind the bed curtains.

"Hermione *Jean* Granger!" someone sing-songs drunkenly — maybe Parvati. "Where are you, you wild minx?"

Ginny pinches the bridge of her nose, letting out a groan. She bats aside one of the curtains, and her *Muffliato* fades away. "Pav, bloody hell—"

Parvati is arm in arm with Eloise and Romilda, wobbling on her feet, face split with a massive grin. "*You!*" she announces too loudly when she sees Hermione, giggling and nearly falling over before Eloise tugs her backward. "Why didn't you tell us about you and Zacharias?"

Hermione blinks. Blinks twice. Opens her mouth and shuts it as Ginny sneaks a glance at her.

"Zacharias?" Ginny echoes.

"I feel *betrayed!*" Parvati wails, and Eloise and Romilda hush her amidst more giggles, working her over towards her bed. "Where is the bond of *sisterhood?*"

"Oh, shut it, you great cow," Ginny thrusts a pillow in her direction. Misses narrowly. But when her eyes find Hermione again, they're full of curiosity, and a bit of something else. "That's who it is? Zacharias Smith?"

Hermione stares at her in silence for a long moment.

It's relief, she realizes. That's the look on her face.

She's relieved by the name. Smith is one of the only other blond boys in their year, and to Ginny, Parvati and the others, he's the only logical answer. The only acceptable blond that Hermione would dare to fraternize with.

And it fills Hermione up with so much panic and guilt that, no matter how much force she musters inside herself to hold it back, she says it anyway.

"Yes...yes, it's Zacharias Smith."

Chapter Notes

Sorry, this one's on the shorter side. But join me on Twitter and Tumblr, lovely people. Let's have a laugh.

November 1st, 1998

Diary,

Oh, you'd better be fucking kidding me.

This'd better be a very bad joke. There's no other way to explain what I've just heard.

Pansy's watching me write. She's ruined my breakfast with her juicy morning gossip, and now she's staring at me like she's expecting me to transform into an imp or something.

But —

Fucking Zacharias?

I've always known Granger's a bloody milksop when it comes to her fellow Gryffindors, but ZACHARIAS?! The fucking least she could've fucking done was say I was fucking McLaggen — or someone at least minimally less revolting than that fucking candy-arse Hufflepuff toss-pump.

I want to rip her fucking hair out.

I want to do more than that.

Before you report me for “coming unhinged,” do me a favor and consider what you'd fucking do if your fucking girl was pretending you were a bloody Hufflepuff to save face?

Why doesn't this fucking book let me cross things out anymore?

She's not my girl. That was a grammatical mistake. But you know what I fucking mean.

I feel like my blood's fucking boiling.

I'm thinking of doing something stupid.

Draco

November 1st, 1998

She realizes she's never paid much attention to him before.

But now she catches herself glancing sideways at him every other minute, as though something in his face will give away whether or not he's heard yet. She understands why Parvati thinks it's him.

He's almost tall enough. And blond, but a darker blond.

But his features are infinitely less angular than Malfoy's — he's almost baby-faced — and he's stockier. Less aristocratic.

Zacharias Smith is not her type.

It's an unfortunate train of thought. Has her falling down a rabbit hole of possibilities. The possibility that Malfoy's her type. The possibility that people are starting to pale in comparison to him.

Which is — which is just *absurd*.

She's a bloody idiot. She knows. And for every second that's passed since the words came out of her mouth, she's regretted them.

Somehow, she's managed to dig herself even deeper into a crater of lies.

Ginny and the other girls had been only too happy for her — they'd joked, teased her.

"What were you so afraid of?"

"He's cute — how's the snogging?"

It certainly hadn't helped that Parvati was drunk. Hermione had asked, of course — to keep this quiet. She'd thought Parvati's inebriation might work in her favor — hoped she'd forget come morning, and somehow the disastrous evidence of her cowardice wouldn't be all over the school.

She'd thought wrong, clearly.

Almost everyone knows.

Just, hopefully not Zacharias Smith.

And hopefully not—

She makes the mistake of letting her eyes wander in the other direction. Past the Hufflepuff table and toward the familiar corner belonging to Slytherin. Malfoy's deeply involved in his journal, scribbling with a certain fury.

She bites down on the inside of her lip.

That doesn't necessarily mean that he knows. Any number of things could have him so angry.

But she watches him for a good minute, and before long, his livid gaze slides in the direction hers has been all morning.

He shoots the blissfully unaware Zacharias a glare that could freeze Hell. He knows.

"Bollocks," Hermione mumbles to herself. But when she glances back at her tablemates, they're staring at her.

"What?" asks Ginny.

"No — nothing. Forgot an assignment, is all." They probably don't buy that.

Her traitorous eyes continue their tour of stomach-dropping sights, falling on Ron next. He's upset — visibly. His normally carefree manner is absent, and worst of all, he's not eating. Never a good sign.

According to Ginny, Ron never really moved on.

And if this is how he stomachs Zacharias Smith, she can only imagine how he'd react to the truth. The idea of it makes her nauseous.

For the first time in days, her scar itches.

She's tried to gravitate the topic of conversation away from all of it several times, bringing up the kink in the wards she'd seen by the Quidditch Pitch — something that still bothers her — but nothing really takes for more than a minute or so.

Everyone is too enamored with the idea of Hermione Granger, lonely, damaged fraction of the Golden Trio, finally moving on from the War.

Which isn't the truth of it by a mile.

Malfoy is nothing but a powerful distraction. The War is still with her every day.

November 2nd, 1998

She'd known it was only a matter of time, and it happens on the way to Defense Against the Dark Arts.

"Hey!" someone calls, feet scuffling behind her. "Hermione!"

She turns — sighs when she sees Zacharias. He catches up to her with a short sprint, book bag bobbing from shoulder to shoulder.

"Hi," he says, out of breath, boyish face a bit pink.

"Hi," she echoes. Her stomach ties itself in knots. She has no idea where this conversation will go, but she expects he's probably angry. And rightfully so.

"I — erm..." His hand makes its way up around to the back of his head, rubbing his hair into a mess of fluff as he struggles for phrasing. He's leaning to one side, then the other, awkward and unsure.

"I'm sorry," she blurts out.

"I — no, no, don't be sorry — it's okay, erm — I mean, I...I feel as though some things were lost in translation. But yeah, erm — it's just...I mean, the whole idea's really sweet, and honestly, I'm flattered — honestly. I just, I erm..."

"Zacharias—"

"*I'm gay,*" he rushes.

Hermione swallows whatever sentence she'd had poised on the tip of her tongue. Zacharias's face blanches, and he glances around nervously at the now empty corridor.

She opens her mouth. Shuts it. Much like a fish.

Of all the ways she'd expected this conversation to go, this direction wasn't on her map. She's torn between relief and confusion — relief because he seems to be taking it all quite graciously, and confusion because — well, why is he telling her this?

"Alright," is the first thing she can manage.

"I just — erm, I thought it wouldn't be fair not to tell you, considering the feelings you have for me —"

"Zacharias—"

"Like I said, I'm flattered. And honestly — maybe if I wasn't—"

"Zacharias—"

"But I am, and I'm sort of confused by the whole rumor, and I just—"

"*Zacharias!*" she snaps, and finally his brown eyes focus on her and his mouth snaps shut. What she plans to say is very cut and dry. Concise. A sort of *'it's all a big mistake, no hard feelings, let's part ways as friends'* ordeal. But what she plans to say never makes it past the back of her tongue.

Instead, this finds its way out — like a rogue bludger:

"It isn't you in the stories, it's Malfoy."

She feels her heart clench down on the blood inside of it. A ripple of panic shoots through her as she realizes what she's saying, but she finds she can't stop now that she's started.

"Friends of mine saw us — at the Ball. And they jumped to their own conclusions. I only said it was you to protect myself."

Zacharias looks as though he's been petrified. She isn't feeling much better. Feels foolish most of all, considering he's someone she doesn't even know if she can trust.

Of all people to tell...

She's mentally hexing herself for the entirety of the silence.

Then Zacharias comes back to life. "Erm..." he says. He's off to a good start. "Right, yeah — okay." Then he seems to do a mental double-take. His brows knit together. "Wait, no — you and —"

"Malfoy, yes," she exhales. Lets out her first deep breath in almost half a minute. She suddenly feels lighter. But perhaps that's only because he hasn't run off cackling yet, preparing to divulge her secret to the entire student body.

No, he's only scrubbing at the space above his nose as though he's got a migraine.

Could be worse.

"Malfoy?" he says again, and his tone is somewhere on the fence between horrified and incredulous. "*Really?*"

She purses her lips. Heaves out another large breath. Her gaze drops to her feet.

“Fascinating.”

Her eyes snap back up. And suddenly Zacharias looks rather excited, though she can’t fathom why. “What?”

“Sorry, sorry,” he squints, laughing to himself as he seems to try to reorganize his thoughts, “I just — wow. *Amazing*. I never could’ve pictured —”

“Yes, I know.”

“What an *odd* pairing —”

“Mm-hm.”

“I mean, after everything —”

“Zacharias, I’ve already gone through all of this in my own head. *Please*.”

Again, his eyes refocus, and after less than five minutes talking to him, she has an excellent grip on his personality. Scattered. Bashful. Unfocused and sporadic. Harmless. A bit like Luna, actually. “Right, yeah...sorry.”

At the back of her mind, she wonders how many hearts it’d break in Gryffindor if it got out that he was gay. At least three, off the top of her head.

But Zacharias is very different than she’d assumed from a distance.

He’s apologizing for his tangent, cheeks going pink again, and she’s thinking that maybe — just *maybe* — he might be kind enough to keep this to himself.

Only time will tell, really.

She feels the need to make a quick escape. Doesn’t want to wait around for something to go wrong. “I’ve — erm, I’ve got to go,” she says, turning — hiking her book bag more tightly over her shoulder.

But he calls after her. Of course he does. Nothing can ever be simple.

“Wait — Hermione!”

She glances back. Holds her breath.

And he says, “Maybe we can help each other.”

XVI

November 9th, 1998

She agreed.

Does it make her a fool? Is she falling deeper, still, into the pit?

It's a horrible idea, but as much as it displeases her logical brain, it appeals to all the other pieces of her that want so desperately to keep the truth shrouded. It even appeals to her conscience, because she can't reconcile forming an affection for Malfoy.

No. She can't.

Zacharias's plan is far from perfect. An unrefined and clumsy attempt on both their parts to conceal what perhaps shouldn't be concealed.

She realizes she didn't bother to ask why Zacharias is so desperate to keep his secret. His, being pure. Harmless. His, which is not a choice, nor a betrayal to himself and everyone he cares for.

Unlike hers.

But, then again, people are cruel. She understands. Of course she does.

Over the weekend, she sent Zacharias an owl, with one word scrawled across the parchment.

Okay.

After all, it was like being handed a false alibi. It doesn't matter how wrong it is, she had no choice but to take it. It's a lifeline. The only one she's likely to get.

But today's the day she has to play the part, and subconsciously she wonders if she even can. She's never tried something like this before.

And she's a very poor actress.

She tries to breathe through it. Urges herself to have perspective. This is hardly the most dangerous thing she's done — nowhere near the most frightening. This is nothing. Absolutely nothing. So she breathes and she focuses on the scratchy seams of her skirt against the sides of her thighs as she meets Zacharias in the corridor outside Defense Against the Dark Arts.

His brows jolt up as he sees her — a silent communication. An *'are you ready?'*

She bobs her chin in response, reaching for his hand the way they discussed. Their fingers interlock, and they walk into the classroom together. Another decision she can't take back.

She wonders idly as eyes start to catch them and whispers start to slide through the air whether she'll ever do something she doesn't regret, even the smallest bit. She regrets how much toothpaste she squeezes onto her brush in the morning, always a little more than she needed. Regrets her choice of shoes halfway through the day. Regrets the way she starts sentences and the way she ends essays.

But it's more than perfectionism. More than a simple desire to make every little thing flawless.

It's that she'll find a flaw, even when there is none. Without fail. She must.

She realizes in the ten steps between the door and the desk she'll share with Zacharias that she doesn't believe in perfection.

And she should be satisfied, because the look in Malfoy's eyes is far from it. He's at the back desk, where he usually sits, with Nott. She has the misfortune of good eyesight. Can watch the emotion flicker across his face. Anger she expects, but she can see something flare up just before it. A sort of hurt. Evidence of a bruised ego.

She's almost forgotten how sensitive he is. His recent behavior's fluctuated between violence and numbness for the most part.

But Malfoy isn't completely stone.

And neither is she, apparently, despite all efforts — because that look, however brief, makes her chest tighten. She's quick to avert her eyes.

They sit.

Hestia leaves her office. She's been doing a remarkable job as the DADA professor this year, all things considered. This is hardly the easiest class to teach, following a war.

She taps her wand on the desk, and the room collapses into silence. The whispers are gone, but Hermione can still feel many pairs of eyes on the back of her head.

"Alright," says Hestia, matter-of-fact as always, "today we're dueling — but I'd like to remind all of you that our next class is Boggarts. I mentioned this at the beginning of term, however, I'll say again: should any of you wish to be exempted from the lesson, you will be excused, no questions asked. It is meant as a healthy and therapeutic exercise in conquering fear, and I know many of you have benefited from it in the past. However, it is not my wish to expose any of you to further trauma, should you not feel up to it. Are we clear?"

Hermione's stomach sinks as the class murmurs affirmatives. She'd forgotten about this lesson. Forgotten to make a choice.

She still isn't sure whether she can do it. And now she has less than two days to make up her mind.

Any other year, and she'd be the first in line. She'd been so put out when she didn't get to face the Boggart in Third Year — had been so curious. So certain she could learn so much from it. Wanted to know her greatest fear more than anything.

Now, she isn't so sure.

What may've once been academic failure could now be watching a friend die.

She shivers where she sits, ignoring Zacharias's questioning glance.

"Split off into pairs, now," says Hestia. "I want you practicing defensive spells and blasting charms, specifically, and in a few minutes I'll bring us back together for demonstrations. Yes?"

Chairs screech as they're pushed back. The desks vanish a moment later. And she finds herself suddenly dueling with Zacharias, whom she's never practiced magic with before.

Odd, how little room he once took up in her life when now he's become so crowding.

You could've said no, she reminds herself.

Yes, she could've. Should've. Didn't. An endless pattern in her life.

November 10th, 1998

Diary,

Someone should tell Granger that no one fucking holds hands. If she'd ever been in a real relationship, she'd know that.

I can't believe you idiots are still sending me these prompts. Nothing I'm giving you is helping with my treatment. What's the bloody point?

Also, really don't appreciate that you had Nott shadow me last week. Stop telling him about my supposedly "concerning entries." It's none of his business. It's bad enough that you've made it yours.

Prompt: In moments of extreme stress, how do you calm down?

I bite my tongue until it bleeds.

And then as soon as I can, I throw myself into an ice bath, because Merlin knows you haven't given me any fucking drugs.

Sadists.

Draco

November 11th, 1998

Her curiosity wins out. It always does.

And now she's in line for the infamous cupboard, trying every moment not to hear Remus's voice in her head. She doesn't need any extra sadness heading into this.

*Hestia hasn't opened the door yet. She's explaining the *Riddkulus* charm to those who've never attempted it, and Hermione is missing Lupin's cheerful gramophone more than ever. All those years ago, in this room, the mood of this lesson had been exciting — adventurous and fun. Now, it's just foreboding.*

The room is seeped in worry. Hestia can tell. She's come prepared, and the table beside her is well stocked with treats and euphoric elixirs — for after, no doubt.

"That being said, I'll remind you once more — you may excuse yourself at any moment in which you become uncomfortable."

Silence greets her in response.

"Very well," she says, tugging the front of her robes straight. "Off you go, Parvati."

It's a particularly bad start. The door of the cupboard opens and Lavender Brown's lifeless body

flops onto the floor. Parvati screams. The class gasps.

Hermione looks away.

Later, she hears that Lavender's corpse proceeded to stand up and stalk towards Parvati, who could not manage the Riddikulus Charm and had to be helped away, two vials of euphoric elixir clutched in her shaking fists.

Padma leaves with her, and Hestia, visibly frazzled, hesitates before inviting the next student up. Hermione can see the doubt building in her eyes when she looks back at last — she's entirely second-guessing this lesson.

It's Dean next, and his common fear is a relief. Cockroaches begin to spill out onto the floor, multiplying on top of one another and building into a mountainous wave. Dean staggers back a few steps but manages to transform them into butterflies, which circle rather beautifully as the next in line takes his place.

Hermione glances behind her. Harry's a few people back, talking to Seamus. She catches his eye. Raises one eyebrow in a silent question.

Just like in Third Year, she isn't sure it's such a good idea for him to face the Boggart. But Harry's expression is calm — serene, even — and he merely presents her with a small, reassuring half-smile.

Why does he always have to be so much braver than her?

She sucks in a deep breath, turning back — watches Zacharias deal with a particularly convincing illusion of a thousand foot drop. Heights. That must be it for him. She wonders how the Boggart manages it.

His Riddikulus charm transforms it into a fake looking movie set background, and students let out half-hearted laughs as he steps away.

And suddenly it's her turn.

She should've been paying more attention. Hadn't expected it to come so soon.

She struggles to pull her wand from her pocket as she steps up, a notable hush falling over the room. No doubt, a few of them are still wondering whether a paper with a Satisfactory, rather than an Outstanding, will show up.

The movie set background sways eerily in a nonexistent breeze. The Boggart is thinking. Studying her. She can almost picture it watching her, even though she'll never know its face.

Then the background falls, as though dropping from a coat hanger, and its papery form floats down to mold into a figure, like a sheet falling over a ghost. Her pulse hesitates. Palm grows sweaty around the base of her wand.

And suddenly the figure is all too familiar. All darkness. Raven curls.

“Ello, lovely,” Bellatrix hisses, and gasps ring out. She's in the same lacy black dress as that day, hair as wild as ever, sharp, yellow teeth glinting. And that same knife is in her hand.

More than anything in this moment, Hermione is furious with herself. How can this be her greatest fear? A woman who's long dead? How can she be so pathetic?

But she realizes not long after that it isn't Bellatrix Lestrange she fears.

It's the pain.

Bellatrix whips out her wand and screams, "Crucio!" and in the precious moments before the curse hits her, Hermione's thinking that she's never read anything about Boggarts producing spells.

Her reading doesn't spare her from the agony.

She catches a glimpse of Hestia's horrified face before white hot pain blinds her, and she can't hear herself scream. Can't feel her fingers. Can't grip her wand.

She's frozen in an excruciating bind, feeling knives being driven through her skin and her bones being bent in all directions.

She feels as though she's back on the cold, black stone of the Manor floor. The pain is identical. Her scarred arm throbs and her mind goes blank and all she can picture are Bellatrix's cold, bottomless eyes.

It feels endless. But perhaps it's only been a matter of seconds.

And then the pain stops, and it takes her a moment to gather her wits. Her angle's changed. She's on the floor.

Her foggy mind expects Hestia's jumped in front of her, the way Lupin did for Harry, to draw away the Boggart's attention.

But it isn't Hestia.

It's Malfoy. Of course it is.

His long, black trousers obscure her view, but past them she can see his Boggart.

It's his father.

Or rather, it's Lucius, but reflected in a large mirror that faces Draco. She puts the pieces together as Hestia casts the Boggart away, back into the cupboard.

"Quiet down, all of you," Hestia snaps, and Hermione realizes just then what a raucous the class is making.

Malfoy steps away from her, moving to the table as Hestia rushes to Hermione's side.

"Miss Granger, are you alright? I do apologize — I never expected..."

But her gaze is magnetized to him, focus gone, and she watches as he takes two bottles of euphoric elixir from the table. He swallows one down and tosses the other over to her casually. It clinks against the stone, rolling to a stop in front of her sprawled feet.

"Bottoms up, Granger," he says, and leaves.

XVII

Chapter Notes

No idea why, but I think this is my favorite chapter. Happy Holidays loves -- enjoy.

November 11th, 1998

Diary,

I don't know why I did it.

No, maybe I do.

But that's worse. That's so much worse.

I don't know what I was thinking, I just—

Oh, bleeding fucking hell, she's here.

November 11th, 1998

After an absurd performance by Zacharias, in which he feigns great affection and concern, Hestia tells her she'll excuse her from the rest of her classes. To take the remainder of the day to rest and to eat some sweets.

But Hermione's feet don't make a move for the Gryffindor Common Room at the foot of the Grand Staircase. They turn, almost instinctively, and lead her out into the courtyard.

Her mind is a haze, at best. Still a little foggy from the pain. Her skin seems to tingle, the way it did for hours after they apparated to the safe house that day. Like it's trying to restitch itself after being invisibly carved up.

So she lets her feet do the work. Trusts them. Has a hunch of where she's headed.

Lately, whenever she follows her feet, they somehow lead her to Malfoy.

This is no exception. She finds herself stumbling down the familiar hill towards the Black Lake, and halfway down she can already see his silhouette — an ink stain against the sparkling surface of the water, glistening as the afternoon sun sinks below the hills.

He's sitting, hunched over his knees, and for half a moment she thinks he might be crying.

But no — he's scribbling ferociously. She should've guessed.

Her feet crunch against the icy grass. She sees him tense. He snaps the journal shut.

Had she not been so numb, she might've rehearsed something to say in her head. Might've approached this moment with some small measure of grace or tact. Instead, her fractured mental

state delivers the most cold, unabridged version of her thoughts to the back of his bright blond head.

“So you’re afraid of becoming your father.”

For almost a full minute, he doesn’t say anything, just stares out at the water. It laps against the silence. Then he exhales, quietly, distinctly.

“Observant as always, Granger. Ten points to Gryffindor.”

She bristles at that, even as she knows she deserves it. She gathers her robes about her to fend off the cold and debates whether or not to sit down.

It’s wrong to be here. She should be committing to her chosen lie — should be pretending to bask in Zacharias’s attention and playing the helpless girlfriend. That’s her side of the deal.

But this is where her feet put her, and with every nerve ending in her body fried to crisp, she can’t argue. She folds herself down onto the scratchy, dead grass. Says what she’s thinking, because every time she tries to filter her words, she fails — so why put in the effort?

“Why did you do that?”

Malfoy doesn’t answer. Stares straight ahead at the horizon, one hand absentmindedly reaching up to tug at his eyelashes.

“I could’ve handled it myself.”

“Not everything is about *you*, Granger,” he snaps, tone colder than the November air. Then he gives a low, angry sort of growl before she can respond, ripping his wand from his pocket and uttering a spell under his breath.

Hermione watches an opaque blanket of white ripple over his body, visible for just a moment before it fades away. Malfoy’s shoulders relax.

She knows he won’t answer if she asks. Murmurs, “*Specialis revelio*” instead. Malfoy barely flinches as his spell is revealed to her. Seems to have expected her to do it, really.

It’s a cooling charm — and a stocky one at that. He’s altered it quite a bit to perform at its most extreme.

It’s no wonder now that he’s always so cold.

“What on Earth are you doing that for?” she asks, again before she can filter herself.

His answer is flat. Deadpan. He still doesn’t look at her. In fact, she’s surprised he bothers to answer at all. “It numbs the pain.”

“What pa—”

Gunmetal eyes lock onto her, and he wrenches up the sleeve on his left arm.

She can’t help but gasp. She hasn’t seen it until now. Certainly, she’s seen him scratching at it. Itching the fabric of his sleeve. But not since he’s returned to Hogwarts has she seen the state of the Dark Mark on his arm.

It’s *festering*.

The skin around the mottled gray-green of the snake is peeling back — a raw, reddish shade, blistering in parts, scabbed over in others. The mark itself seems to have faded. Well, no, not faded. It looks smeared, rather. And yet somehow still permanent.

She doesn't even notice that she's reaching for it until he yanks his arm away. She snatches hers back, too, cementing it to her side in case it gets any other foolish ideas.

A part of her thinks how silly this is.

Not two weeks ago, he'd left another half-moon bruise on her neck — said pretty words like *I'm not sorry* and made her feel pretty things — and now she's afraid to touch him?

It's simply nonsensical.

Still, she doesn't reach for him again.

"Cold is all that helps," he says into the silence.

Absently, Hermione toys with the wool of her own sleeve. Drags it up to trace the letters she's already traced a thousand times. "For a long time, I'd just cast Stinging Jinxes on my legs. My other arm," she says and doesn't know why. Then, out of nowhere, she finds herself laughing. Loudly. Boisterously.

Out the corner of her eye, she can see Malfoy looking at her weirdly. She can't tell if it's with distaste or confusion.

But through her laughs, she manages, "D'you know? It's the most absurd bloody thing — fucking ridiculous, but d'you know? When I first came back here — " she stamps the grass with her foot, "when I first saw your pompous bloody face again, d'you know the first thing I thought?" She risks a glance at him, finding his stare unnervingly sharp and direct. It's safer to look away. "I thought about how similar we were — our scars were. *Are.*" *And she surprises herself by baring her arm to him — displaying her scar in the fading afternoon light. His eyes lock onto it as though magnetized, then jerk back up to her with a look that's guarded and complex. "I wondered," she continues, unable to help another laugh, "I fucking wondered if one day we'd ever compare them."*

Her humorless smile falls, though, as she stares longer into his serious face. And then he suddenly takes her arm, icy hand sliding under to grasp her by the elbow. She stifles a gasp at the contact, watching somewhat helplessly as he draws it toward him. He shoves the rest of her sleeve up and out of the way, and she finds herself grimacing — preparing for pain.

Except, there is no pain.

He brackets the scar with impossibly gentle hands, lifting her arm to hold it closer to his eyes. To examine it. She can feel his cold breath gusting up against it. Can see gooseflesh rising up along her arm in response. She flushes, knowing he can see it too.

Then, with a touch featherlight, he traces the carved letter 'M.'

Hermione does gasp now. Can't help it. If it hurts even when she touches it, why doesn't it hurt now?

"What are you..." she starts to say, but he interrupts.

"Why Zacharias?" he asks, still focused on her scar. "Of all fucking people?" And his soft tone doesn't match his words.

She's surprised he's asking. A little surprised that he even cares.

She huffs, quietly, "You know it's fake, right?"

"Do you think I'm an idiot?" Again, his tone and words don't line up, and as he traces the 'B,' he says casually, "Zacharias Smith couldn't find your quim, even if you sat on his face."

She rips her arm away from him with a disgusted sort of squeak. "You're vile," she snaps.

He meets her eyes, impassive. Shrugs. "It's true."

An underling part of her brain is piecing together that he knows Zacharias is gay, but she's too busy being offended to notice.

"You didn't answer my question," he adds, looking back out towards the water. The sun is setting.

"Your — I..." she fumbles.

"Why him?"

She struggles to respond. Again, opts for the truth, voice terse. "He was the safest option. I had to tell them something...after what you did on Hallow's Eve."

Malfoy huffs. Goes silent for a long moment. Then he says, "Mine's bigger."

Hermione coughs. "I beg your par—"

He yanks up his sleeve and displays the infected mark to her again. "My scar. It's bigger..." His eyes lock onto hers, catching what is likely a fiery blush, "Than yours."

She swallows back her embarrassment. Belts her arms around herself as it grows colder and looks away. "Yes, I suppose it is." She feels itchy and uncomfortable. Stands up.

Malfoy's eyes follow her.

"I..." she hesitates, glancing down at her feet. She isn't sure what she wants to say, and yet it feels entirely necessary to say something. "Thank you," is all she manages, after a long pause, and the phrase feels awkward. Too much and inadequate all at once. She isn't even sure if she is grateful. "For what you did."

"Hurt that bad coming out of your throat?" he snarks. Her face must've gone sour.

"Yes, actually."

"Don't strain yourself, Granger." He stands too, brushing off his trousers.

"You still haven't told me why you did it."

Again, Malfoy doesn't answer. He shoves his hands into his pockets and glances sideways at her. "Zacharias Smith," he says again, instead. "He's safe?"

She lifts her chin. "Yes."

"Because he isn't me."

Her pulse stutters. "...Yes."

He takes a step toward her, and the dying light catches his blond hair — creates an ironic halo effect. One of her feet slides back. She debates stepping away. Somehow can't, even as he moves so close she has to look straight up to meet his eyes.

"Anyone but me..." he murmurs, searching her gaze, "right, Granger?"

She smells the familiar mint on his breath — clinically strong. "Right." she breathes.

One of his hands reaches up to trace the line of her jaw, cold as ice. Her joints are locked in place, muscles useless. And yet she doesn't think she'd move if she could.

That same hand travels upward, fingers ghosting over her lips. "Fuck you, then," he whispers — and he sweeps down, mouth inches from hers. They share the same breath, noses against one another.

"Likewise," she says. Her voice trembles, barely audible. The movement of her lips makes them whisper against his, and a frighteningly familiar pulse comes to life in her lower abdomen.

His hand snakes around to the back of her head, tangling into a fist in her mess of curls. "I can't fucking stand you," he hisses.

Her eyes flutter shut. "I know."

Loathe as she is to admit it, she wants nothing more in this moment than to kiss him. She wets her lips. Tilts her head back. His grip tightens.

"Oi, Draco — oh."

They jerk apart. Her pulse skyrockets, and for a moment she thinks it's all over.

But it's Nott up on the hill. He stands stock still. Shoots her a withering glance as she rushes to right herself before shifting his eyes to Malfoy.

"What is it?" asks Malfoy, impeccably calm.

Nott pulls that lime green journal from his bag and waves it in the air. "Less than half an hour. Just checking up." His eyes find Hermione again. Tighten.

"I'll meet you in the Owlery."

Nott huffs. "Right." He tucks the journal back into his bag. "See you then." And he turns on his heel, trudging back up the mountain.

Hermione clears her throat. Adjusts her bag on her shoulder and moves to follow Nott towards the castle. "I should—"

Malfoy's hand finds her arm, holding her in place. Their eyes meet, and something inscrutable passes between them.

Then he seems to think better of it, and he lets her go.

She sucks in a deep breath, hesitating only a moment before managing to set off on her way.

"Granger," he calls after her. She looks back. He's toying with a ring that looks like an heirloom on his finger — doesn't look at her. "I couldn't just stand there...like I did before. Not again."

She opens her mouth. Makes a small sound of confusion, brows furrowing.

He looks up. "You asked me why."

She puts it together. Something warm and unfamiliar floats around in her chest.

"Because I couldn't stand there and watch you scream. Not again."

She exhales.

That night she dreams of him. And she isn't sorry.

XVIII

Chapter Notes

I have to thank you all for your truly wonderful reviews. They keep me going. I'm also excited to announce that the trailer for this fic is up on youtube. If you care to check it out, the link is on my profile and also here: <https://youtu.be/HKxAaUYct5U>

November 13th, 1998

Diary,

I can't imagine anyone believes it. It looks so forced. And I can't fucking stand it.

Every time he kisses her on the cheek and every time she fucking reaches for his fucking hand, I want to carve my fucking eyes out the Muggle way. And I don't fucking understand that.

But he's not her fucking type.

I'm half expecting you to write an actual reply to this one, just so you can laugh in my face. What'll it say? Oh, probably something along the lines of: "And what, Malfoy? You think you're her type?"

No, I'm not her fucking type.

She's — she's probably very particular. I'd wager her type is a man who wears a waistcoat and a cable-knit jumper every day and drinks his tea with three fucking sugars. The type of man who'd kiss his wife when he came home. He's probably read every book by all those bloody Muggle authors she loves — fucking Shakeknife and whoever. He's probably also fucking memorized Hogwarts: A History because Merlin fucking knows she never shut her mouth about that one.

Yes, that's a must.

I'll bet he's into ballroom dancing and chess and he'll definitely like cats. He'll be an art aficionado and he'll do things like cook for her and learn her favorite poems and I'm absolutely fucking positive he'll be the sort to make love.

I'm not that fucking man.

I wear expensive, elf-tailored suits that would disgust her humanitarian disposition. My tea has to be black and over-brewed and if I ever had a wife, we'd already be divorced. I don't know a fucking thing about her beloved Muggle books and I used my copy of Hogwarts: A History to make charmed paper dragons. Mother made sure I could dance, but she never said I had to like it — and I made it my business not to. I cheat at chess and I fucking hate cats and I've never cooked a meal in my fucking life. I think poetry is pathetic.

And I wouldn't make love to Granger.

What a concept.

No — to her I want to do the things not written or spoken about in polite society. I dream about doing them. My hands itch when I see her. I so fucking badly want to do them.

And a part of me wants it to hurt her when I do it.

No.

No, I'm not her type at all.

Draco

November 23rd, 1998

Zacharias is pleased.

After nearly two weeks of spreading their fake relationship around the school, he tells her that the Slytherin boys have laid off. They no longer tease him. At least not for the reasons they did before.

And while she's happy for him, she wants to end this more than anything.

All of it feels wrong. Feels almost...*sticky*, if that makes any sense. Every time they kiss in front of Harry or Ron or any of their peers, really, she feels like she needs to take a shower. It's all wrong.

And it's entirely her fault.

So she's dedicated the next few days to thinking up some creative and believable way to end things. She'll talk it over with Zacharias. Maybe have some massive, scripted blowout in front of everyone. That way his reputation is protected, and she can be free to—

She stops her thoughts like she's stepping on an insect.

Free to do *what*?

She refuses to let her mind go in that direction. She's ending this for herself. So she doesn't have to lie anymore. For that and for only that.

She thrusts her focus back onto her cauldron. They're making Amortentia today in Potions — for the first time this year — and she's purposely placed herself as far away from Zacharias as possible in case it becomes clear to anyone just how different their tastes are. She's brewing next to Luna, which feels safe enough.

Except Malfoy's at the perpendicular table, next to Zabini, and that isn't safe at all.

From her position, she can see the steam rising from his cauldron — can watch as it gusts up against his face and creates beads of sweat on his pale forehead.

“Now, remember my friends,” says Slughorn, and she's exceedingly grateful to be snapped out of it, turning her attention back. “Concentrate,” he insists, as if he knows her thoughts. “I cannot stress enough the power and delicacy of this potion.”

Hers is nearly complete.

But that's what's concerning. With only a few steps to go, she should already be catching hints of her favorite scents. Spearmint and mown grass and what not. And so far all she's getting is the mint. It isn't spearmint, either. It's peppermint, rich and strong.

She practically holds her breath as she drops the last ingredient in, afraid as never before to follow in Seamus's footsteps and blow the whole thing up.

He's already done that, after all. She'd have to join him where he sits, over at Slughorn's infamous quarantine table, hair smoking.

The last ingredient stews for a moment, and luckily nothing combusts. But the peppermint remains ever strong, and as she sniffs at it, brows furrowed, new scents begin to appear one by one. Smoke seems to be one of them. A wood-burning, campfire sort of smoke. Then something she isn't quite sure about — perhaps linen. And then there's...

Her pulse quickens. She feels the flush creep up from her neck onto her face. Whatever this last scent is, it's having an effect on the strength of her knees. She grips the table for support, just as Luna says, "That's a very interesting one, Hermione," in that musical, lilting voice.

Her head is moving in two directions, one of which forcefully tells her to step away, and the other insists she dive right into that cauldron — because anything that smells *that* good cannot be dangerous.

It's...it's sort of musky. Oaky. But there's citrus in it, too. And a sort of watery finish. Fresh. Like rain.

"Oi, mate," says Zabini suddenly, and it rips her eyes up from the depths of the potion. He's waving a hand in front of his nose and looking at Malfoy. "Put a little less on, yeah? Gives me a bloody migraine."

Her stomach drops.

Malfoy looks confused. She watches his nose scrunch up, and as he inhales, his eyes shoot straight to her.

That's what it is. It's his cologne.

Hermione rips the cork from the tube of lacewing flies and throws them in, backing up just in time to watch the potion explode.

Students gasp and laugh and Luna glances over at her curiously. She can't see Malfoy through the smoke.

"Well, now, Miss Granger," announces Slughorn, "I'm disappointed. Off to the table with you."

The scent is gone, though. That's what matters.

She skirts around the brewing tables to join Seamus, unable to look even as she feels his eyes following her.

November 24th, 1998

She finds she was entirely wrong about him.

Zacharias Smith is *not* a nice boy.

And it only takes one sentence to completely reposition her view of him.

“If you end it, I’ll tell all of them.”

She’s on her way out — stops dead a foot from the door of the Prefect’s Bathroom, where they’ve come to discuss things.

Zacharias backtracks almost immediately — mutters things like, “I mean — I erm...just, *please*,” but she’s already seen the vindictive expression on his face. Fascinating...an absolute wolf in sheep’s clothing.

She’s disappointed in herself for not seeing it earlier.

“Are you threatening me?” she murmurs.

“I...no, Hermione. At least, I’m not trying to,” he fumbles, pushing the dirty blond hair from his eyes. It’s nothing like platinum, she realizes. No where near platinum. “I just...”

“You’ll just out me if I back out of our deal.”

He says nothing. Doesn’t blink.

“I’d say I could out you, too,” she says, surprised at the steadiness in her pulse — the strength in her voice. “But I’d like to stay above that level.”

“Try to understand the position I’m in,” he calls after her, but the door is already closing.

And as she walks down the deserted corridor, dark with the hour, she finds herself quite unexpectedly appreciating young Draco Malfoy — the one who called her Mudblood and sneered in favor of smiling.

He never pretended to be a nice boy, like Ron or Zacharias.

He made a point of being anything but.

And for a moment, the honesty of it overwhelms her. That old saying echoes in her head. Malfoy never tried to catch his flies with honey. He never promised sweetness. He threw vinegar the whole time.

She wonders if she’s preferred vinegar to honey all along.

November 25th, 1998

“You realize what time it is, don’t you Granger?”

Her pulse stutters, and idly she wonders when she became this unhinged. Turning, she finds him standing in the doorway to the boathouse. An unconventional place to meet, certainly, but safe she reckons.

She’s been staring at the spot by the window, where Snape once lay bleeding. It’s impossible not to picture it, and Malfoy’s arrival is a welcome distraction.

“Yes,” she answers at last. He has the letter she owed less than an hour ago in his hand, and if it isn’t obvious from the shadows beneath his eyes that she’s woken him, it certainly is from his dress. He’s... well, he’s wearing joggers — something she could’ve never pictured the Malfoy heir in, had she not seen it in person. They’re charcoal grey and tucked into a pair of brown boots, and he’s isn’t wearing a coat. Just a black jumper, which she imagines does little to ward off the cold November air.

“What was so important it couldn’t wait until morning?”

She turns fully to face him, leaning back against the window ledge and chewing her lower lip. “I tried to end my...*arrangement* with Zacharias Smith,” she says after a moment. “And he — well, he didn’t take it well.”

The water laps in the silence.

Malfoy’s expression is difficult to read. “Didn’t take it well,” he echoes, giving nothing away in his tone, either.

“He said he’ll tell them all — about...” she makes a feeble gesture between the two of them, and his brow does quirk at this, “...if I don’t continue.”

Malfoy ruminates for a moment, gaze complex. But when he speaks, there’s an edge. “And you’re so scared of this that you felt the need to organize a late night rendezvous?”

“Early morning,” she says without thinking, grimacing once it’s out of her mouth. “It’s...it’s early morning, not late night,” she adds pathetically.

“Can you ever turn that fucking part of your brain off?”

“Look, Malfoy, I just wanted to give you some warning,” she rushes before he can continue, and he bites back on whatever he planned to say. “I don’t think he’ll wait too long to play his hand.”

“He has one card, Granger — and it’s me.” Malfoy crosses his arms. Her eyes are drawn, traitorously, stupidly, to the appealing curve of his biceps, lean and yet masculine. A Seeker’s build. “It bothers you *that* much?” he asks again.

“No — I...yes. I — I don’t know,” she stumbles, turning away and facing the window again. She takes a breath and tries to organize her thoughts. It’s hard to do that while looking at him. “It wouldn’t be pleasant for you either.”

“Even though *I’m* the Death Eater.” He finishes the unspoken part of her sentence. His voice is icy. “Making you the better half of the situation.”

“I never said that.”

“Fuck you, Granger,” he snarls, as if she hasn’t spoken. She risks a glance over her shoulder. “You think you’re a fucking prize?”

“No.”

“You think, out of a room of hundreds, I’d choose you?”

“I’d choose *you*.”

“Because, let me tell you, I fucking wou—” His words stop as though he’s been magically

silenced.

She's staring at the window again. Doesn't want to look at him. And yet, she meant to say it. Could've stopped herself, but chose not to.

At the very least, she appreciates she made a conscious choice.

"You what?" he asks quietly. Barely a murmur.

"I'd choose you."

There's a long pause. She listens again to the water in favor of acknowledging the silence.

Then Malfoy sniffs. Angrily. "Don't play the saint, Granger. That's Potter's job."

She turns again, facing him but not looking up. Not certain she wants to. "I'm being incredibly selfish, actually," she says to the ground, matter-of-fact. "Wildly, wildly selfish."

Another painfully long silence follows. When he speaks, his voice is softer. She stares at his feet.

"And how's that?"

Her answer is easy. Unexpectedly so. It flows out like it's been meant to know the world beyond her throat for a long while. "I like the way I feel when I'm with you. You don't expect me to be happy or recovering or even...or even fucking *polite*. You treat me the way you did before the war. You're rude and patronizing and — and violent and you don't tiptoe around me, you — you call me a cunt and throw me into walls. You're horrible. You're *horrible* and I fucking hate you as much as you hate me. When I feel the way I feel around the rest of them, I feel like a stain. Like I'm tainting everything else. I don't — I can't explain it properly. I just...with you, I can — I can feel as furious as I need to feel. You're so sullen and so mean that it doesn't feel like I'm ruining anything. It's already ruined."

Her eyes flit up, and she regrets it when she sees the look in his eyes.

"You're right. That is selfish," he says.

"That isn't the half of it." She pushes off the wall. Risks two steps toward him, and a chill from the nearby water rushes up against her. Makes her shiver. Malfoy stands like a statue. "I..." she breathes, losing the strength in her voice as she reaches out her hand. She pulls it back twice before finally allowing it to rest on his chest over the soft knitting of his jumper. "I like the way this feels, too. You." Her other hand follows as though magnetized, and now she has both palms flat against his pectorals. She can't imagine how this looks from an outsider's perspective. He doesn't move away though, and she realizes she's never touched him quite like this. So slowly. So carefully. She doesn't even know what she's saying anymore. It's falling out of her like a leaking faucet. But the floodgates have opened and there's no stopping it. "I...I like touching you, and I like it when you touch me. It's the only time I feel like I can escape." She runs her hands downward a little boldly, so that her fingertips rest on his ribcage. "You're so cold and un-soft and so...so *not* Ron." She has no Veritaserum to pass this off onto, she realizes. There's nothing she can do to take this back. No excuse she can make.

Malfoy, for his part, has shown no conscious reaction, but she can feel his pulse through his jumper. It's skipping beats like a broken record.

"I like how alone you are," she breathes, "because it means I don't have to share you with anyone. I owe you to no one. You're as alone as I am and you — you're my secret...even though you're not

mine. Even though I sometimes wonder if you could be mine. Sometimes wish you were.” She fists her fingers in the fabric of his jumper, and his breath hitches. His first truly noticeable reaction. It yanks her eyes up, and they meet his like the impact of lightning on rock.

“Does that make any sense?” she breathes.

His eyes search hers — frosted glass against muddy brown. “None,” he murmurs, and then he leans in.

At first, it’s just a touch of the lips. No movement. And yet there’s something to it. Something cathartic and calming and yet equally exciting about his mouth resting on hers. Even though she’s felt more of him. Even though they’ve done this before.

This feels different. It always does. Feels new.

But this time, especially — and she realizes it’s because she doesn’t feel guilt. She isn’t grappling with self-doubt or consequences. By tomorrow, if Zacharias has his way, everyone will probably already know.

There’s something freeing about it, and for one infinitesimal moment, she doesn’t give a damn what anyone thinks. Perhaps she will in the morning. Perhaps even five minutes from now.

But in *this* instant, with his cold, unmoving lips over hers, she can only think of how right it feels. More right than most things have felt in her entire life.

It morphs quickly into more than a touch. He slants his lips and takes her chin in hand and his tongue darts out to taste her.

But then he pulls away, and she goes very still.

His eyes look dark when he’s this close, shadowed by their proximity. “What about Weaselby?” he asks quietly — soberly.

The petulant nickname from so long ago forces a little laugh out of her. “What, *Ron*? What *about* Ron?”

“Aren’t you two destined for each other, or some fucking rubbish like that?” He hasn’t let go of her chin. He’s so close, every word ghosts against her skin.

She searches his eyes. Realizes he’s completely serious in this moment.

“Ron and I have about as much in common as a book and a tea kettle,” she says.

“And, what?” Malfoy asks, voice low. “You and I have more?”

“In common?” She huffs another laugh. Pulls back slightly to roll up her sleeve, and then to reach delicately for his and do the same. She shows him their scars, side by side, just as she’d imagined. “Yes, we do.”

Malfoy meets her eyes. Something she can’t quite explain passes between them. He’s quick to roll his sleeve back down. But then he takes her arm like he did the other day. Looks down at it, gently running his thumb along the clean skin beside the etched letters.

She gasps, though, when he suddenly pulls her arm up and dips his head low, holding it in place by her elbow as he plants a featherlight kiss on the letters ‘M,’ ‘U,’ and ‘D.’ He glances up through

his lashes, mouth still on her, almost as if he's asking permission.

For what, she doesn't know.

She gives it anyway. Nods, releasing a trembling breath.

But she doesn't expect him to open his mouth — run his tongue along the sensitive length of her scar. A little shriek is forced out of her throat, and her entire body jolts. Malfoy just grips her elbow tighter, planting another kiss on the last three letters.

And then he's suddenly backing her up — pressing her against the window ledge.

“Hold still, yeah?” he murmurs, straightening up to nestle into her neck — to kiss up the line of her jaw and then backtrack downward to suckle at her pulse point.

She can't manage an answer. Her mind has been wiped clean like a chalkboard.

Malfoy's cold hands trace her figure, running up and down her waist and caressing her ribs through the thick fabric of her uniform jumper. It makes her shiver and warms her all at once. He kisses his way up the center of her throat, finding her chin and then returning at last to her lips.

She kisses him back eagerly, surprised at herself all the while, and their quiet gasps for breath fill the empty boathouse. He tastes like the peppermint from the Amortentia. Smells like the weak remnants of his cologne after it's mostly worn off.

She's lost in it. Lost for what feels like hours but is probably only a matter of minutes.

But then she feels his callused fingertips brush at the skin below the hem of her skirt. Start to slide upward.

She wakes up.

Goes rigid and tears her mouth away, feeling the inexplicably vivid cold of Malfoy Manor's marble floor against her back. She must make a strange sound, because Malfoy lets go of her immediately.

And she remembers who she is and who he is and suddenly everything she's just said feels like little more than pretty words.

“Granger?” he murmurs, cautious — questioning.

“I...” she swallows thickly. “I have to...”

She can't even finish the sentence. Isn't sure what she meant to say. Stop? Leave?

But her feet decide before she can, and the next time she catches a breath, she's halfway back to the castle, Malfoy's unreadable expression burned on the backs of her eyelids.

XIX

November 25th, 1998

Diary,

It's this fucking thing on my arm.

Destroying my life.

Draco

November 30th, 1998

Six days.

It's been six days, and nothing.

Not even from Parkinson, who's such a talented gossip she's known to have information ages before the subject even does.

Which means Zacharias hasn't said anything.

Hermione doesn't like that. It makes her uncomfortable. Because she's already told Harry and Ron and Ginny and Parvati and everyone else who noticed their distance and cared to ask that they've broken up, meaning he could play his hand at any moment.

But like Malfoy said, he only has one card.

Her stomach ties itself in a sailor's knot. She's added the boathouse to an ever-growing list of places in Hogwarts she can no longer visit. And while, if anyone ever asks, she can cite Snape's death as her reasoning, she knows inside that it has nothing to do with Snape.

Malfoy has been notably absent from classes — on both the remaining days of last week as well as today, it seems. Absent from meals, too. She's almost as worried as the morning she thought he'd drowned himself, even as she has no right to be.

She shouldn't have said the things she said to him. Shouldn't have encouraged this silly attraction of theirs, when what she'd known would happen all along in her heart had happened not five minutes later.

Aside from the time she fell off a playhouse as a child — saw her own bone jutting out through the skin of her leg — Malfoy is tied to every horror in her past. Malfoy Manor lives in his eyes and in his touch and in his voice, and she was foolish to ever think differently.

Still — even the logic of this can't prevent her from worrying.

Ginny is another problem.

Hermione had an inkling that she doubted her relationship with Zacharias, and now that it's proven to be so short-lived, the suspicion in her eyes has doubled. Half the time, during meals, Hermione finds the pretty witch's gaze sliding over her, and it makes her second guess each bite.

She has to lay low. She has to stay away from Zacharias — away from Malfoy at all costs. No, in fact — she thinks she has to stay away from everyone, for a while. Things had been simplest and safest toward the beginning of term, when she'd kept mostly to herself.

It'll seem like a regression to her friends, no doubt. But a necessary one. The Hermione they'd become accustomed to — broken and unexciting and empty, like a shell — well, she isn't much but she's certainly safe.

Yes, reverting back to her old ways seems like a brilliant plan.

For all of twenty seconds.

She's brewing Skele-Gro for Madam Pomfrey, quietly lost in all of these thoughts, when it starts. A slow-building raucous, somewhere down the hall from the Hospital Wing. Shouting, scuffling, several sets of desperate footfalls. She and Poppy glance up at the same time, and somehow, instinctively, Poppy knows to clear off the cot she's standing beside.

A moment later, a huddled mass of students comes careening around the corner through the entryway.

"Pomfrey, *Pomfrey* — *help!*" Nott is shouting.

Hermione drops the flask in her hand. It shatters on the flagstone.

"Put him here! Here!" Madam Pomfrey's response time is quick, like a whip-crack, and she's guiding the students to lay him on the bare cot as she rolls up her sleeves.

Hermione is frozen.

"Miss Granger, *quickly*." Poppy waves an arm behind her without looking, but when Hermione doesn't move she whips around. Snaps in the air. "*Now*, girl — good gracious, get over here!"

Hermione trips over her feet, stepping in glass as she forces herself to move to Poppy's side.

Malfoy is always pale.

But not like this. Now, he is the color of the sheets he's being laid out on, blending in like camouflage. All of his veins are visible — he's translucent — and she can practically see them struggling to hold in what little blood is left. But all of it — *all of it* — is pouring out, gushing like a river without a dam from his left arm and turning the white sheets violently red.

The stretch of skin bearing the Dark Mark is gouged. Carved into like a slab of meat. Blood is pooling on the floor beneath it where it dangles off the side of the bed — flowing down the length of his arm and into the palm of his hand, before leaking out between his fingers.

She feels her stomach roll. Her gaze flits to his face.

And he's just staring. Straight up, at the ceiling. His eyes are bloodshot — glassy, half-lidded. Hauntingly dull. If the entirety of the situation were removed, he would appear uncommonly bored.

He blinks. Slowly. He's conscious.

He's *conscious*.

"*Miss Granger!*"

Madam Pomfrey's sharp voice jolts her like a electric shock, and a moment later she's soaked in warm blood, his arm braced in her hands. She smears it on the bedside table as she fumbles for Essence of Dittany. Madam Pomfrey has swept aside the half-dozen Slytherins surrounding them to stand at the foot of the cot and elevate Malfoy's legs.

"What happened?" she demands, terse but calm, as always. Hermione cannot imagine how she's calm.

"I — I don't, I don't know, I found him like this," Nott rushes. "Must've been an accident."

Someone laughs.

It's Malfoy, half-heartedly, still staring at the ceiling. "No use lying on my account, mate."

"Mr. Malfoy, don't speak," Pomfrey insists.

Hermione is applying the Dittany with trembling hands, but the wound is resisting it. "It isn't working," she gasps out, for the first time hearing how strange she sounds. Unsettled. Unhinged.

"It's Dark Magic, I doubt anything will," Madam Pomfrey snaps, and out the corner of her eye, Hermione can see her preparing a tourniquet.

"What are you doing?" Nott demands, but one of Pomfrey's nurses pushes him back when he tries to take it out of her hands. "You can't cut off his arm!"

"There's nothing to be done. Dark Marks resist healing."

"You haven't even *tried* anything!"

As they argue, Hermione presses her hands to the wound, struggling to stanch the flow. "What have you done?" she whispers. "What were you thinking? What have you *done*?"

And Malfoy turns, his head falling to the side on the pillow with too little strength, tired eyes finding hers.

"Looks better now, doesn't it?" he rasps.

A sharp breath falls from her mouth, and then Madam Pomfrey is pushing her aside and tying a magical tourniquet above his elbow with her wand.

"Hey! *No!*" Nott is being barricaded by more than one nurse, now.

Malfoy's eyes follow Hermione as she falls back into the crowd, her muscles not responding, her mind a useless whirlpool.

Madam Pomfrey takes Malfoy by the wrist and poises her wand where she intends to cut. Nott is hurling obscenities. Several of the other Slytherins are looking away, squeamish — some have turned their backs.

Pomfrey opens her mouth, the spell on the tip of her tongue.

"Wait!"

For a moment, Hermione doesn't realize she's the one who said it. But everyone has turned to look at her and Madam Pomfrey has an eyebrow quirked. "Miss Granger, now is not the time to—"

She acts on impulse. “No. Wait.” And she pushes back through the crowd of nurses and students to stand at Poppy’s side, pulling her wand from her pocket.

“Miss Granger, he doesn’t have much—”

She does it before she can be stopped. Takes Malfoy’s arm out of Madam Pomfrey’s grip and hovers the tip of her wand an inch or so above the wound.

“Imperio,” she breathes.

There’s a collective gasp.

“Miss Granger!”

But she doesn’t take her eyes off the wound — feels Malfoy’s gaze on her.

“Heal,” she demands.

For a moment, there's nothing but an agonizing silence. Madam Pomfrey starts to bat her away, pulling at her arms.

But as she stumbles back, she watches. And another mass gasp rings out as the gouges in Malfoy’s arm begin to reluctantly sew themselves back together.

Within thirty seconds, the lines of the Dark Mark are intact again and its evil shape stares back at them beneath a sheen of drying blood. Stares with all its permanency.

Malfoy’s expression is a mask. Hermione is numb.

And not a moment later, Aurors are charging through the entryway of the Hospital Wing.

November 30th, 1998

McGonagall assures her that it's just a formality.

Still, her hands are cold and shaking, crusted with dried blood — every inch of her arms beneath the elbows is stained red. The front of her blouse, too.

She doesn't know what possessed her in that moment. What absurd, cautionless, lawless entity took control of her and pushed the Imperius Curse off her tongue. What was she *thinking*?

The truth of it is she wasn't thinking. She'd been looking — at him. Watching him grow paler with each second and imagining him with one less limb. Imagining him losing *one more thing* as a result of this war.

And then everything Madam Pomfrey was saying about Dark Magic just took root in her head and grew like a weed. Dark for dark, light for light.

It was only logical.

But it'd taken the Ministry no time at all to trace the Unforgiveable, and now, despite McGonagall's avid defense of her actions — despite Madam Pomfrey's and Zabini's and even bloody *Parkinson's* witness accounts — she's being led through the Ministry atrium, with Theodore Nott, of all people, as her companion.

"You'll be required to make a statement," the Ministry escort is explaining, "and then a twenty-four hour stay of magic will be placed on your wand."

She's numb to it. To all of it.

She can't take her mind off of that gruesome wound.

"*No use lying on my account,*" Malfoy had said. Which meant it hadn't been an accident.

Another attempt at suicide.

It sends her into a tailspin. Of guilt and confusion and rigorous overthinking. Was it the boathouse? Was it what she'd said and hadn't meant?

Was it her fault? Again? *Again?* Again?

"Oi, Granger," Nott snaps and yanks her out of the way before she can walk into one of the black-tiled walls. "Pay some bloody attention."

Nott has been enlisted to serve as a neutral party — someone who won't defend her blindly, like McGonagall, but also who doesn't openly despise her, like Parkinson, although Hermione has some doubts about that. He's been fairly *open* in his distaste regarding her and Malfoy.

Still, he's there to speak in her defense, and for this she allows him to treat her like an imbecile at every given opportunity as they make their way to the hearing.

A small part of her brain unhelpfully floats the possibility that she's just obliterated any chance of working for the Ministry. Of becoming an Auror or a Healer.

For Malfoy.

News travels too quickly at Hogwarts. Again, she has Parkinson to thank for that.

Still, she's been blindly hoping during the entire journey back from the Ministry that she'll be able to slip into bed undetected. To deal with yet another round of heavy scrutiny in the morning, when this headache has subsided.

Luck is not with her. Hasn't been and never will be.

And when she steps through the portrait hole and into the common room, at least half a dozen pairs of eyes are waiting for her.

"Hermione?"

"Mione?"

"What happened?"

"Mione, *bloody hell*..."

Her shoulders slump. She heaves out a breath and collapses into one of the armchairs by the fireplace. Harry, Ron, Ginny, Dean, Seamus, Neville, Parvati...every Gryffindor she can possibly imagine at this point. They're all gathered around her like children expecting a bedtime story.

And for a long moment, it feels safer just to stare down at her own hands.

But they're still covered in Malfoy's blood.

"I'm sure you already know what happened," she manages at last. She pulls out her wand to cast a charm for her headache — waves it uselessly until she remembers.

Ginny catches on quickly. "They put a stay on you?"

"A what?" asks Ron around a mouthful of Turkish Delight he's eating from a box.

"A stay — a ban. She can't use magic," Ginny explains, and as she does Harry leans forward. Pulls out his own wand, green eyes gentle and cautious.

"Mione," he says quietly, "can I...?"

For a moment, she doesn't understand. But he points the tip of his wand at her hands, and she's suddenly reminded of how uncommonly kind Harry is.

Malfoy's blood vanishes.

"Thank you," she murmurs.

"Go on, then — what happened?" Seamus says, and he's instantly hushed by Dean.

"Give her a bloody minute, mate."

"No, no...it's fine," she says primly — smoothes her skirt, now that her hands are clean. "It was a

warning. The Ministry gave me a warning. That's all."

"That can't be *all*—"

"Shut it, Seamus."

"It makes sense, though, doesn't it?" says Parvati over them. Hermione turns to look at her, watching her twist her braid around her finger as she talks. "I mean...you're a war hero, Hermione. Malfoy's a Death Eater..."

"Ex-Death Eater," she mumbles, surprising herself. She's relieved no one seems to hear.

Parvati continues. "No one can really fault you for using whatever force needed to defend yourself."

"Yes, well, it was an Unforgivable, so there are certain procedures that—" she stops as Parvati's words register. Thinks for a moment she might've misheard her. "Force? What do you mean force?"

They trade confused glances. Harry shifts uncomfortably.

"We heard you and Malfoy had another, erm..." he searches for a word, "altercation. And you cast the Imperius Curse. But we know it was self-defense, Hermione — don't w—"

"Oh, *bloody hell*," she snaps, lurching to her feet, and all of them lean back, startled. Ron swallows too quickly and chokes a bit on the Turkish Delight.

"Mione—"

"This is *unbelievable*." She storms toward the dormitory stairs, but as Ginny rushes to follow, she whips around. "Malfoy didn't *attack* me. Don't you see? Don't you realize how unfair you're being? It's *prejudice*. It's bloody *prejudice*. Don't you see it?"

"Hermione, what on Earth are you on about?" says Ginny, gently, cautiously. She reaches out as though to grab her shoulders and calm her down. As though she's a mental patient. The others stare from behind her.

Hermione gathers a thick breath — lets it stream out through her nose, suddenly uncertain at her own fury. "Malfoy's Dark Mark was wounded," she bites out at last. "They brought him to the Hospital Wing. He didn't attack me, he was half dead. I used the Imperius Curse so Madam Pomfrey wouldn't amputate his arm." And she turns her back on their surprised eyes, starting up the stairs. "Stop reading into rumors."

She keeps her curtains drawn tight until she hears the other girls get into bed — listens for each individual pair of feet and the creaks of each four-poster.

She's restless. Knows already she won't sleep tonight. And for the past hour, she's been going over each and every reason she shouldn't go to the Hospital Wing in her head. There are almost too many reasons. Seemingly endless reasons.

But she keeps seeing Malfoy's last glance behind her eyelids, and it proves to be a powerful reason

all its own.

And as soon as she hears Ginny's breathing even out with sleep, she's swinging her legs over the side of the bed. She doesn't bother with robes. Pads off towards the dormitory door in her lavender-striped pajamas.

This is a bad idea. She knows.

She's perfectly cognizant of the similarities between her and an addict. Mentally goes through them again as she makes her way through the dark castle, easily avoiding the memorized routes of Prefects.

Nothing positive has come from interacting with Malfoy. He's detrimental to her health — pulls her from sleep every other night with vivid dreams. He reminds her of the Manor. He's rude and arrogant and a sinking ship all his own. He's destroying her friendships.

And yet she can't keep from going back to him.

What's the difference, really, between Malfoy and heroin?

What are they but two shipwrecks, entangled by the same tide? How fucking poetic.

She's one hall away from the Hospital Wing when she hears voices. Thinks for a moment that it might be Madam Pomfrey and flattens herself to the wall beside the entrance.

But the voice is too youthful. Too high-pitched.

"I'll come back in the morning," it says, and all too soon, she recognizes the simpering tone of Parkinson. "Keep you company."

Hermione peeks her head around the entryway's arch. The Wing is dim, but she can see Pansy draped over Malfoy's cot — watches as she leans in and plants a kiss on his forehead.

And there's a sudden, inexplicable sourness on her tongue.

Malfoy says nothing as Pansy gets up to leave, and Hermione doesn't have time to conceal herself before she's rounding the corner.

She startles, letting out a ridiculous little squeak upon catching sight of her. Then her face sinks into a dirty sneer.

"What are *you* doing here, Mudblood?"

Pansy hasn't changed at all, even after everything that's happened. It's sort of remarkable, really.

"Madam Pomfrey asked me to check on him overnight."

She's changed though. Lies come so easily to her now.

"No, she didn't," snaps Pansy.

And Hermione just shoves past her, knocking their shoulders. "And how would you know?"

She feels Pansy's dark eyes follow her through — hears her angry little sniff before she stalks away.

Malfoy doesn't look surprised to see her. He's propped up a little awkwardly on the stiff pillows of the cot, laying on top of the covers, the beds around him empty. The Wing is silent, save the quiet breathing of the comatose Quidditch player at the far end— a Ravenclaw who's been here several days.

"Pomfrey didn't send you," he rasps, tone as bored as ever. "She's releasing me tomorrow afternoon. There's no reason for you to be here."

Hermione pauses at the foot of his cot, unfazed by his coldness. She doesn't sit by his side. That feels too intimate. She leans instead on the bars of the footboard.

"Was there a reason for Parkinson to be here?"

Malfoy blinks slowly at her. His eyes are hooded with exhaustion, rimmed with purple lines, and he's still pale from blood loss. "To comfort me, obviously."

"I didn't think you liked Parkinson." Hermione adopts his bored tone as well, although inwardly his words sting, and she doesn't know why.

"She likes me."

"Clearly."

Malfoy's eyes tighten. He shifts, adjusting his arm in its off-white cotton sling. "Going to fault me for seeking positive attention, Granger?"

"No."

"Human beings fucking need it, you know?" He gives a frustrated huff, again trying to adjust himself more comfortably. Failing. "Even Death Eaters," he murmurs, staring at the bedsheets — an afterthought.

"How is your arm?" she asks, because the topic feels too poisonous.

"Still connected to me."

"You're welcome."

Malfoy sits up suddenly — so abruptly she starts a little. "I'd rather it was fucking gone," he says through gritted teeth, either with pain or anger. She isn't sure. "You didn't even fucking *ask*."

And for a moment, she can't believe what she's hearing. "You're joking," she says flatly.

A glare is his only answer.

"You ungrateful *bastard*," she snaps, unconsciously leaning forward. "I saved your arm — your fucking *life*. Which, I might add, you tried to *waste*. *Again*."

Malfoy's face floods with something. He splutters with confusion for a moment, incredulous and furious all at once. "Merlin, you know fucking *nothing*, do you?" he manages at last.

"*What? What do I not know?!*"

Their shouts are echoing off the high ceilings. She's surprised they haven't roused the portraits.

"NOTHING! You know *nothing*!"

“You tried to kill yourself!”

“I DON’T WANT TO DIE!”

It echoes for what seems like an eternity, stunning her into silence.

And Malfoy dissolves into pathetic, humorless laughter. “You stupid, stupid bitch. You don’t know anything. Fucking nothing. I didn’t try to kill myself. I don’t want to die. I’m scared. I’m so fucking afraid to die.”

Hermione grips the bars of the footboard in a vise, knuckles going white. “The lake...” she whispers numbly. Feebly.

Malfoy forces out another laugh, and it sounds more like a cry. “*Merlin*, you really thought—? Bloody hell, Granger, do you know how much this burns?” And he rips the thin fabric of the sling out from around his neck before she can even think to stop him. Yanks his arm free of it, hiding a wince as he displays the slow-healing Mark. “Do you know how hot it gets? I feel like I’m boiling. I’m on fire. I’m always, *always* on fire.”

She puts it together quickly, but not before he spells it out for her.

“I needed to cool down. The lake is below freezing at night.”

“Don’t lie to me,” spills out of her mouth instinctively.

“I’m not fucking lying, Granger.”

“And *yesterday*?” she snaps, suddenly aware of tears welling in her eyes. Confused by them. Furious at them. “How do you explain yesterday?”

Malfoy gathers an unsteady breath, falling roughly back onto the pillows and wincing again. “I didn’t want to look at it anymore,” he says to the ceiling. “Didn’t care how much it would hurt. I didn’t want to look at it.” Then his eyes flit down and meet hers sharply. “And d’you know? For one fucking second, I thought — maybe. Maybe I wouldn’t have to. When Pomfrey made that tourniquet.”

A heavy dread sinks into her stomach, weighing her down.

“But you had to fucking ruin that too.”

And then he shakes his head and closes his eyes, practically dismissing her.

She stands, still as stone, for a good minute or two, unable to move. Unable to form words. Tears unable to fall. Her mind frantically tries to reorganize the last several weeks, months, around this new information. Tries to make sense of everything in a different light.

The cold of the bars fades, growing warm in her grip, and an apology sits on her tongue.

But she finds herself swallowing it, and when she moves she doesn’t feel like she’s in control. Feels hypnotized. Doesn’t fight it.

Letting go of the bars, she moves around to the side of the bed, sitting exactly where she told herself not to. Malfoy’s eyes snap open — shoot to her, sharp and untrusting.

She shoves back the striped satin of her sleeve and takes him by the wrist of his injured arm, leaning over so he can see both scars.

“If I have to live with mine, then you have to live with yours.” And a tear falls, finally. Just one. It hits the skin of her bare thigh where it’s tucked under her on the edge of the cot.

“Fuck you, Granger,” he spits, but the venom is weak, and her response is soft. Dazed, almost.

“Stop that.” She lets her eyes trace him, sliding over the bloodstains on his dress shirt — the few inches of bare, alabaster skin she can see of his chest, above the top button. “Stop doing that.”

“Doing what?” And now the venom is entirely gone, replaced with uncertainty.

Cautiously, she runs her fingers over the mottled ink of the Dark Mark. Gooseflesh fans out across the skin of his arm, quick and yet she doesn’t miss it. “Pretending to be cruel.”

“I’m not pre—”

And something strange and stupid and courageous overcomes her. She shifts quickly, and suddenly her knee is between his, her other bracketing his thigh — and she’s leaning over him, palms beside his shoulders. His words die in his throat.

Usually, she doesn’t have time to think like this. To take him in, like this. His cold blue eyes flit desperately between hers, uncertain, perhaps even a little afraid. Her hair falls down around them, brown curls brushing against the edge of his jaw.

“You don’t have to do that with me,” she whispers.

The muscles of his throat constrict as he swallows. She leans lower. Close enough to smell the peppermint. Always peppermint.

He’s so much like heroin.

And she forgets she should be afraid, too. Forgets all her rules. Forgets about the boathouse.

Forgets on purpose.

She says, “I see right through you.” And she kisses him.

His mouth is dry. His lips are chapped. Her tongue grazes the sweetness of the mint he’s sucking on, moments before he swallows it.

“Stop doing this to me,” he says against her lips, even as his hands snake their way into her hair — fist in it. “Stop,” his teeth catch her bottom lip — trap it. “Stop, stop,” he murmurs, pulling her closer, and when her body flattens against his, it feels so right it’s almost wrong. Too right.

A frantic part of her brain tries to set off alarm bells. Tries to remind her why she swore never to do this. But the rest of her is sinking into a gelatinous surrender. Drowning slowly. Happily.

Malfoy sits up against her, grip tightening, one hand abandoning her hair to belt around her waist and yank her close. Locking them together. That foreign, forbidden tingle flutters to life low in her stomach — *lower*. The one she’s only felt a handful of times. The one she discovered in Third Year, under her sheets with her own fingers. The one she never felt with Ron.

Malfoy pulls her hair — drags her neck back, exposing it. For a moment she stares at the upside down Hospital Wing behind her, but then he latches onto a perfect spot and bites down, and her eyes flutter shut, a sound she didn’t know she could make escaping through her teeth.

Slowly, his other arm works her hips into a gliding rhythm against him, and it brings color to her

cheeks. That tingle becomes a steady pulse, and her shaking hands mirror his, threading through platinum strands, damp with sweat. Malfoy mouths a searing path up the side of her throat, leaving bruises in his wake — she can feel them. His hand cradles her skull — holds her head steady as his lips find her ear.

“I *hate* you,” he rasps as he sucks at the lobe, tracing his tongue along the shell of her ear. “I fucking hate you.”

“No, you don’t,” she breathes, her pulse skipping and stuttering in her chest, the blood loud in her ears. She pulls away — finds his lips, wanton and unashamed. “You don’t,” she says around his tongue, silenced when he flicks it up against the roof of her mouth.

Both of his hands find her hips — shove them back — and her head misses the bars of the footboard by a fraction of an inch as he drops her roughly to the mattress, reversing their positions. The cot creaks angrily beneath them as he drapes himself over her, hooking her thigh up around his hip.

For a moment, he goes still, staring down at her. Their breaths are short and heavy, nearly gasps. He searches her eyes. Releases a sigh like a surrender. “No, I don’t.”

He props himself up with one arm so he can trace his fingers over her jaw — up over her lips, toying with them. Parting them and sealing them. The pulse in her abdomen triples, but her eyes can’t help but catch his injured arm shaking.

“Aren’t you in pain?” she whispers against his fingers.

“Of course I’m in fucking pain,” he hisses and parts her lips with his thumb. Dips low to kiss her hard. “Be quiet.”

He pulls away in enough time to catch her glare and then surprises her with a huffed laugh. A real laugh. It thaws her anger in instant. He leans back slightly, resting his weight on his knees. His eyes lock onto hers, and both their smiles fade as he watches her carefully. Watches while he runs his hand up along the line of buttons on her nightshirt, sending a shiver through her.

He’s waiting for her to panic.

She realizes it soon enough — even takes a moment to search herself, search her nerve-endings for any sense of it, but they seem to have given in at last. She wonders what’s changed between this moment and the boathouse, but when he frees the lowest button with two fingers she forgets to care.

“Fucking ridiculous pajamas, Granger,” he says, going for the second button.

“You realize you’re covered in your own blood.”

His mouth curls up on one side — the way she’s admitted to herself she likes — and with a sharp yank, he rips open the rest. Buttons fly as she gasps, arms rushing to her chest to cover up instinctively.

“Don’t,” he says, voice low as he leans in again. “Don’t.” He pulls at her forearms as he brushes his nose against hers. Kisses her once. Twice. “Show me.”

He opens his eyes inches from hers, and again they stare at one another. His gaze is challenging, and for a moment she has to grapple with just how well he seems to know her. Enough to know she can’t resist a challenge.

She lets him pry her arms open. Lets him pin them down on either side of her head.

And he looks.

Stares at her naked chest until she feels so much heat building in her cheeks she's tempted to fight to cover herself again. She's plain. She knows that. She's always known. In fact, Malfoy himself made sure she was quite aware of it in earlier years.

She's thinking about reminding him of this when he says, "Fucking hell, look at you." It's so quiet he might be saying it to himself.

And he says nothing more, but she stops being embarrassed when his tongue glides over the space between her breasts. Her breath hitches. His eyes find hers from beneath his lashes, and he adjusts his course, mouth closing over her left nipple.

She gasps — jolts so abruptly she knees him in the thigh.

"Fuck, Granger — *ow*," he hisses, dropping his forehead to her chest for a second.

"Sorry, sorry, I'm sorry," she splutters, trying to sit up, but his grip remains tight and he keeps her pinned. He shakes off the pain. Laughs at her, settling himself down again and pressing their hips together. The hardness she feels stops her breath. Enhances her blush.

"You'd think no one had done that before," Malfoy murmurs, biting down on her lip.

"N-No one has," she breathes, realizing too late what she's admitted.

He pauses. Goes completely still for a moment. And now she does feel panic. It spreads like a wildfire through her stomach, along with doubts and second-guesses. Insecurity. Fear.

He pulls away from her lips, and she risks a glance — opens her eyes expecting disappointment or something similar.

Instead, his expression is calm. Serious. Deep in thought. She'd give anything to know his thoughts in this moment.

She considers asking.

But before the words can leave her throat, his hand is sliding up her thigh. He keeps his eyes on hers, blinking slowly, expression unreadable as his fingers ghost, featherlight, over the front of her satin shorts.

"What about this?" he asks quietly.

She feels her knees shaking. Her heart is struggling to pump blood fast enough, her mouth dry. "What?" she says, barely a whisper.

He twists his hand — slides his fingers between her legs over the fabric, and it takes all of her strength not to let her thighs clamp together at the intensity of the sensation. "Has anyone ever done this?" He nips at her bottom lip. "To you?"

Her eyes flutter shut. "No." Her voice is hoarse.

"No?" He adds pressure. Careful, practiced pressure.

"*No*," she gasps, trying to come to terms with what her body's telling her. With the fact that she's

never wanted anything like this. Never felt hungry like this. Starved like this.

Her hips rise to meet him without her permission.

It was supposed to be Ron. She was supposed to feel this Ron. Want this with Ron.

Or with Harry.

Or with Dean.

With Seamus, with Cormac, with Viktor.

With anyone but him.

“And this?”

He cuts off her thoughts abruptly when his fingers dip below her waistband — slide beneath her underwear and over where she’s never, *never* been touched.

“Never,” she says aloud, voice trembling.

His mouth finds her ear again, sucking gently and doubling the sensations shooting through her veins like sparks. “Just me?” His fingers slide back and forth rhythmically, purposefully, hitting spots she never knew about. Never read about. Never thought about.

“Just you,” she gasps out.

Malfoy groans, and the sound of it sends shockwaves straight to the place his fingers keep teasing. It’s tortuous. Incomplete. Unfair.

“Please,” she hears herself whisper. Can’t believe what she’s saying. Can’t believe what he’s reduced her to in a matter of minutes, when she’d thought her resolve was so strong.

He relents. Just barely. Dips his finger inside, but only for a split second before retreating. It forces out a moan — another, “*please.*” All these sounds she never imagined she’d make.

“I’m a bad choice,” Malfoy says against her ear, even as he slides his finger in deep. Holds it there. “Fuck, you’re tight. You’ve really never — I’m a terrible fucking choice. Dammit, Granger. The fucking *worst.*” He twists his finger even as he says this, making her back arch, making her mind hazy.

“I don’t care,” she hisses, and it morphs into a desperate keen when he adds a second finger. “It’s my choice. It’s my choice. Please.”

And she finds herself reaching for his belt buckle. Malfoy yanks his wand from his pocket as she struggles with it, and she sees his hand shaking. Is glad for it, if only to know he’s as affected as she is.

He casts the contraceptive charm, and for a moment her bare abdomen glows pink. The color reflects off of his eyes as he glances up at her, uncertain.

“*It’s my choice,*” she says again firmly, before he can speak.

He tosses his wand to the floor with a heavy exhale, hooking his thumbs in her waistband and yanking her shorts and underwear off — throwing them somewhere. He divests himself of his shirt and trousers just as quickly, and she’s surprised at herself, but she’s too shy to look. Keeps her eyes

glued to his.

Malfoy lowers himself over her slowly, sensually. A small part of her recognizes that he's good at this. Must've had practice. It's almost painful to think about.

But just as she feels him at her entrance, he pauses. Brushes his nose against hers, eyes closed. "How can I trust you?" he whispers. "How can I trust you not to regret this?"

Her heart constricts. And it guts her to say it, but she tells him the truth. "You can't."

He breathes out. A short, angry breath.

And then he thrusts in.

White hot pain shoots up through her stomach. Tears prick at her eyes. She lets loose a little scream, hand fisting in the starched sheets.

He isn't being gentle. He's trying to hurt her. His thrusts are angry. Punishing. He slams into her with what feels like years of pain and anger, with no regard to her inexperience, and as the tears roll down her cheeks, she sees his face. Sees the tilt of his brows and the way his eyes are squeezed shut. Sees the raw hurt. All of it.

A sob wracks its way out of her chest. "No."

His painful rhythm cuts short. He opens his eyes slowly, reluctantly, as he goes still inside of her, and for a moment all she can focus on is the sting.

"What?" he asks quietly, coldly — pretends he doesn't know what he's doing.

It awakens her own anger, hardening and determining her, and she reaches up to twist her hand in his hair. "No," she says again sharply, giving his head a jerk. "I'm not letting you do this. I'm not letting you ruin this on purpose. You don't get to make me regret this on purpose. You *don't*."

"I—"

"Shut up," she snaps and she kisses him silent. A furious kiss, at first. But she forces it to soften. Forces his jaw to unclench as she runs her tongue gently along his bottom lip. Nips at it. "Don't do it," she whispers. "Because this?" And she clenches her stomach muscles, despite the pain — squeezes around him. He lets out a hiss, eyes sobering as they find hers. "I want this. With you."

Something fractures in his gaze. Some wall falls.

And watching it crumble is as erotic as the way their bodies are interlocked.

"Do it right," she demands. "I know you can."

He doesn't speak. His eyes speak for him, flying from one emotion to the next as he stares at her, more lost and more desperate than she's ever seen him.

"Show me."

His mouth falls on hers — collapses. His muscles go slack as he kisses her deeply, hungrily, and he melts into her the way he's never allowed himself to before. Vulnerable.

He starts to move. Slowly. Deftly.

He rocks his hips against hers, pushing in and out, in and out, and the sting fades away into nothing. In its place, a slow-burning friction starts to build. A tension. The only tension she's ever known to feel impossibly, inexplicably *good*. Better than good.

But it's the noises he makes — the quiet moans and the hitches in his breath, the way he kisses her — lazily, a tangle of tongues and gasps, the way his hand curls into hers against the sheets. It's this that starts to tip the tower of sensation that's stacking up inside of her — has it teetering, ready to fall.

"*Malfoy*," she breathes, free hand tangling in his hair, drawing him closer.

He thrusts hard suddenly, making her gasp, eyes flying open.

"That's not my name," he growls. He thrusts in again — hard, deep. It's overwhelming, and yet it isn't painful the way it was before. "Say my fucking name."

Her lips lock shut. She doesn't know why. An infinitely small piece of her doesn't want to fully give in to him yet.

Malfoy growls again and dips his arms beneath her, yanking her up as he sits back and holding her in his lap. The friction is twice as powerful at this angle, and for a moment she sees white spots. Loses her concentration as he rocks up into her.

"Say it."

She shakes her head, letting it fall back, eyes closed. That tower is swaying dangerously.

Malfoy bunches her curls in his fist and forces her forehead against his. "Please...please say it."

In and out, in and out...

"No," she whispers feebly.

"Please." He bites down on her lip. "Say it. Say it, please."

She can only whimper.

He throws her back down, the old mattress squealing in protest, and he yanks up her thigh again, driving in deeper, sending her reeling. "Admit it to yourself. Say it. Fucking say it. *Say it*."

"*Draco*."

The tower collapses.

Her body jerks, and she grabs onto him for support as the sensation wracks its way through her, thighs shaking, hands trembling. Her eyes roll back into her head.

He sighs — groans in approval, and then he loses himself in her, gasping against her lips as he carries himself through his own collapse.

Then his full weight sinks against her, heavy and warm, for once, the sweat of their bodies mixing. The sudden silence is thick — weighted with what they've done, filled only by their gradually slowing breaths.

"Fuck," he murmurs into her neck, but it doesn't quite cover it.

Doesn't quite encapsulate losing herself to the boy who tormented her for years for the sport of it, here, in the Hospital Wing, on a cot soaked with his own blood.

It doesn't.

She stares up at the ceiling.

They've definitely woken the portraits. From the corner of her eye, she can see that most of them have vacated their frames. All but one. The portrait of a chambermaid, who peeks at them from between her fingers, blushing.

"Fuck," Hermione echoes, looking back to the ceiling.

Because it was him. It was him and it was the last thing she should've done. The last thing she'd ever thought could happen as a result of coming down here tonight. The stupidest, most reckless, most un-thought out thing she's ever done.

And it felt right.

Chapter Notes

Can't tell you all how much your lovely comments mean to me. I'm so glad you're enjoying this as much as I am. Please come say hello on Tumblr! xoxo

December 1st, 1998

She fell asleep.

She realizes it in the middle of her dream, as she sits in the center of a tornado of butterflies, and the panic wakes her up instantly.

So instantly, in fact, that she falls off the cot — lays sprawled, naked, on the cold flagstone of the Hospital Wing for several seconds, utterly confused.

Then it all starts flooding back to her at an alarming rate, and her body reminds her too. The soreness between her legs, the tenderness in her neck, the swelling in her lips.

Malfoy's sleepy face appears from over the edge of the cot.

"Did you sleep on the floor?" he mumbles, voice thick and groggy.

She flushes as his eyes widen a little — trace over her naked body, on full display now in the sunlight. But before she can get a word out, voices sound from the hallway just outside.

"Oh no," she breathes. She shoots to her feet so fast she almost elbows Malfoy in the face. "*Oh no, oh no, oh no.*" She searches desperately for her clothes, finding the scraps of her nightshirt before she remembers him tearing it in half. Her cheeks flame and she rips the sheet off of him to wrap around herself. "Bloody hell, what do we do?"

Malfoy hasn't moved much. He pulls his knees up to his chest, naked save a pair of boxers. Casual. Always so fucking casual. "I dunno. You could leave."

"There's only one exit!"

He gestures to one of the windows and yawns.

"Oh, for goodness sake, Malfoy — *help me!*" She whacks at him with a section of bundled up sheet.

"Merlin, woman, just conjure yourself some clothes!"

"I can't! My wand isn't working."

The voices grow louder. Closer.

"What do you mean your wand isn't—"

"*Draco!*"

He sighs childishly — moves too slowly. But eventually he pulls out his wand and conjures her some robes.

“Thank you,” she breathes out. “Thank you.” Her pulse has only just begun to slow when she notices. “Wait — *no*, Malfoy these are *Slytherin* robes.”

He shrugs. “Suppose they are.”

“Oh, you *git*.” She balls up the sheet and throws it in his face, frantically pulling up a chair from nearby and shoving the remnants of her pajamas under the covers. “Give me your arm.”

He raises an eyebrow. The voices are just around the corner.

“Oh, you must be joking — *please*. Please, give me your arm.”

“Very nice, Granger. Manners are very important.”

He gives her his arm and she yanks on it intentionally, smirking when he winces. Part of her can’t believe they’re already back to bickering, after—

Poppy and her head nurse round the corner.

“Yes, there’ll be some scarring, some soreness, but otherwise it’s healing well,” Hermione says, a little too loudly, as she pretends to study his Mark.

“Subtle,” Malfoy murmurs.

She squeezes his arm hard. Makes him jolt.

“Miss Granger.” Madam Pomfrey sounds surprised, coming to a stop beside them, her shrewd gaze setting Hermione on edge. “I didn’t expect you this early. Certainly not after yesterday.”

“I just wanted to check on it,” she says, feeling her heart race. She tries to hide the green and silver tie by leaning further over Malfoy’s arm.

Madam Pomfrey makes a little ‘hmm’ sound and bobs her head once. Turns to him. “And how are you feeling, Mr. Malfoy?”

“Potent,” says Malfoy, and Hermione coughs. “You know — *virile*, even. I mean, I’ve been fucked.”

Madam Pomfrey looks scandalized, and Hermione thinks she might just take that window option, but Malfoy continues.

“Because this thing’s still stuck on my arm, of course. I’ve been royally screwed, so to speak.”

She can do nothing, even as her face stains red, growing hotter with each second.

“But I’m lounging in the afterglow of Granger’s uniquely stellar healing abilities.” And Malfoy shoots her a sideways grin, obviously pleased with himself.

She digs her nails into his skin as she smiles up at Madam Pomfrey. “Who’d have thought?”

Poppy isn’t a moron, though, and even as she nods and walks away to her desk, head nurse in tow, Hermione can feel her suspicion.

“*Merlin*, Granger.” Malfoy yanks his arm from her grip as soon as they’re out of earshot, massaging the little half-moon indentations she’s left.

“What is the *matter* with you?” she snaps, trying to keep her voice down. “Are you out of your mind? Don’t answer that. *Don’t*. Just — bloody hell, fix my robes. *Fix them*.”

“I think you look better in green, actually.”

“*Malfoy*.”

“*Draco*,” Pansy sing-songs from the doorway.

Hermione watches him go pale. *Paler*, anyhow. All of the humor slides off his face like butter from hot toast, and in unison they turn to look at her.

Parkinson, for her part, goes violet. Purple like a beet. And even from this distance, Hermione can see her putting the pieces together. Connecting the dots, having seen Hermione here last night, and now finding her still here.

In Slytherin robes.

Pansy blinks once and turns on her heel.

Slowly, Hermione gets to her feet. Exhales deeply. “Everyone will know,” she murmurs.

Malfoy finds his bloody shirt on the floor by the bed, tearing it down over his head without undoing the buttons. The same way he took it off...

“No one will,” he says, snatching up his trousers. “Her pride will see to that.”

She looks to him, but his eyes are down, his playfulness from moments ago completely evaporated. It’s a stark contrast. Gives her mental whiplash.

“What is it?” she asks, crossing her arms.

He doesn’t look up, fumbling angrily with his belt. “What is what?”

“What’s wrong?”

His eyes are icy when they flit up, but he paints over it quickly with the usual look of boredom. “Nothing, Granger.”

“You think I regret it,” she says flatly.

He throws his legs off the side of the bed, yanking on those fancy black dress shoes he’s always wearing. He tugs at the laces like he wants to snap them. “It’s pretty absurdly fucking obvious that you do.” He mimics her as he ties one knot. “*Everyone will know*.”

“What did you want me to do?” She waves a hand at the entryway. “Kiss you in front of Parkinson? In front of Madam Pomfrey?”

Laces done, he drops his feet and meets her eyes abruptly, glare sharp. “Maybe so, Granger. Maybe fucking so.” He stands. “Pomfrey, can I go?”

Pomfrey shoots him a sour look for his rudeness. “Yes, Mr. Malfoy,” she waves him off, “go.”

He brushes past Hermione, faint scent of what's left of his cologne washing up against her. Reminding her how close they'd been less than a few hours ago.

"Draco," she finds herself saying before he can get too far, and it must be his first name that stops him.

He doesn't look back. Just stops. Waits.

"I don't regret it." Her voice is quiet, but certain. "Truly."

For a moment, he does nothing. Then he turns to the side — presents her with his profile. Stands motionless. And a moment later he's gone.

She folds and unfolds her fingers for what feels like several minutes, staring after him until Madam Pomfrey rouses her from her daze.

"Go to class, Miss Granger," she says curtly, and when Hermione turns to face her she's busily scribbling with her quill.

But as she leaves the Wing, it becomes clear there was no need to kiss Malfoy in front of her.

Pomfrey calls out an afterthought just as she passes beneath the archway.

"And I'll want to speak with you about contraceptive charms when you return."

In her panic, she'd forgotten about the bruises.

December 1st, 1998

Diary,

Prompt: What is the most important part of your daily routine?

Sitting by the lake. In the morning. In the cold.

Draco

December 1st, 1998

She doesn't know why, but she goes straight to Ginny.

She doesn't get far from the Hospital Wing when something low in her gut twists and makes a snap decision. Decides that it's time.

Maybe before. Maybe before last night, she could've shouldered it herself.

But not now.

There are too many emotions, so many of them conflicted and complicated, bubbling over like a

cauldron inside of her. Too many to sort through on her own. Too many to keep tucked away.

And she forces herself to admit that a part of her just wants someone to *know*. Wants someone to talk to about it. Wants to try to put into words how the previous hours altered her physically. Chemically.

Harry flashes behind her eyes first, and she considers him. She really, really does. He's her best friend. She knows he won't judge her.

But he despises Malfoy too deeply.

She doesn't want to break his heart.

Well — it's that, and the thought of describing last night to Harry makes her itchy and uncomfortable.

Ginny is...*safer*. Calmer. More neutral.

And so here she finds herself, hiding in an alcove by the Great Hall, dressed in Slytherin robes, covered in love bruises *again*, with a useless wand, waiting for her. Last week, this scenario would've seemed like a fever dream.

She watches Ron and Harry head in to breakfast, and her nerves begin to awaken. Palms begin to sweat. Ginny can't be far behind.

Please.

Please understand.

Please.

Ginny's flash of red hair startles her so much, Hermione almost trips out of the alcove.

"Ginny!" she whisper-shouts as she sees her step off the stairs.

Her head whips to the side, scarlet hair flying, and for a moment she squints around.

"Ginny!" she calls again, a little louder, tucking herself further into the shadows as Dean and Seamus pass behind her into the Hall. Ginny steps off to the side, curiously following the sound until she's close enough for Hermione to yank her into the alcove.

"What in—"

"It's me, it's me — it's Hermione," she rushes.

"Mione, *what*—"

"Come with me, please. *Please*. I need to talk to you."

For Ginny's part, she does a fair job of holding back questions until they've branched far out onto the castle grounds, towed along by Hermione with a rather fierce determination.

"Mione, where are we going?" she asks at last, and Hermione can hear the other unanswered questions in her voice. By now, she's undoubtedly noticed her Slytherin robes, unless she's completely oblivious, and Ginny Weasley decidedly is *not*. She isn't sure whether she's seen the bruises yet, having followed behind her all this time, but it's inevitable.

She has no wand to Glamour them away. At least not for the next several hours.

“Hogsmeade,” she answers after a long silence. “I need a Butterbeer.”

“Hermione, it’s nine in the morning. It’s *freezing*. We have class.”

“We aren’t going.”

This quiets Ginny immediately — holds her tongue for the rest of the trip. Inwardly, she sighs, because yes, of course, the only way for Hermione Granger to truly seem off-kilter is for her to fall behind in her studies.

Even after a bloody war, she’ll always be the know-it-all.

“You’re squeezing too hard,” says Ginny.

“Sorry.”

As they pass through the village, rather empty at this time in the morning, blanketed in a light snow, Ginny casts a warming charm over the both of them. And Hermione finds that when she can no longer focus on the cold — focus on the shivering, her attention returns to the indescribable soreness below her hips.

It isn’t how she’d thought it would feel, the day after. Painful. Intrusive. Like her body had been invaded.

Instead, it’s the way a muscle feels after being stretched for the first time. That pleasant pain that somehow tells you you’re growing stronger.

Unless that’s entirely in her mind.

The Three Broomsticks is practically vacant — just opened, and Madam Rosmerta clamps down on what was likely a scowl upon seeing them. Realizes who they are and flushes pink, disappearing up the stairs.

War heroes have some privileges, it seems.

“Two Butterbeers, please,” she tells the groggy barkeep.

“Oh, no, I’m alright. I don’t—” Ginny starts, but she speaks over her.

“*Two* Butterbeers, please.” And she glances over her shoulder at her as he waves his wand around and grunts, getting them started. “Trust me, you’ll need it.”

“Tell me what’s going on,” Ginny pleads, and now Hermione can see her gaze flitting up and down from her eyes to the bruises. The concern is plain on her face.

Grudgingly, the barkeep tells her the drinks are on the house as she turns back and tries to hand him a few sickles. She takes the warm mugs and leads Ginny to a secluded corner booth, sliding one across the grimy table to her.

“Tell me,” Ginny says again.

“Sip first.”

She lets out an incredulous little huff but puts the glass to her lips, watching Hermione’s eyes and

drinking until about an inch is gone — until Hermione nods.

“Happy?”

“Yes.” And Hermione gulps down at least twice as much of hers before wiping her lips and clearing her throat. “You have to swear not to tell anyone. Even Harry.”

Ginny looks offended. “You really think that’s who I am?”

“No, no,” Hermione pinches the bridge of her nose, “Gin, you know I don’t. I just — I have to say it anyway, for...for my own sake. Just to know that I’ve said it.”

“Fine, then. I won’t tell anyone. Talk to me, ‘Mione, you’re scaring me. You’re in *Slytherin* robes, for Merlin’s sake.” She pushes away the Butterbeer. Leans closer, gaze gentle — again with that frightened animal complex.

Hermione doesn’t want to see that expression anymore.

Isn’t some wounded deer.

She blurts out, “I was never seeing Zacharias.”

Ginny blinks slowly, pursing her lips. “I think I knew that,” she says after a tense silence. “Sensed it, I guess. I mean, he doesn’t seem like your type, does he?”

It sends her mind elsewhere for a moment, and she wonders if Ginny realizes that Ron isn’t her type either. That sweet and funny and warm aren’t it. That it’s somehow become coldness and depth and an absolute lack of safety and blindingly platinum blond hair.

“I’m sorry,” she manages, bringing herself back to the present. “I didn’t want to lie to you.”

“Then why did you?”

“You...I...” she struggles for a moment. Takes another desperate gulp of Butterbeer, the sweetness warming in her stomach. “I felt like I had to. Parvati was so sure. *So sure* it was him, and you — you looked *relieved* when you heard his name. I just...” another deep sip, “it was better than the truth.”

Ginny’s face goes through a subtle assortment of emotions as she considers this. One red eyebrow quirks. “Going to tell me the truth now?”

She keeps the mug at her lips for safety. For comfort. Sips and says, “I think so, yes.” She drops her eyes from Ginny’s face, staring at the deep brown of the table instead. Tracing the dirty grooves absently. “Please try very hard not to hate me. I don’t think I could stand to have you hate me.”

“‘Mione.”

Ginny’s tone draws her eyes up.

“I won’t hate you.”

Hermione gathers a thick, unsteady breath.

“I swear it.”

She finishes off her Butterbeer. Slides the glass away and tangles her thumbs together. Picks at her cuticles.

“Who is he?” Ginny coaxes. “...Or she?” she adds after a moment.

Hermione huffs a laugh. “It isn’t that. Bloody hell, I wish it was that.”

“Tell me.”

She can’t force it off her tongue. Tries, feeling like she’s choking on it.

Ginny tries to help her along. “Did he do that to you?” She gestures to the bruises scattered over the expanse of her throat.

Hermione nods.

“When?”

Her breath hitches at the thought of it. “Last night. Maybe early this morning.” And she closes her eyes, balling her hands into fists until all the blood is forced out. “In the Hospital Wing.”

There’s a deafening silence.

She risks a glance, and Ginny’s face is drawn up with confusion, brows furrowed. She squints at her. “The Hospital Wing...” she echoes. And then, like a match striking — like the snap of fingers, like the crack of a cue ball hitting the billiards — she puts it together.

It’s obvious, because the next second she snatches back her mug and downs it one go. Coughs as she sets it down empty.

And she fixes a tortuously unreadable expression onto Hermione. “Malfoy?” she asks, but it’s more a confirmation.

Hermione bites her bottom lip. Frees it. “Malfoy.”

Moments later, Ginny is sliding out of the booth. Getting to her feet.

Panic flies in all directions from some sort of catalyst in Hermione’s chest, and she reaches out for her. “No — no, please. Wait, Gin. Where are you—”

She squeezes Hermione’s shoulder.

“I’m getting us another round.”

Chapter Notes

Considered not posting this today so you all wouldn't think I'm a complete psychopath who binge writes and then hibernates for several years, but alas that is me. Also kicking myself for not doing chapter names because I so so so sooooo badly want to call this one Granger's Grand Soliloquy. Sigh...

December 1st, 1998

Ginny returns with two pints of Firewhiskey, and if that doesn't explain how she feels about it, nothing does.

Without any breakfast, it affects them quickly, and it makes telling the truth so much easier.

Hermione finds the words just pouring out of her, like ink from a broken well.

"It's...it's hard to explain. It's like — d'you know what splatter art is? It's a Muggle thing, it's strange. Abstract. It's taking paint and just throwing it against a canvas. Staining everything. Just letting it hit where it hits. And it's violent and messy and it has no rules or patterns or intentions. Bright, vicious colors thrown everywhere. Some people think it's just a disaster on paper. That it's the act of making art by ruining art. Other people adore it. But it's — it's just that you can't undo it. Can't erase anything once it's there, you know? Can't even try to aim or make it look a certain way. It's just this collision course — this clash of paint and canvas that somehow, somehow makes something. And that...that's what happened with Malfoy. *Draco*. We just sort of collided with each other — stained each other with all of our problems and just sort of bled out all over the place. But I...I like the way it looks? I think? I don't know, Gin. I don't. I absolutely *do not know*. I don't know if I'm making a mistake or reading things wrong or hurting people but I don't feel normal unless I'm with him. It started with the Lake. I kept accidentally finding him there, or I don't even know if it *was* accidental, but I kept finding him there and he's just such a *prick*. All the time. He doesn't care. He says what's in his mouth, he doesn't swallow it or change it or hold it in. And I know, *I know* who he is and what he's done and who he used to be. I remember what he used to call me. I remember all of it. But then he just — he sits there and he tells me he couldn't watch me scream like he did before. And he spends all of his time writing in that bright purple journal and just looking so *out of place*. Like me. So much like me. We — we're so similar. And I've spent so much time thinking it should be Ron. Growing up thinking it. Waiting for it to feel right. To sit right in my stomach. But it's wrong. It's so, so wrong, and when Ron kissed me I was numb. I was nothing. And then — then fucking Malfoy kisses me and it just absolutely shatters all those hopes I used to write down in my thirteen-year-old diary and I just had to sit there and try to make sense of it. Of how that could be. How the one person I'm supposed to hate unconditionally is the only one I want to let touch me. And my thoughts have been so impossibly *loud*, all trapped in there at once, bickering and arguing and switching sides. Because I couldn't just go and tell you, like I could if it were some other boy. I couldn't sit with you and Parvati and Luna and gush over how it made me feel and where he touched me because it's fucking Malfoy and I'm not allowed to feel that way about him — and...and because every time anyone sees him touch me they think he's trying to kill me. It's fucking *prejudice*. And it's too strong. It's too fresh. So I let you all believe it was Zacharias because at least that was safe, but it hurt him. It fucking *hurt* him. And it hurt me and I

wanted so badly to have you know the truth. To have you all know. But how could I? How could I? Knowing what you'd think? What some of you might do? What *Ron* would do? So I lied. I lied. I felt like I had to. I've been lying for months. But then — last night, I...we...it's gone too far. It's gone too far and I can't lie about it to you anymore. My first time was supposed to be with Ron. Everyone told me that. *I* told me that. But no — no, my first time — *mine*, me, Gryffindor's bloody princess, or whatever bollocks they call me in the Prophet — was with Malfoy. Death Eater. Pariah. War criminal. Slytherin's disgraced fucking prince. It was with him, in a hospital bed and I wanted it to be. I didn't waste it. In my heart I know I didn't waste it. And I had to tell you because it was so absolutely, ridiculously right. He and I are paint splattered all over the place and we're staining everything and maybe we absolutely don't go together, but to me — to me we're a fucking Jackson Pollock."

She feels like she hasn't taken a breath since she started. Gasps and gulps down air, tears streaming down her face. She drowns any future words with Firewhiskey and waits for Ginny to speak. She's been silent this whole time. Listening. Staring.

The sudden quiet is painful. Makes Hermione's fingers tremble.

Ginny sips her whiskey.

And then she asks, quietly and calmly as ever, "Who is Jackson Pollock?"

"Masterpiece Muggle splatter artist," Hermione murmurs around the rim of her cup, unsure what to make of this response.

Ginny nods as though committing it to memory. Sips more whiskey.

"Please say something."

She swallows, setting down her glass and starting to twirl the ends of her hair around her fingers. Never a good sign with Ginny. "You won't like what I have to say."

Hermione scoffs. Splutters. "I — I don't care. I don't. I knew that before I told you. I want to know what you *think*. What you really think."

Ginny sighs and leans forward on her elbows. "I think..." she pauses, sighs again, eyes flitting between each of Hermione's. "I think he's going to hurt you."

She nods, feeling shaky and neurotic. "He is. He *has*. But — I...I've hurt him, too. I'm not...I'm not powerless in this situation. I'm not scared. I can hurt him, too."

Ginny's eyes narrow. Not in anger, but rather introspectively. Like she's sizing her up. "Spoken like a true Slytherin," she says, and her gaze drops to the silver and green tie.

Hermione gives a nervous laugh. She can't read her. Isn't sure exactly how she means it.

"Speaking of which..." Ginny pulls out her wand. Casts a spell to fix her robes and glamours her neck in under ten seconds. She's always been quite impressive with her magic.

"Thank you," says Hermione quietly. She still can't tell what she's thinking. How she's feeling.

Ginny's poker face is quite impressive as well.

"Gin," she urges after another long silence. "Please."

“What?”

“Just say it. Whatever you’re thinking. Say it.”

Ginny finishes off her whiskey — leans her head on her hand. “Mione, I...I don’t really know what I can say to make you feel better. I hate him. I’m sorry, but I hate him and I think I’ll always hate him. He’s flesh and blood of the woman who murdered my brother. His *father* is the reason I —” She breaks off. Clears her throat, “First Year. He’s the reason for what happened in First Year.”

“I know,” Hermione breathes, inwardly cursing herself. How could she have been so stupid and selfish not to consider Ginny and Tom Riddle’s diary? How much more deeply this might affect her? She’s not a neutral party. Not by a long shot.

But Ginny continues. “The way you talk about him, though...it worries me. It sounds as if you’re very far gone, Hermione. You’re very deep in this. What happens if you come to a point where you need to crawl your way out? Will you? *Can* you?”

Hermione huffs. Glances down. Away. “Probably not.”

Ginny says nothing.

Slowly, the Three Broomsticks grows busier with the late morning crowd. Hermione watches her whiskey grow murkier by the second, clouding in the glass. She’s swirling it around when Ginny speaks again.

“So...last night then?” She doesn’t need to finish.

Hermione chews her lip, not looking up. Nods.

“Are you alright?”

Now she does meet her eyes, feeling color flood to her cheeks. “Better than alright,” she admits. “I know, though. I know you don’t want to hear it.”

“Hermione.” Ginny’s tone is suddenly stern, and she sounds somehow older than her years. Wiser. “I may hate him. But it is none of my business who you see. It’s not in my control, nor should it be. I’m sorry I can’t say the same for others —”

She means Ron.

“ — but you can always talk to me. And while I may judge Malfoy — *will*, will judge Malfoy — I will never judge you.”

Hermione feels tears well up in her eyes again.

“Do you understand?”

She nods, and it shakes a few of them free, sending them streaming down her face. Ginny conjures her a tissue.

“Thank you,” she says through the thin fabric of it as she wipes her eyes. Hopes Ginny knows how broadly she means it.

Ginny orders one more round of the tamer Butterbeers, along with some pumpkin pasties to soak up all the alcohol. They sit together well into the lunch hour, talking things over. Hermione tells

her about Zacharias's threat and about Pansy. Tells her about stealing Draco's journal and about Theodore Nott.

In turn, Ginny tells her what she hasn't seen. Tells her how it's looked from the outside.

And she's slightly horrified, because from the outside, she's behaved like a complete sociopath.

"And we miss you, 'Mione," she says as well. "We want to be there for you, but you don't make it easy. With this, I understand. But with everything else — we can help you. You don't have to do it on your own."

She finds herself holding back more tears. "I know. I know, I'm sorry." But all she can promise is, "I'll try."

Walking out of the Three Broomsticks, though...she feels like a tangle of impossibly heavy chains has been taken off her feet. Feels fifty pounds lighter.

Ginny should've known all along.

She crawls into bed that night having not gone to a single class and feeling thoroughly unlike herself.

It's nice.

Madam Pomfrey hadn't said a word to her about Draco when she came in. She'd simply asked her to perform the contraceptive charm three times with her newly working wand, *hmmph*-ed when she'd done it right, and then dropped the subject.

Poppy has never been one to pry.

This, though, is the first moment she's had all day to be alone with her thoughts. She stares up at the vibrant red canopy of her four-poster, and for the first time since waking up, she opens up the floodgates.

Her thoughts run rampant. Her legs grow restless. She lets herself retrace every memory in her head without restriction, and it starts to feel real. Like it truly happened.

She's partly shocked at her behavior last night. Surprised by her nerve and her assertiveness. Certainly, she's always maintained those attributes with vigor during everyday life, but she'd never imagined they'd cross over into the bedroom.

Never imagined she could be so forthright about what she wanted.

And what's more, who could've *ever* expected *Draco Bloody Malfoy* to listen?

She makes a mental note to ask his middle name. Is abruptly wildly curious and surprised she doesn't know.

But these are suddenly things she wants to know. Almost should know, considering what's happening between them. She can in no way put a label on it, but she can at least be sure that she wants to know him better.

Childishly, she makes a list in her head — twenty-one questions with Draco Malfoy.

And she wonders whether she'll ever get to ask them.

December 2nd, 1998

Diary,

The fuck do you mean my last entry was too brief?

I answered your weekly prompt, you mouth-breathing halfwits. What more, by law — if you've even actually read my fucking charges — do I have to do?

The answer is fucking nothing.

I can read. I read it.

I know all the loopholes.

Have a pleasant evening,

Draco

December 4th, 1998

It's Friday evening when Ginny first brings it up.

The Gryffindor common room is tamer than usual, and Hermione's working on an essay in the armchair by the fireplace while Harry and Ron fill out Preliminary Auror Training forms on the floor by her feet.

Ron didn't want to be an Auror. He wanted to play for the Chudley Cannons. At least, that was the last she'd heard.

But she hasn't really spoken to Ron in months — not like she used to, and it seems things have changed.

Ginny's been working at drawing her back into their social circle, quite casually and without any ridiculous grand gestures, thank goodness — but it's an adjustment all the same.

She tries to remember the last time the three of them sat like this. Worked in silence in each other's company. Not since before the war, she reckons.

Malfoy has been a blur since that morning. She's only caught glimpses of him coming and going. He's skipped several of their shared classes. She doesn't know why it makes her tense, but it does.

Ginny sits across from her in the other armchair, reading, and she says it without looking up, "Any developments with Jackson Pollock?"

Hermione's quill slips, and she draws a thick, black line down the empty quarter left on her page. Ruins it. She flashes wide eyes at Ginny, but she still hasn't looked up from her book.

"Who's Jackson Bollocks?" asks Ron, yawning.

“*Pollock*,” Hermione corrects automatically. Adjusts herself in the armchair, pulse suddenly quite fast.

But Ginny explains before her thoughts get too far away from her. “He’s a famous Muggle artist — abstract. Hermione’s doing a research project on him for Muggle Studies.”

Her pulse slows...just a fraction.

“Yes...” she murmurs after a moment, uncertain and suspicious, “*I...am*.”

“Pretty in-depth, the way I heard it. Lots of work.” Ginny turns a page, still not looking up.

“Yes,” she says again, catching on.

Harry looks up from the floor through his messy mop of hair. Smiles impishly. “Hermione’s probably already finished it.”

And Ginny looks up finally, tossing Hermione a complicated glance. She thinks she understands. “Not at all,” she says, continuing when Ginny subtly nods. “It’ll take me months, I expect.”

Ron has already lost interest. His face is screwed up as he scribbles on his form. Harry is only half-listening.

“So?” Ginny asks again. “How’s it going?”

And she gets it.

Ginny really is a brilliant witch. In under two minutes, she’s perfectly crafted a way to talk about Malfoy in front of Harry and Ron. In front of anyone, really.

She hides a smile. “No new developments. Just preliminary research at this point.”

Ginny winks when no one’s looking. “Well, let me know if you need any help.”

And all of the tension in her body seems to ease in that instant.

Finally. Finally, an ally.

XXIII

December 7th, 1998

Diary,

Fickle is a good word.

With only two syllables, it somehow captures just how absolutely fucking volatile people are. Undependable. Untrustworthy. It's this pathetic little word — it even sounds pathetic, and it's so fitting. People are fickle. Everything is fickle. Every aspect of my life.

Even I am. I'm sure of it.

But if you really fucking think about it, expecting everyone to be fickle makes them not fickle at all. I can depend on their undependability. Countermeasures.

Yeah, it might not seem like much, but it brings me comfort.

I like knowing what to expect, for fucking once in my life, and at this point I can comfortably expect to have the rug pulled out from under me at every given opportunity.

Prompt: If you could change one choice you made in the past year, what would it be?

Almost too easy. My appeal. Mother insisted on it, but if I could go back, I'd plead guilty and accept all of those initial charges.

Azkaban sounds like a lonely paradise.

Draco

December 12th, 1998

Over a week.

Over a week and they haven't exchanged a word. Haven't traded so much as a full glance or shared the same ten feet of air. Not only has he skipped the majority of the classes they have together, but on the rare occasions that he *has* appeared, it's as though he believes it'll physically hurt him to look anywhere near her direction.

She swaddles herself in the belief that what she feels is little more than irritation. Annoyance. Exasperation that he's behaving like a typical, childish boy in this situation, when she prides herself on repelling typical, childish boys.

Except beneath all of that, she knows what she feels.

Slighted. Hurt. Used.

And also proven right, and she *abhors* proving herself right in situations like this. But there was that little voice in her head all along, ringing its little alarms and nagging its way through the dark recesses of her mind, telling her Malfoy was bound to do this.

Not just bound.

Almost *required*.

Everything she knew about his old nature would've practically *demand*ed that he do this, and yet... that's just it.

His old nature. She'd felt certain, growing more and more positive by the day over the past several weeks, that his old nature was dying. Giving way to something new and ultimately more.

But perhaps, after everything, the only constant with Malfoy is his unpredictability.

And ninety-five percent of her had not predicted this.

She wasted it. She *wasted* it.

Everything she confessed to Ginny in a drunken haze feels childish and embarrassing now.

What a *waste*.

"Hermione, your tea," says Luna calmly, in her way, and Hermione glances down to find it boiling in its dainty little cup.

She shakes herself free of the anger, and the bubbles subside. Ginny is watching her carefully when she looks up, a question in her eyes, but Hermione shuts it down quickly, forcing a smile at Luna.

"Sorry. Lost in thought, I suppose."

They're taking tea in the Astronomy Tower, an affair Hermione has just learned that Luna hosts every weekend. Ginny's encouraged her to come, and thankfully it's just the three of them today, although Luna has mentioned twice how Parvati and Padma usually make an appearance.

Idly, Hermione wonders if she's scared them off.

Who'd want to take tea with moping Granger?

The conversation shifts to the latest edition of the Quibbler, but Ginny's eyes still flit her way every now and again as Luna talks.

"Still nothing?" she asks as they descend the stairs later.

Hermione shakes her head mutely. Is afraid if she opens her mouth, all of her hurt and all of her fury will pour out.

They pass into one of the main corridors, lively with students the way it always is on weekends during the winter.

"Maybe you should approach him first?" offers Ginny. "Maybe he's waiting for—"

"I will *not*," she snaps immediately. "I don't care how old-fashioned it is. Just this once, I want things to go the way they go for everyone else for me. I will not go chasing—"

She breaks off.

Can't fathom what she's seeing.

But she can feel Ginny's gaze shoot to her from the side, wondering why she's stopped, and then it shifts to follow her stare.

Malfoy is walking arm-in-arm with Pansy Parkinson.

They're at the far end of the corridor, passing in and out of view through the crowd, but his white-blond is unmistakable, as is her laugh.

"'Mione..." says Ginny softly. A warning.

Someone steps out of the way and she can see Pansy stretch up on her tiptoes and press a kiss to his cheek.

"'Mione—"

She charges forth, hands balling into white-knuckled fists at her sides.

"'Mione, *don't* — oh, bollocks," Ginny mutters from behind, but she doesn't follow.

And Hermione slips through the crowd with a thousand different curses on her tongue, the outline of her wand a comfort against her palm through the fabric of her skirt.

No one would assume anything if she hexed Draco Malfoy.

That's — that's what she *should* be doing. What she's *expected* to be doing.

She's about halfway across the corridor when he spots her, and she sees a muscle in his jaw twitch. Sees him straighten up like a child caught out of bed after midnight. He says something to Pansy — she can't read his lips — and then he excuses himself, starting off at a rather brisk pace down the perpendicular hall.

And Hermione charges right through Pansy's noxious cloud of powdery perfume as she rounds the corner after him.

She keeps her eyes low. Focuses them on the shiny black heels of his pointy dress shoes, following them around several twists and turns and down several flights of stairs. Follows until no other pairs of shoes accompany them.

Until the halls they're walking through are filled only by their out-of-step treads.

She realizes he's headed for the Dungeons. For Slytherin House. His pace has doubled, though he's not quite running. Not yet.

Her eyes pan up — catch him throwing a glance over his shoulder, and when he sees how close she is he seems to realize that Slytherin will be a dead end. He panics and cuts a sharp turn down another corridor, then down two more flights of stairs.

She has her hand around the base of her wand.

Malfoy slips around one last corner, throws a desperate, "Sod *off*, Granger," at her and then yanks at the iron of a wall sconce, producing a hidden doorway.

He throws himself through with fervor, as though he thinks she won't make it across the threshold in time.

But she does. Of course she does. It's almost too easy.

And the door closes behind her, leaving him in precisely the worst situation he could ask for.

“*What is this?*” she demands, wand out at her side. Malfoy turns to face her. Backs himself into a table.

A beat of silence.

“This is the Kitchens,” he says.

Hermione hesitates — coughs and splutters at him, “*No, of course* I know this is the — what is *this*, Malfoy? What are you playing at?”

Malfoy runs a hand through his hair, looking anywhere but her eyes as he leans back against the table. As he so astutely pointed out, they are, in fact, in the Kitchens. It’s vacant. Dinner isn’t for another several hours, and the House Elves are otherwise occupied throughout the castle, no doubt. Dishes are laid out behind him in rows — plates and goblets and serving platters — in various classes of material. Some bronze, some porcelain, some crystal.

She’s never actually been in here. Students aren’t supposed to know about it, lest they think to go snooping around when midnight cravings strike.

She wonders why Malfoy knows the way in.

She has more important things to wonder about. She collects herself and reinvents her penetrating stare, hoping to stir answers out of him.

“Is there some sort of game we’re playing that I’m not aware of, Granger?” he asks, and he’s adopted that bored tone.

She sees red. “Don’t you *dare* stand there and act casual — like you weren’t running away from me less than a minute ago.”

“I was *not* running—”

She raises her wand. Points it firmly at his face.

He goes temporarily silent, only to cross his arms over his chest a moment later and fire back, “Do you have any idea how fucking *terrifying* you look when you charge at people? Merlin’s right tit, Granger, you’re like a bloody *Hippogriff!*” But even as he eases into the comfort of arguing, there’s still an undercurrent of nervousness. She can see it in his eyes. Hear it in his voice. “And now you’ve got your bloody wand in my face.”

She doesn’t lower it.

“You looked very cozy with Parkinson,” she deadpans.

And like a threatened snake, Malfoy recoils, then strikes, loading as much venom into his attack as possible. “Oh, I see. Right, right, of *course*, Granger. Of course. You’re jealous. You thought giving up your virginity would be some sort of grand affair. Something bloody *meaningful*. Isn’t that what they teach you Gryffindor girls? What — did you expect me to show up outside your dormitory with flowers? Take you for a stroll? Write you a few love notes? Did you really think that was the kind of person I was when you decided to fuck me?”

The hex flies out of her wand wordlessly, shattering half a dozen long-stemmed crystal goblets about an inch from his elbow. He jerks away. Hisses and looks to his forearm, plucking a shard of

glass out.

“You’re doing it again,” she says flatly. She refuses to let any of her emotions show, even as they quiver, throb just beneath her skin.

“Doing *what*?” he sneers, but she doesn’t look at his face — can’t. She watches a rivulet of ruby blood run down to his wrist instead.

“Being cruel,” she murmurs. “Pretending.”

And when she finally glances up, his lip is curled — vicious. “Always so sure of yourself, aren’t you, Granger? Always so certain you’re right.” He pushes off the table, taking two measured steps toward her. Her wand arm stiffens. “Ever considered that you were actually wrong about me? That, maybe, by some wild stretch of the imagination, I’m as rotten on the inside as I am out.”

Her eyes narrow to slits, and another wordless hex does away with a porcelain serving bowl just over his shoulder. Malfoy doesn’t flinch this time, even as shards of porcelain sprinkle against his back.

He huffs a laugh. “Yes, very good, Granger. Break another.”

Her eyes widen a fraction. A furious breath steams out through her nose. And then she flicks her wand with intention, decimating a stack of clear glass plates.

“Not like that,” says Malfoy, and before she can think to do anything about it, he’s got his hand around her wand.

“How *dare* y—”

He slides it free of her grip like a knife from warm butter. Her fingers twitch around the new emptiness.

“Not like that,” he says again. He tosses her wand aside — a hollow clatter she doesn’t see. Her gaze is locked on him, the expression in his eyes something unfathomable. Inscrutable. A riddle to solve.

Malfoy takes a few steps backwards, jolting his eyebrows like a challenge before turning away towards the table. “Watch. Like this.”

And then he takes hold of a large, cut-crystal compote and launches it at the wall.

Hermione jolts. Throws a hand up to shield her eyes as microscopic shards mist over the room.

“See?” says Malfoy proudly. He takes up three china plates at once and throws them down at her feet in quick succession.

She jumps. Skips around the flying pieces, shoulders tense, fingers splayed out at her sides. Trembling, but just slightly.

Their eyes meet again.

Malfoy drags a wide porcelain soup bowl off the corner of the table. Stalks toward her, glass crunching under his feet. He shoves it into her hands.

“Try it,” he demands.

She lets out an unsteady breath. Her fingers flex against the bowl's cold curve.

"You know you want to, Granger. Go on. Do it."

He dips his head, just slightly, forcing their eyes to connect. Ice and earth. His narrow, and that vicious smile from before is gone, replaced with a somewhat competitive smirk.

"Do it."

She releases a cut growl. Grinds her teeth and condemns the bowl to the flagstone. Something almost erotic fans out across the tense slopes of her muscles at the sound of it smashing, the sight of the pieces scattering around their feet.

A full smile spreads across Malfoy's face, accentuating the sharp curve of his chin. He doesn't say another word. Takes her wrist instead and pulls her forward — over to the table.

He slips behind her, and her skin prickles — either with warning, or something else. She isn't sure.

But her thoughts jumble and glitch when his free hand finds her other wrist, chin resting against the curve of her neck, his skin cold. He crowds up against her, his chest flush with her back. And as her breath hitches he guides her hands to a fresh stack of china plates. Maneuvers her like a puppet, making her fingers caress the smooth glass and only letting go when he sees her latch on.

He steps back just as she launches two or three of them at the wall to their right.

She gasps as they fly apart. Fights a smile.

Malfoy laughs low from behind her. Then he stalks away along the length of the table, collecting a group of goblets by their stems. He twirls one about between his fingers — throws it to the ceiling, backing out from under the rain of shards. Laughs louder. Starts to juggle them, breaking them against one another.

Hermione finds herself lifting the rest of the plates — hugging the heavy stack to her chest and stepping back to let them fall lazily from her grip, creating a mountain of cracked quarters and halves below.

A laugh flies unbidden from her lips. She glances to Malfoy, flushed, and he's got his arms out in front of him. Claps his hands three times for her. Curt. Sharp. Applause.

She can't stop herself now. She marches to the far corner, finding a china hutch — tearing open its doors to rip out the neat rows of gravy boats and tea cups, listening and laughing as they shatter.

"Brilliant, Granger — fucking *brilliant*," Malfoy calls over the raucous, going for another stack of plates and one by one smacking them to pieces against the edge of the table.

She empties the cabinet and starts on the one next to it, decimating the goblets and bowls in every creative way she can think of.

"Granger, here — this one," Malfoy tears her attention away, beckoning her with the sight of a large crystal vase. He tosses it over the table to her.

"How should I...?" she finds herself asking.

"There." He points to the little chandelier above their heads. "That."

Another laugh bubbles out of her throat and she takes the vase by its thin neck, pulling it back to

send it careening into the fragile fixture. They laugh together as it swings violently to one side. Dislodges and crashes down to the table.

Malfoy's eyes are alight. "Come here," he says, and then he sweeps aside an arrangement of at least fifty cups and saucers to hop up onto the table. Holds out a hand for her on the other side.

She doesn't even hesitate. Takes his hand and lets him swing her up next to him.

Together, they stare across the table's long expanse, still crowded with unbroken dishes.

"First to the end?" Malfoy proposes, breathless.

She laughs. Nods.

"On three! One—"

She breaks forth on one, giggling and kicking her way through the array of goblets as he shouts after her.

"Cheating *brat!*"

But he's laughing and he catches up quick. In absurd unison, they smash their way through the rest of the table, kicking plates and bowls against walls. Screaming encouragements at one another. Laughing like she doesn't think she's ever laughed before.

The floor crowds with tiny shards of crystal and large pieces of china, until there's no safe space to walk.

And in some wild fever dream, the two of them hop down off the table. Laugh and scream and jump around in it like they're splashing through puddles in the rain. Jump until they can hardly breathe.

Until they're hunched over, gasping and red-faced.

Hermione closes her eyes. Heaves out smiling breaths at the ceiling. Then she shuffles her way through the mess, feeling sharp edges prick at her ankles and not caring a bit. She kicks aside the debris next to the wall and collapses into a seat against it.

Malfoy joins her moments later, sliding down and leaning his head back against the stone.

Together, their panting slows. Fades to quiet, simultaneous breaths.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" he murmurs, foot playing with half a teacup. "Destroying things."

"Yes," she answers instantly. She can't think clearly in this moment. Doesn't want to. She hasn't felt a release like this since long before the war.

And for a good ten minutes or so, the two of them sit in complete silence. Comfortable with it. Not feeling the need to break it, unlike everything else.

Then she watches Malfoy lean forward. Pluck something from one of the piles of glass.

It's a teardrop crystal from the chandelier, cracked in half in a way that makes it look more like a half moon. He twists it around in his hand for a while, inspecting it. Then he pulls his wand from his pocket, and she watches him transform it into the pendant of a necklace, conjuring a black leather cord for it to dangle from.

He sits back against the wall. Considers it in his hand a moment longer before holding it out in front of her.

“For you.”

Something throbs in her chest, both pleasant and exceedingly painful. “Shouldn’t you be giving that to Parkinson?” she asks flatly, stripping all emotion from her voice.

Malfoy huffs. A different kind of laugh than what they’ve been sharing. Colder.

“Think what you will of me, Granger. I can’t stop you.”

A beat of silence.

Then he adds, “But consider, for one moment, what it might feel like to be me. If you even can.” Another laugh, this one dark, dejected and pathetic. “Imagine you’ve fucked up your life so badly that you’ve started to expect literally everything to fail. Imagine waking up every morning knowing that when you leave your room, people are going to look at you like they want to kill you. Seek you out and repeat the names of the people they think you murdered. Just chant them at you over and over again, at every given opportunity, even though you had absolutely fucking *nothing* to do with Lavender Brown’s death. Or Fred Weasley. Or Creevey or Bones. Imagine dealing with that every fucking day. And then imagine that somehow, accidentally, you stumble into something that possibly, maybe, just maybe makes leaving your room in the morning easier.”

She finds herself holding her breath.

“Yeah? Got that? Now imagine wanting that thing so bad. *So* fucking bad. Imagine being so fucking proud that you’ve managed to earn that one thing. Win that one thing. Imagine being so proud that you can’t fucking wait for the world to see.”

A bead of sweat slides down the side of her neck.

“And then imagine that one thing feeling just as passionately about you. Except instead of proud, they’re *ashamed*. So ashamed and so full of regret at the same things that make it possible for you to get out of bed.”

She bites down hard on her lip, feeling his gaze shift to her from the side.

“Now look me in the eye and tell me you’d blame yourself for seeking affection. For wanting it to look like someone still loved you. For wanting to feel like someone loved you, or even wanted to be near you.”

Reluctantly, her eyes slide to his, and the image of him is blurred by tears.

“Pansy’s a lot of things. But she isn’t ashamed.”

He drops the pendant into her lap.

“That though...” He gestures to it. “That is for the person who told me she’d pick me out of a room of hundreds. If she ever decides to mean it.”

Glass clinks — skids against flagstone as he gets to his feet.

“Until then,” he says as her eyes follow him, “excuse me while I soak up every drop of affection Parkinson has to offer. I can’t tell you how much I fucking need it.”

Then, with a flick of his wand, the mountains of shattered glass and porcelain vanish, and he leaves her in an empty room.

“Feels good, doesn’t it?” . . . “Destroying things.”

BREATH MINTS BATTLE SC

ONLY





Please give your love to @gildedshivers on Tumblr for this incredible piece she did for me.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so, so, so, so, soooo much from the bottom of my cold, Slytherin heart for all of your reviews. Some of you knock me flat on my back with laughter, and all of you just make me so endlessly proud to be writing this. Thank you for being here. You're practically family, dammit.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

December 18th, 1998

Diary,

I've never stayed before.

This is bloody strange. I mean, I used to literally have nightmares First and Second Year that I'd miss the train and be stuck here.

And now I—

Oh, for fuck's sake, here we go...

December 18th, 1998

"You can't be serious, 'Mione."

"I can and I am, Ronald." She butters her toast without looking at him, trying very hard to keep her tone steady. "I need some time to myself. Time to think. Relax."

All around them, people are hugging goodbye and lugging suitcases through the aisles between tables. The train leaves from Hogsmeade in a little over an hour.

She's staying.

"Come on, it'll be fun, 'Mione. Mum wants to see you," Ron urges. "And you're *always* alone."

"Ron..." Harry starts.

"It's true, she is!" Ron practically shouts. "I mean, blimey, Hermione. It's like you don't *want* things to go back to normal."

"*Ease off!*" Harry snaps, and Hermione jolts a little on the bench. Harry very rarely loses his composure.

She glances up to see him leaning in to whisper something to Ron, and she tries in vain to scrape her knife against her toast so loudly she won't hear. But she does.

"Her *parents*, Ron."

Hermione clears her throat, rushing out, “Luna, what are your holiday plans?” and turning to her. Plastering a smile on her face.

Luna beams, as does Neville beside her. “Neville is coming to meet Dad.”

“That’s wonderful,” says Ginny, going along with the subject change, and Hermione feels yet another endless swell of gratitude for her. “Are you up to date on the Quibbler, Neville?”

He goes a bit red in the face. “I, erm — might be, I dunno, a *few* issues behind...”

But as they laugh, Hermione hears raised voices from the far side of the Great Hall. The Slytherin table.

Malfoy — *Draco* — is sitting at his usual end, purple journal out, and Cormac McLaggen is standing over him, backed by two Gryffindors she doesn’t know the names of.

“No one to go home to, eh, Ferret?” Cormac jeers.

Hermione’s gut wrenches.

“What? Mummy doesn’t love you anymore? Or is Mummy in a work home with the other House Elves now that the money’s gone?”

They’ve all turned to look now. Students have stopped mid-step with their trunks in the aisles. Cormac’s making quite a scene of it, and Hermione is already halfway out of her seat before Ginny pulls her back down.

Draco glances up at Cormac like he’s just noticed him talking. Adopts the classic bored expression. “Would you like a wand up your arse, McLaggen? I can be very accommodating.”

“*Oooh*,” Cormac feigns fear, and the two behind him laugh. “See, that’s the problem, Ferret. In order to properly threaten people, you have to actually be *good* with a wand. When’s the last time you were *good* at anything?”

Hermione’s wand is out, aimed carefully at him under the table. But she hasn’t even thought up a proper hex before there’s a muted, sickening thud and Cormac’s sprawled out on the ground, a panting Theodore Nott standing over him with a bloody fist. Cormac’s cronies scatter like vermin as Nott grabs Cormac by the shirt collar and lays into him again and again and again.

Gasps ring out through the hall with every hit. Two Prefects scamper off to alert a professor.

And then, finally, Draco stands up, sighing loudly. “Nott, I think you’ve broken his jaw. Move off it, yeah?”

Theo pauses with his arm raised, breathless and spattered with blood. He glances up at Draco. “One more punch?”

Draco huffs, maybe a laugh, as he closes his journal. “Yeah, alright.”

Nott follows through one last time, and there’s an extra thud as Cormac’s head drops to the stone. Hermione can hear a few little outraged squeaks throughout the hall, likely from the girls she always hears doting upon Cormac’s “cherub-like” face.

“Why don’t you take that crooked nose home to Mummy for Christmas, yeah?” Nott spits at his unconscious form. “Happy Holidays, you fucking knobhead.”

“Mr. Nott, good *gracious!*” shouts Havershim from the entryway, having just arrived, and all heads snap to her like they’re watching a tennis match.

Nott straightens up and sighs. Puts his wand in her outstretched hand without question and prepares to be led off to detention.

But then Havershim snaps, “Mr. Malfoy, your wand.”

Hermione gasps audibly.

And when Draco hesitates, Havershim shouts, “This *instant!*”

She snatches away his wand before he can even fully remove it from his pocket, and Hermione watches his face cycle through a number of complicated expressions as Havershim leads them away.

“Bloody hell,” Ron snickers, turning back to his plate. “What a show.”

And Hermione is out of her seat before he can finish his sentence, narrowly dodging Ginny’s hand. “Enough of this.”

““Mione?”” several of them say at once.

“Have a wonderful Christmas, all of you. I have something to take care of.”

She charges off after Havershim without another word, leaving them gaping.

She’s fortunate the wards outside of McGonagall’s office aren’t active. It allows her to make the dramatic entrance she’s been planning the whole way.

She bursts in and marches up the stairs, eyes settling on the scene.

Draco and Nott are seated in the two chairs across from McGonagall, who is eyeing the blood splattered all over Nott's shirt with great concern. Havershim is standing next to McGonagall's desk, waving her hands about madly, mouth open wide with whatever rubbish she’s been spilling.

But Hermione’s entrance is loud — distracts her, draws all attention.

“Headmaster,” she says, slightly out of breath, trying not to lose her train of thought when Draco’s eyes snap to her.

McGonagall quirks a brow. “Miss Granger...”

“I don’t know what she’s said to you,” Hermione jabs a finger in Havershim’s direction, “but I can assure you she’s lying.”

For a moment, the office is silent.

And then Nott lets out a snort, biting down on his lip and looking away from everyone to keep from laughing out loud.

“*I beg your pardon!*” Havershim fumes.

“Miss Granger, that is hardly appropriate—”

“Forgive me, Headmaster, but I assumed you would want to be made of aware of any acts of prejudice being committed on school grounds.”

“Prejudice?!” Havershim swishes her skirts angrily. Posts her hands on her hips. “And upon whom, pray tell, have I been inflicting this *prejudice*?”

Hermione doesn’t skip a beat. Finds her words coming even more smoothly than normal. “On them.” She nods to Draco and Nott.

Havershim scoffs. “And where’s your—”

“Proof?” Hermione takes a step forward. “Would you like me to show the Headmaster the records I’ve kept? All the instances I’ve made note of in which you’ve imposed unjust detentions on Slytherins? Or the grade discrepancies between their House and others? The appalling series of false accusations you’d made against reformed survivors of the war? The five separate occasions specifically involving Draco Malfoy? The Headmaster was present for one of them, after all.”

Havershim’s eye twitches rather comically. She opens her mouth. Shuts it. Opens it again several seconds later. “Now *see here* —”

“Professor Havershim,” says McGonagall calmly. “Would you excuse us for just a moment?”

Now Havershim shifts her gawking to the Headmaster, looking quite a bit like a fish trying to breathe out of water.

“I will be with you shortly,” McGonagall adds when she doesn’t move. She doesn’t speak again until Havershim walks dazedly to the door and closes it behind her.

Then she turns sharp, inquisitive eyes on Hermione.

“As I’m sure you are aware, those are very serious accusations, Miss Granger.”

Hermione gathers a steady breath. “Yes, Headmaster. They are also true.” Her eyes jut involuntarily towards Draco — catch his expression for just a moment, finding a cocktail of emotions staring back at her.

“And what can you produce as proof?” McGonagall folds her hands neatly on the desk in front of her.

“You can search my memories. But Headmaster, it isn’t just Professor Havershim.”

She receives another brow quirk in response.

“It’s become something of an epidemic, I’m afraid.”

And then, in what feels like one breath, she explains the events of the past thirty minutes as they really transpired. Describes past instances she can remember off the top of her head. Talks and talks and doesn’t stop talking until she sees a slight flicker in McGonagall’s eyes. Until she’s certain she understands the gravity of it.

McGonagall steps in it for a moment. Threads her fingers together. Then she turns to Nott, her expression catlike — not so different from her Animagus form. “Mr. Nott, I urge you to remember that violence is never a suitable solution to a problem.” She pauses, then adds, “Regardless of how

cruel the situation may be. Twenty points will be taken from Slytherin, and you will be serving two detentions with Professor Sprout.” She sits back. “You may go to your dormitory.”

Nott stands, looking a little confounded. He deals a curt nod to McGonagall, but his eyes linger on Hermione as he steps past her to leave.

She wonders if he’ll always hate her this much.

When the door closes, McGonagall shifts her eyes to Draco. “Mr. Malfoy, you are free to go as well.” But when he stands, she says, “And I do apologize for Mr. McLaggen’s behavior.”

If Nott looked surprised, Draco looks absolutely gobsmacked. He turns to leave, eyes sweeping over Hermione in a way that makes the blood rush to her cheeks.

She does her best to hide an absurdly large, victorious grin.

But when she makes to follow him out, McGonagall stops her.

“Miss Granger. A word?”

Her stomach drops. The smile melts off her face. And for a moment, dropping down into the velvet seat takes her all the way back to First Year. Reminds her of all the trouble the three of them used to get into.

She braces herself for a lecture.

“Miss Granger,” McGonagall says again, and from the way she adjusts her posture, Hermione can tell she’s trying to think of way to phrase whatever she’s about to say. A bad sign. “I feel I’ve known you long enough to speak plainly.”

Hermione swallows and nods.

“I understand you have developed an affection for Mr. Malfoy.”

She feels her mouth drop open. Shuts it immediately, any semblance of expectation as to the direction of this conversation evaporating within milliseconds. How does she —

“Poppy mentioned it to me,” McGonagall answers before she can ask. “Voiced a bit of concern. But even if she hadn’t, Miss Granger, I’m afraid it is quite obvious to eyes as old as mine.”

Her cheeks feel like branding irons. Probably look like them, too. She tries to form words, but McGonagall continues before she can work up the courage.

“As your longtime Professor, and now as Headmaster, I feel it is my duty to—”

“*I know the contraceptive charm,*” she blurts out. So quickly it all sounds like one word. She bites down on her tongue the moment it’s free, furious with herself, and when she can meet McGonagall’s eyes, she finds her visibly flustered.

Her brows furrow and she purses her lips. “Yes, I am quite certain that you do.”

And it becomes humiliatingly clear that this was not at all the direction in which she’d been headed.

“Sorry, Headmaster,” Hermione mutters, eyes falling into her lap as no where else seems bearable.

There's a long moment of deafening silence.

Then McGonagall stands. Strides silently around to the front of the desk, and when Hermione can muster the courage to look up, she's holding out the dish of Dumbledore's lemon drops.

McGonagall speaks in a raspy voice, as though something is caught in her throat. "Albus...always knew the best moment to offer these. Seemed to know exactly when a bit of sweetness was needed. I believe this may be one of those moments."

Something painful throbs in Hermione's rib cage. She reaches delicately into the dish, almost afraid to disturb the arrangement of the candies as she plucks one out. Its tart flavor is a welcome distraction.

McGonagall sets the dish aside, resting back against the edge of the desk, hands clasped in front of her. "Frankly, Miss Granger, I am not surprised. Not in the least. Wayward souls have a way of finding one another." She clears her throat, brushing down the silk of her deep maroon robes. "I am in no position to pass any judgement — wouldn't have any judgement to pass, even if I were. Mr. Malfoy had a more complicated and unstable upbringing than I believe anyone else within these walls could imagine."

Hermione sucks hard on the lemon drop, eyes glued to her. McGonagall is looking off ahead.

"I am also not surprised that you have been so quick to understand this. To see past it. And I must say, I am quite proud to witness it."

Now her eyes tilt down, to the side. Find her.

"But I feel obligated to warn you, Miss Granger. As you have seen today, there are many who will not see it this way. Some who never will. It will not be easy for you. Mr. Malfoy will be faced with a great deal more than name-calling and petty accusations...as will you, if you choose to tie yourself to him."

She places a warm, weathered hand on Hermione's shoulder.

"I know how difficult it has been for you to cope. I would expect nothing less, after what you have been through. But are you certain this is something you can handle? Right now, on the road to recovery? Are you certain you are prepared for the complications? The ramifications?"

Hermione stares up at her for a long time after she goes silent. Considers her words carefully, all the while feeling an odd sensation building up in her chest.

Then she clears her throat, slowly getting to her feet. Feels suddenly resolute.

"I understand, Headmaster. Thank you for your concern."

She weaves her way out from around the chair, smoothing down her skirt as McGonagall regards her curiously a few feet away.

"I've just come to realize how little it matters what anyone thinks."

And then she dips her head and excuses herself, McGonagall watching as she leaves with what might possibly be the beginnings of a smile forming on her stern lips.

Halfway to the office door, Hermione pulls the broken pendant from the pocket of her skirt.

She fastens the clasp around her neck.

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr: <https://onyx-and-elm.tumblr.com/>

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

December 19th, 1998

Diary,

Is there a fucking spell to make sense of things?

Draco

December 24th, 1998

She spends days planning it.

Puts in the same amount of devoted effort as she would a term essay in First or Second Year. Except, it's almost harder, because she can't expect an Outstanding. She can pour as much concentration and careful consideration into this as possible and still not be able to depend on an outcome.

Can't even be sure he'll let her finish her sentence.

It's Christmas Eve, though. She can't wait any longer. It has to be tonight.

She stands in front of her four-poster for a good twenty minutes, staring at what must be three quarters of her wardrobe strewn out across the bed. She doesn't have Ginny or Parvati here to consult. She's the only Seventh Year who chose to stay.

And warding off that nagging part of her brain that keeps insisting this is utterly ridiculous proves to be quite an undertaking.

Eventually, she settles on a pale blue chenille jumper — the forest green piece she'd had in mind seemed too pretentious. She pulls it down over a pair of simple jeans, wraps a white silk scarf around her neck and tugs on her boots.

It's only as she struggles to magically pin her hair beneath a knit cap that she realizes she never did this for Ron.

Certainly, she'd put a great deal of effort into her reveal at the Yule Ball. But it had been just that — a reveal. Her chosen moment to display herself as more than just the mousy know-it-all. And it had been for everyone. And for herself.

This, though — she's never done this with one person solely in mind.

It's...oddly exhilarating.

And equally terrifying.

Every time she thinks she's finally comfortable with how she looks, something flips like a switch and she decides she looks absurd. And it eventually becomes so frustrating that she smacks her

hand against the mirror, snatches her bag off the foot of her bed and practically throws herself down the stairs from the dormitory.

She's timed everything meticulously. She cannot afford to waste precious minutes fussing over meaningless details.

But the nerves really start to set in as she walks the deserted halls, decked with holly just as the carol suggested. She has no gauge for Malfoy's reaction, and she's spent the last several days working herself into a frenzy thinking of all the possibilities. Her resolve is firm, though. She's going to go through with it, even if her knees wobble the whole way.

And they do.

By the time she reaches the Dungeons — reaches the spot Harry and Ron once told her hid the entrance to the Slytherin common room — she's pretty sure the tremors are visible.

Even so, she adjusts the pendant under the scarf and takes out her wand. Performs three magical taps on the wall — a loud knock.

Idly, as she waits, she wonders if anyone's ever *knocked* for Slytherin House. She pulls the pendant out from under her scarf and toys with its sharp edges between her thumb and forefinger.

And then, all too quickly, a confused and suspicious Theodore Nott materializes a few inches in front of her, like he's stepped through the wall.

She jumps back. Catches her breath.

"*Granger?*" His dark brows arch up like small mountains.

"Erm — hi," she manages at last, collecting herself. "Hello."

"Did you just...*knock?*" he drawls, and her earlier thoughts are confirmed.

"Yes, I did, I..." she thumbs the hem of her sweater, "I was hoping to speak to Draco."

A thin seam of panic starts to widen. She hadn't really accounted for Nott being the gatekeeper. She'd been too distracted by her relief that Parkinson was going home for the holidays. And she can't be sure he won't just scoff at her and slam the door — well, wall — in her face.

"What for?" asks Nott, and she pulls herself out of her thoughts.

Indignation is certainly not the best way to go in this moment, but old habits die hard. "That isn't really any of your business, is it?"

Nott's eyes tighten. He adjusts the collar of his sweater as he considers her. "Actually, it is, Granger, as I've explained to you countless times at this point. But I'm bored of it, so I'm not going to explain it again."

And then, to her utter disbelief, he steps back — disappears, and moments later Draco materializes in his place.

He's in all black. A black cable-knit jumper. Black trousers. It's stark against his pale skin, his platinum hair. But, for the first time in a long time, he looks rested. The deep, defined rings of purple beneath his eyes she's grown so used to seeing have diminished some.

And his eyes themselves have snapped instantly to her neck. To where her fingers still play

nervously with the pendant.

The sentence she's so carefully rehearsed evaporates in her head.

"Granger," he acknowledges, and she can't discern anything from his tone.

"It's Christmas Eve," is all she can think to say.

"Well spotted."

She clears her throat. Tries to reorganize her thoughts. Tries to remember why she's even *here*.

"It's...well, it's Christmas Eve," she says again, "and I...I wondered if you had any plans?" Her heels knock together. She itches the back of her ankle with the toe of her boot.

"Plans?" He echoes the word like it's foreign.

"Yes. Are you busy this evening?" All of her phrasing feels childish. She can't remember anything she planned to say or how she planned to say it.

"Why?" He shows his first small flicker of emotion, quirking a thin brow.

And she breathes out slowly through her mouth. "I'd like to go on a date with you."

There's a long, painful silence. Her eyes flit over him, trying to avoid his penetrating stare at all costs.

"A...date?"

She hates it when he repeats her.

"Yes," she says. Folds her arms over her chest, forcing her gaze to meet his.

The other brow quirks now, and he adjusts his posture, leaning back languidly against the wall.

"You realize, Granger, that the word 'date' tends to have romantic connotations?"

Her heart pounds. She's almost certain this is his way of rejecting her. "Yes," she says anyway. "Which is why it's...appropriate."

And finally — *finally* — she sees emotion in his eyes. Sees the faintest glimmer of surprise.

But then, less than a second later, he's sinking back through the wall.

Her chest throbs. Painfully, like she's been struck with a mallet. She glances down at her feet. Feels suddenly idiotic in her sweater, tugging at its hem as she turns to walk away.

The logical part of her brain had, of course, accounted for this possibility.

But the emotional part had not.

She lets out a shaky breath. Starts to walk fast. Wants to run. Run away and hide.

Except, there's another pair of footsteps echoing hers — catching up. And she whips around to see Draco closing their distance as he tugs on a long black peacoat, a pair of gloves in hand.

Her pulse stutters. Stumbles and trips over itself.

“I assume we’re going someplace cold, judging from you.” His eyes give her a sweeping once over, hesitating on her shocked face. “Lead the way, Granger.”

They apparate from Hogsmeade, hand in hand — and even through the fabric of their gloves, the contact sends shivers up her arm.

When they arrive, appearing in a dark, snow-dusted alley, he lets go immediately. Puffs out a steamy breath, turning a small circle as he tries to figure out where they are.

She injects herself with courage and reaches for his hand again, squeezing onto it tight. Doesn’t wait to see his reaction — isn’t *that* brave, not yet — before pulling him along after her out of the alley.

Soon enough, they’re weaving through crowds of people along sidewalks.

She’s taken him to London.

His fingers flex against hers in her hand, almost nervously. “Are we going to Diagon Alley?”

She squeezes again, glancing sideways at him at last. “No.”

And the relief in his eyes is clear as day.

She’d thought about taking him there. About a proper wizarding date. But then she’d considered that most members of the wizarding society weren’t likely to treat him with a great deal of kindness.

And this was meant to be an escape. For both of them.

Seeing his eyes now makes her doubly glad she planned things the way she did.

“Where then?” he asks.

“Trafalgar Square. There’s a Christmas market there.”

She analyzes his reaction carefully as they walk, seeing the slight hesitation. The uncertainty. “A Muggle Christmas market?” he murmurs.

“Yes.”

They’re only a block away. And neither says another word until they’ve stepped around the corner and into the bright and colorfully lit square, its centerpiece a massive tree beside the fountain, glowing like a beacon. Canopies of Christmas lights hang from above like stars, and little tents that look like log cabins are set up in rows, filled with sweets and gifts and wonders.

It’s very crowded, couples and families with small children milling about in all directions, all in high spirits.

“Is this a test?” asks Draco quietly, staring straight ahead when she glances sideways at him.

“What?” She almost laughs.

“A test,” he repeats, deadpan. “Are you testing me?”

She’s silent for a long moment. Then she scoffs. “Yes. This is a test. I wanted to see if you’d go on a massive Muggle killing spree.” She releases his hand and gestures widely in front of them. “Have at it.”

Draco raises an eyebrow at her. Huffs.

And she laughs again, shaking her head. “You’re ridiculous, you know. Utterly ridiculous. No, this is not a test. I wanted to take you somewhere we wouldn’t be bothered. Somewhere pretty and Christmassy. I brought you because I thought you’d like it.” And she’s pleased with herself for having put it so simply.

Even more pleased when his brow smooths out and she feels him take her hand again.

“Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, Granger.”

They spend hours there.

She takes him first to a small hot chocolate stand, rolling her eyes as he gripes about having to wait in line.

“There are lines at Honeydukes. At the Three Broomsticks. You have to wait in the wizarding world, too,” she counters, turning to order as they reach the front.

“Yes, but their hot chocolate is hand-stirred and melted down by Elves! And it’s served in a silver flagon, not some flimsy paper—”

She shoves the flimsy paper cup in question into his hand, effectively silencing him.

“This is Swiss hot chocolate,” she says, guiding them away from the line. “Don’t say another word before you try it.”

Draco narrows his eyes, looking down into the cup suspiciously. He removes one glove with his teeth — an unexpectedly distracting action — and then dips his pinky finger in the whipped cream, cautiously dotting it on his tongue.

“Oh, yes, certainly check for poison,” she snorts, raising her own cup to her lips. And finally he follows suit, taking a measured sip.

It’s immensely gratifying to watch his eyes widen. To watch him instantly tip his cup back for more and then burn his tongue.

She doesn’t say *‘I told you so.’* Doesn’t say anything. Just quirks one brow and smiles triumphantly before turning and leading him off to the next tent.

They smell scented candles and study the craftsmanship of unique Christmas decorations — well, she studies. He critiques. He’s inordinately confused and enamored by wind-up toys, having had all his toys charmed as a child.

She catches him paying special attention to a small mechanical carousel.

“You like it?”

“It’s nonsensical,” he says, too loudly and right in front of the shopkeeper. But his eyes are glued to it as he watches it spin. Watches the little gears turn as it plays a music box form of Silent Night.

“You like it,” she says again, no longer a question.

Draco huffs and straightens his shoulders, striding away with what’s left of his pride, and she buys it while his back is turned, slipping it into her bag.

“We’ll have to go to Diagon Alley, you know,” he says as they peruse the display of gingerbread houses — part of a competition.

“Why?” A small flutter of uncertainty awakens inside her. Is he really that uncomfortable around Muggles?

But then he says, “To go to Gringotts. I have no Muggle money and I want another one of those flimsy hot chocolates and you are not paying for anything else.”

The urge to kiss him is suddenly almost overwhelming. She turns away to hide her wide smile as she hooks her arm through his and spins them around, back toward the hot chocolate stand. “I asked you on the date. Surely, you have some respect for tradition. I’m paying tonight.”

“*Tradition?*” he splutters. “If you’ve any respect for tradition, then the man — being me, unless there’s something you haven’t told me, Granger — would be paying for everything. But you *blindsided* me.”

“How wonderfully sexist — two hot chocolates, please.”

He continues to argue with her even as he eagerly takes the offered cup, and they sit on the edge of the fountain, sort of absentmindedly people-watching as they drink.

“Your thoughts?” she asks, a little afraid to know the answer as she gestures to the market as a whole.

Draco sips deeply from his cup, unknowingly painting a white, whipped cream mustache above his lip. “Crowded and bizarre...and yet not entirely unpleasant.” He turns to face her, flashing that sideways half-smile she can’t get out of her head at night. “And this flimsy hot chocolate is—”

She kisses him. Intends to kiss him quickly, to clean the whipped cream from his lip, but now he tastes of sugar and chocolate and always that faint tinge of peppermint and she finds she can’t stop. She turns more fully to face him, the cold of the skin of his neck leeching through the wool of her gloves as she pulls him closer.

She hadn’t realized how much she’s missed this. Hadn’t realized how impossibly *hungry* she’s been since that night in the Hospital Wing.

And if she has any ability to read body language, he seems to feel the same. His hand finds her thigh, dragging her closer, hot chocolate forgotten somewhere as his other hand fists in her hair.

Someone whistles at them.

Draco breaks away instantly, cussing under his breath, and she laughs as she feels him reach for his wand. Kisses him again until he forgets to care.

Later, he asks about the possibility of a third hot chocolate, but instead she takes him to dinner. To one of her favorite restaurants from childhood, where she and her parents would go after the

theater.

She'd thought about not going there. Thought it might be too hard.

But then she'd considered the possibility of making new happy memories there, and it had won out.

They talk about their childhoods. Talk about their favorite things and their least favorite things and the things they've done — everything they should've known about one another years ago, had they not been so preoccupied with hating one another. She becomes intimately acquainted with Draco's sweet tooth, hiding another smile at his excitement over the mince pies for dessert.

He loves Quidditch and she can't stand it.

She can cook a four course meal and he doesn't know what a colander is.

He's mastered every Potion in the Hogwarts curriculum, and so has she.

She's afraid of snakes — and so is he.

They have nothing and everything in common.

Throughout the meal, she catches his eyes flitting to the pendant around her neck over and over again.

"What does this mean?" he asks at last, spoon playing with the melting pistachio ice cream they're sharing. He gestures with his free hand between the two of them. "This."

She leans on her palm, and one of the only things she'd actually prepared to say this evening — planned and wanted to say — crosses her lips.

"It means I want to grow up — and start going after what's good for me."

Draco lets the spoon sink into the ice cream. Sits back, eyeing her pensively. "I'm not good for you."

She plays with the pendant, not taking her eyes off him.

"Actually, I think you are."

He breathes out audibly and she continues before she loses her nerve.

"I'm stubborn and selfish and I've been too prideful to admit it, but I think I've needed you for a long time."

His eyes darken, turning gray like steel. His foot glides up the side of her ankle under the table.

She gets the check.

Chapter End Notes

Come hang: <https://onyx-and-elm.tumblr.com/>

XXVI

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

December 25th, 1998

It's half past one in the morning, and she finds herself making no attempt towards Gryffindor Tower as they sneak back into the castle.

And he makes no attempt to let go of her hand.

But he doesn't lead her towards the Dungeons, either — and she's admittedly a little disappointed. Has always been curious about the Slytherin common room.

"Nott will be there," he says when she mentions this, pulling her along after him through several dark corridors.

Excitement bubbles in her chest. Being Gryffindor's resident know-it-all — and therefore, by extension, its resident prude — she rarely gets to feel the exhilaration of sneaking around and doing what she shouldn't.

And this — tiptoeing hand in hand with Draco Malfoy through the castle in the middle of the night, desperately seeking out a place to be alone — is the epitome of that.

Her cheeks ache from smiling, her face flushed with thoughts of the dark possibilities she'd seen brewing in his eyes at dinner.

She is so tired of relying on self control.

Now, she only wants to rely on free fall.

Soon enough, Draco is dragging her up an all too familiar spiral staircase, both of them out of breath.

"You can't be serious," she gasps out, stifling a laugh as they come to a stop at the top before the door.

"*Alohomora*," he whispers, then yanks open the heavy latch and pulls her inside by the waist.

"The Divination Classroom?"

She spins in a slow circle, surveying the dark, deserted room as he turns to lock the door behind them.

"Needed somewhere with pillows," he answers, and with a flick of his wand, he lights every candle in the room, illuminating the floor pillows in question in front of the Divination tables.

She quirks a brow at him. "I'm not certain Trelawney goes home for the holidays. What if she's in the castle somewhere?"

Draco shucks his coat — stalks toward her. "Then she'll have seen this coming and made herself scarce."

Hermione laughs. “She was never fond of me.”

“Making this absolutely fucking poetic.” And he takes hold of her with a familiarity she didn’t know they were allowed to have yet. Like he’s been doing it for years. Like he knows exactly where to touch her and how much pressure to apply.

He kisses her once — a languid, melting kiss — before shoving her off her feet and onto the heap of floor cushions. Follows her down.

She laughs again, tossing away her bag as he crawls up over her. Pauses. Stares.

The candlelight flickers over him like little threshing waves of gold, and she sort of realizes that this was how she’d always pictured her first time. How she’d imagined it would feel. Probably not in the Divination Classroom, and never in her wildest dreams with Draco Malfoy, and for the *second time*, no less, but...the candles, the pillows, the look in his eyes...

It’s the stuff of fantasies.

She wonders if she should be afraid of waking up.

He stays leaning over her for the longest time, just looking at her. Seeming to drink in the situation — possibly the absurdity of it. They hadn’t had much time for thinking the first time around.

She reaches up and runs her fingers over the cold swell of his lips. Feels him press back against them in a kiss.

And then he’s sitting back — tugging his sweater over his head, messing up his hair.

She sits up, letting her coat fall from her shoulders as he starts unbuttoning his undershirt. Their eyes stay locked, watching each other as they undress.

He’s...sculpted.

That’s the best way she can describe it. Thin, but broad and tall, with expertly rounded shoulders and sharply carved edges. Gleaming alabaster.

But he’s also scarred.

It’d been so dark in the Hospital Wing that she hadn’t noticed at all. Now, though, with the candlelight and the moon’s glow in the windows, it’s only too easy.

And she gasps. Stops fumbling with the fasten on her jeans and sits forward fast to press her hands against his chest.

He seems confused for just a moment, then tenses a bit with realization. “Ah, yeah...” he murmurs with a forced casualness. “Saint Potter made a right jigsaw out of me.”

She runs her fingers over the dark purple slashes, so long and thick they must’ve been gruesomely deep. Harry hadn’t lied about what happened that day, but he certainly hadn’t described it like this.

“How do you know what a jigsaw is?” she hears herself ask. Can’t think of anything else to say.

“I’m not *brainless*, Granger. I do know what Muggles *are*. All of us had to take Muggle Studies.”

She’s relieved to hear the familiar snark in his tone — is afraid she might cry, otherwise. Instead, she presses her head to his chest, closing her eyes and letting out a slow, deep exhale. She needs

him to know that she understands. Needs him to know they'll get through this — both of them — somehow. But she can't put it into words, so she just leans against him for a few endless minutes. Sighs when his hand snakes up to bunch in her curls.

Draco Malfoy will never be the sort to pet her head and whisper sweet nothings, but she finds she prefers the sharp pressure of his fingers tangled in. Like he's holding on for dear life.

Then she feels his free hand play with the lace strap of her bra, and the sadness in her chest sinks away as though down a drain, that forbidden burn bubbling up in its place.

She pulls away — finds his gaze glued below her throat, and she's absurdly glad she'd had enough wishful thinking earlier to dress accordingly.

"This is fun," he says, voice low as he traces the rough pads of his fingers along the pink lace edges of her bra. Gooseflesh fans out across her skin.

"I'm not always boring," she murmurs, smiling a bit sheepishly when his sharp eyes flit up to meet hers. "It's part of a set."

He lets out a short huff, an expression almost like pain, but not quite, passing over his face. In the next instant, he shoves her back down onto the pillows. "Move, Granger. You're in the way." And he starts yanking at the bottoms of her jeans, trying valiantly to get them off over her feet.

She laughs. Never thought she'd be able to laugh so much in a situation like this. Feel comfortable like this.

But then her jeans are off and everything becomes very serious very fast.

He looks almost *feral* as he eyes the pink lace shorts, completely see-through. Completely revealing. Her face feels hot.

Draco makes a noise she can't quite describe, and then he's scooped his hands beneath her thighs and yanked her toward him. She realizes she shouldn't like how much he yanks her around, but she does, she *does* — and she can't think about that right now because he's leaning in with all sorts of intentions she has in no way planned for.

"Malfoy, wait—"

He pauses with his head lowered between her knees, fingers leaving imprints on her thighs — clicks his tongue. "I've told you that's not my name."

And she's grateful for the burst of irritation — it calms her down. "I will not be calling you that until you call me by my first name."

His head knocks against her thigh and he groans in exasperation. "So many fucking *syllables*..."

"Oh, you poor thing."

"*Her-mi-o-ne*," he sounds out, voice vibrating against her skin, "I mean, it takes *ages* to say it."

"Yes, well, Draco has that hard consonant that isn't any fun at all. Takes a lot of effort."

"Are we really arguing about *phonics* right now?"

"You started— oh *my god!*"

She suppresses a shriek as he dives forward and closes his mouth over the lace front of the shorts. Her thighs jerk against his hands — jut inward instinctively — and an electric shock shoots up her spine. She fists her hands in his hair, desperately trying to yank him back as he soaks the fabric with an unexpectedly hot, wet tongue.

“Stop, stop!” she gasps, pulling so hard she’s sure it hurts.

He does, but only to hook his thumbs under the lace and yank the shorts off entirely, sinking back between her legs impressively fast before she can lock them shut.

“No, wait — *no*,” she babbles nervously, reaching for him and kicking her feet out and squirming.

He yanks hard on her thighs. Spreads them so wide it stings — strains the muscles for a moment. She gasps and her eyes shoot to his and he’s just staring at her, inches away from where she’d never expected or planned for any boy’s face to be.

“Hermione?” he says, raising his eyebrows, and hearing her name for what must be the first time on his lips silences her quite effectively.

They stare at each other for a few tense seconds.

“Yes?” she manages, and it comes out a squeak.

“Shut the fuck up.”

And then he buries his face between her legs, tongue going on the instant offensive and laving its way across nerve endings she didn’t know she had. Her head falls back against the pillows like it’s weighted down, a moan ripped forcefully from her throat, and all she can do is helplessly jerk and twitch against him as he kisses her *there* with the same fervor he uses when he kisses her lips.

Her mind makes a choice out of two options. She can either fall into a drug-like state and let her thoughts turn to mush, or she can over-analyze everything. She decides the first option is too vulnerable.

So she thinks. Thinks and thinks and overthinks as Draco Malfoy goes down on her.

Every time the late night conversations in the girl’s dormitory would shift in this direction, oral sex would come up, usually proposed by Parvati.

From the way the experienced girls had talked about it, it had seemed like a lot of tongue-flicking and alphabet-tracing and general tentativeness. Romilda had said it was quite difficult to climax, as the boys performing it had rarely applied enough pressure.

And now Hermione is thinking those girls did her a great disservice, because she is absolutely not prepared for the way Draco Malfoy performs oral sex.

He is absurdly un-shy.

The tentative licks and snake-like tongue effects she’d expected are no where to be found — he’s placing wide, wet, open-mouthed kisses on her like he’s trying to clean every drop of ice cream from a bowl, with no regard for trying to find specific spots or trace letters. Instead, he sucks. *Sucks*. Licks and sucks and closes his lips hard over her, again and again and again, and by god, the *sounds*.

She’s absolutely not prepared. Her thighs are shaking and her breath has abandoned her and she’s

desperately searching for that lack of sensation Romilda had mentioned and instead finding an ever-building tsunami of quivering energy.

But then her mind takes a horrible turn down a back alley and she starts to wonder how she tastes. Remembers Parvati talking about certain boys making her self-conscious. Saying they didn't like the way she tasted. Does she taste bad? She can't imagine she tastes *good*. Bloody hell, she's been nervous and sweating and she hadn't expected his tongue to be anywhere *near* there. What if he's

"Hermione," he says against her suddenly, and she's pulled out of the back alley and somehow thinking how inordinately pleased she is about the four syllables in her name.

"Yes?" she croaks when she realizes it's a question. She forces her head up, unprepared for the sight of him looking up from between her legs, chin and lips wet, glistening. Her cheeks flame.

"When I said '*shut the fuck up*,' I meant that overlarge brain of yours as well."

"I...I just..." she splutters stupidly, breathlessly, "what if I taste—"

He yanks on her thighs again — his way of silencing her. "You taste," he starts, then makes her watch as he presses a wide, sloppy lick against her, his eyes falling shut, a groan tumbling from his open mouth. "You taste like fucking *opium*."

Hermione jerks against him, suppressing another shriek even as she overthinks some more. "Opium is bitter."

"Stop taking everything so literally and being a fucking know-it-all for two fucking seconds, please," he says, even as he pauses to suck on an extremely concentrated collection of nerves. "I did a lot of opium. I fucking *love* opium. You don't know how much I love opium." She can't believe he's having a conversation with her as he's doing this. After every sentence, he stops and sucks and licks at her until she sees white spots, then continues. "But the tossers in the Ministry's psychiatric division have decided that I don't *deserve* any more opium. Can you believe it?" His tongue dips low, teases her entrance. She bucks up against him — *whines*, or at least that's what it sounds like. "And I was very, very..." He lets his tongue sink into her, briefly, then pulls it out when she moans, "*very* upset about that, as you can imagine." One of his hands releases its iron grip on her thigh and snakes around to where his mouth is, fingers toying with her like he knows exactly where all the sweet spots are. "Now, though..." Another open-mouthed kiss. "I don't think I could care less, because this..." His finger slides inside of her. Her head flops back onto the pillows, toes curling against the cushions by his hips. "...*you*..." He adds a second finger — starts to pump them rhythmically as his tongue sets to work on that same collection of nerves. "...are so much better." And then he adds a third finger, sucks hard and curls one of the digits up against a spot inside of her she was previously unaware of, and it's too much.

She screams. Yanks away from his mouth and his grip and curls herself into the pillows, bucking against them and squirming as she rides out the waves of almost painful pleasure. Hides herself from him, tucking her face into the cushions.

She stays that way, gathered up in a fetal position, until her breathing slows and the shaking stops. Even then, can't bear to look at him.

She feels the cushions adjust beneath her, accommodating his weight as crawls up over her. Feels his cold hand curve around her chin, pulling her face from the pillow and forcing her to look up at him.

“I thought you were a Gryffindor,” he smirks. Then he licks his lips purposefully. Licks the moisture off his chin, grin widening when her breath hitches.

“You...you are absolutely a Slytherin,” she whispers, voice shaky. But she jolts when she feels his hand slide between her legs again.

She reaches down to push at it. “No, stop — no, I’m...it’s too sensitive.” And she realizes she sounds like she’s begging. Flushes.

“Does it look like I care?” he growls, other hand dragging against her hip to flatten her on her back again. She hears the telltale clink of his belt buckle. Sees a flash of purple fly to the side as he tosses away his trousers, the journal in the pocket thudding loudly against the floor.

Her stomach glows pink suddenly, startling her, and then she hears his wand clatter somewhere off to the other side.

“You’re a...bastard,” she murmurs feebly, even as her arms betray her, weaving around his neck — inviting him in, wanting him closer.

His tongue flicks against her lips. He spreads her legs. “I know.”

And then he sinks in deep.

They lay in a tangle of velvet cushions, discarded clothes and sweat, both unable to sleep.

Their position is not quite affectionate, and yet intimate all the same. She’s never expected to cuddle with him. Doesn’t need to. Doesn’t care. This — lying facing one another, with only their ankles tangled together, is more than enough. With the way his sweat-soaked hair sticks up from where her fingers twisted in it and with the blissful ache, the heavy soreness between her legs.

He huffs a laugh at one point, reaching out to tug on one of her curls and watch it bounce back. “Happy Christmas, by the way.”

Something warm throbs in her chest. “Happy Christmas,” she echoes quietly. Doesn’t tell him it’s the best she’s had in a while.

Then she remembers.

“Oh,” she says, unable to help a smile as she sits up suddenly. “I almost forgot.”

He watches lazily from the pillows as she finds her bag, gaze searing across her nakedness and making her blush when she notices. She comes back quickly to lay beside him again, if only to hide most of her body against the cushions.

And she pulls the wind-up carousel out of the bag. Holds it out to him, suddenly a little self-conscious. Uncertain. “Happy Christmas.”

He laughs.

Loudly. Unexpectedly.

To the point where she’s embarrassed and starts to pull it away, thinking he’s making fun of her.

But then he takes hold of the toy in one hand and yanks her in for a kiss with the other.

A moment later, he's on in his feet — leaves her laying there confused as he finds his jacket on the floor, absolutely unashamed of his nakedness. When he collapses back down next to her, he pulls the exact same carousel from his coat pocket. "Happy Christmas," he says wryly, laughing as he hands it to her.

"I—*what?*" she splutters, laughing too. "How did you — I thought you didn't have any Muggle money!"

"I didn't. I stole it. Happy Christmas."

And he kisses her before she can even start to argue.

The Christmas morning feast is one of the best, or so she's always heard from Harry and Ron. A sort of gift to the few students who have no reason to go home for the holidays.

But it's even better than she imagined, because she's sitting next to Draco Malfoy at the Slytherin table while she eats it, completely soaked in the afterglow of the night before, with not enough students in the Great Hall around them to notice or care.

She sneaks sideways glances at him as he drinks his tea sleepily. He drinks it black — strange, now that she knows about his sweet tooth. But his plate is stocked full of sugary treats like candied gingerbread bonbons and almond cream tarts, so she supposes that makes up for it.

They eat in pleasant, coexistent silence. He scribbles in his journal and she bites back on her curiosity.

But then the mail arrives, and he spits his tea all over it — curses and tries to mop the dark stains off the purple cover.

He yanks the Daily Prophet up off the table, almost ripping it in his haste.

Hermione sips her tea quietly.

"Bloody hell," he sighs at last, wiping a hand along his face — warping it into a grimace. He hands the Prophet to her dejectedly so she can see the front page.

WAR HERO AND FORMER DEATH EATER SPOTTED ON ROMANTIC CHRISTMAS EXCURSION

Below it is a massive, moving photograph of the two of them kissing on the edge of the fountain in Trafalgar Square.

"Fucking Skeeter," Draco groans, angrily shoving a bonbon into his mouth. "Probably fucking followed us the whole night."

"Yes," says Hermione quietly, setting the paper down. "I paid her to."

He chokes again on his tea.

She just laces their hands together on the table, glancing sideways at his appalled face.

“Figured you deserved a grand gesture.”

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr: <https://onyx-and-elm.tumblr.com/>

And some people were saying they couldn't find the link to the trailer on YouTube, so here's that: <https://youtu.be/HKxAaUYct5U>

xoxo

XXVII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

December 25th, 1998

Diary,

The Muggle date — as a concept — is not wholly ridiculous, as it turns out.

The lines are ridiculous, and Muggle London is highly overcrowded, but their hot chocolate is good and their toy craftsmanship is...tolerable.

No, forget all that. Muggle dates are probably fucking ridiculous all the way around.

But Muggle dates with Granger are—

Fuck.

Well. Brace yourselves.

Things are about to get very fucking ugly for me.

Draco

January 3rd, 1999

She's left every letter unopened, save a very brief, scribbled missive from Ginny which read:

I'll be there soon. Don't panic.

It was dated from Christmas, but hadn't arrived until the next day, along with most of the others. Included in the envelope was the clipping from the Daily Prophet, which Hermione had ended up tucking away in her nightstand.

But she'd been very careful not to look at the senders on the other letters. Had seen one written in Ron's furious scrawl and stopped checking after that. There was likely one from Harry — maybe more than one. Definitely several from Parvati. Romilda. Eloise. Maybe even Neville, if she had to guess. Likely not Luna — she tended not to pry. She winced at the thought of one from Molly Weasley, but she had to accept that it was probably somewhere in the pile, too.

Thankfully, not many students had stayed at Hogwarts over the holidays, and hardly any from their year. What immediate attention she and Draco did get from the article came mostly in the form of ogling First Years — *"isn't it romantic?"* — and the occasional, haughty disapproval of some Fourth and Fifth Years who knew more about their history.

Draco, though — she'd been very apprehensive about his reaction. Didn't know what to expect. And he'd stared at her with that alarmed expression for a concerning amount of seconds. Had her doubting and second-guessing, the way he always does.

Now, though, he's got his head in her lap as she reads Merida Swoglot, so she figures she must've done something right.

They're in the Divination Classroom, again. It's become their regular haunt. And as she reads, he casts lazy variations of Charms spells above their heads, yawning. Over the past several days, no longer hindered by the need to sneak around, they've discovered how much they enjoy one another's silent company.

No need to talk. No need to entertain each other.

Just mutual, undemanding silence.

She doesn't usually break it. Hates to. But today she feels she must.

"What time does the train get in?"

Draco's paper dragons hesitate in midair. Start to fly counterclockwise. "Noon," he says, examining his wand. "But you already knew that."

"Can you blame me for being nervous?" She glances down at him over the edge of the book. He doesn't look at her.

"No. But I don't particularly want to talk about it."

"Shouldn't we have — I don't know, a *plan*, or something?"

Now he does glance up, and it's with an expression she's becoming increasingly familiar with. A look that seems to say, '*Really, Granger?*' without saying anything at all.

"What?" She snaps the book shut. "It's not a terrible ide—"

"People don't usually have to *rehearse* conversations with their friends," he drawls.

"Oh, please — as if you didn't rehearse what you wanted to say to Nott."

He flattens his lips and shakes his head innocently at her — pompously. "No. No, actually, you'll find I went into that one completely green. No script."

She huffs at him. "You're telling me that Nott's sudden...*tolerance* of the two of us is the work of your exceptionally skilled improv?"

He flashes those sharp teeth she never expected to know so well. "I'm that good."

The large sun dial clock on the wall chimes once, with a certain finality. Eleven-thirty.

She tenses up, and Draco shifts uncomfortably in her lap. Sighs and lets his paper dragons fall away to ash. A moment later, he's sitting up — turning to face her.

"You did the hard part," he says. "In fact, you *overdid* the hard part." He gets to his feet and holds out his hand. "This is just the encore."

Hermione tucks the book beneath her arm, grumbling unintelligibly under her breath as she lets him heave her off the floor.

"I don't believe for one second that you aren't as nervous as I am..."

Together, they vanish the evidence of their presence in the classroom.

“...and I *hate* your metaphors.”

They don't hold hands.

Both of them seem to subconsciously agree that that would be too jarring.

No, they don't even touch. Instead, she sits at the corner of the Gryffindor table's bench, facing the doorway to the Great Hall, back straight. Jackknifed. Her hands are folded, twisting in her lap. Draco sort of looms behind her, sitting on the table itself. Elbows on his knees. That bored mask on his face.

From an outsider's perspective, it might look like the sort of awkward posing of a portrait.

But there is no conceivable way to act natural right now. And as students start to mill into the Hall with their trunks, back from holiday and altogether more spritely and energetic, she starts to wonder whether she made a terrible, terrible decision.

She tosses a nervous glance over her shoulder at Draco. Watches him jut his lip out and blow a stray strand of hair out of his face over and over again.

No. She looks back to entryway a little emboldened. No, not a terrible decision.

Just possibly terrible execution.

Because Harry, Ron and Ginny round the corner, and it is absurdly easy to tell they were just talking about her. The way Harry trails off and mutters nonsense. The way Ron stiffens. The look Ginny shoots the two of them.

Hermione tries to pretend she doesn't notice, instead leaning back on the oldest and worst defense mechanism she has and acting like nothing's amiss. She smiles broadly and gets to her feet, pulling Ginny into her arms.

Ginny hugs her back, all wool and mittens — hesitantly, nervously. But at least she does.

“Hi, hi — how was your Christmas?” Hermione rushes out, eyes flitting to Ron and Harry so quickly they're nothing but a blur before shifting back to Ginny, where it's safer.

Ginny says something about monogrammed cardigans and backyard Quidditch, but she's looking distractedly over Hermione's shoulder. At Draco.

He hasn't moved from the table, watching them — expression guarded, emotionless.

Hermione glances back at him too, unsure how to proceed. Her pulse throbs in her ears. Draco quirks a brow at her, just barely.

So she turns back. Closes her fists at her sides to hide their tremors. Bows to fate.

“So, I...I'm sure you've all seen the Prophet.”

Ron drops his trunk. Lets it thud on the ground loudly — echo through the hall, making them

jump.

“Yeah,” he says roughly, pushing through Harry and Ginny’s hands to stand in front of her.

“We’ve seen the Prophet. Owls stop delivering over the holidays?”

She feels sweat start to build between her clenched fingers. “I wanted to speak to you in person.”

“Well, here we are,” Ron snaps, splaying his arms out wide. “Go on.”

“*Ron*,” Ginny tries, but he waves her off, stepping sideways and in front of her, as if he consciously knows he’s cutting off her one line of support.

“I can’t talk to you when you’re being unreasonable like this,” Hermione says cautiously, voice low.

She isn’t surprised. In fact, he’s being less aggressive than she expected. If she can talk him down, maybe she can —

Ron crowds her suddenly. Steps into her space, blasting fuming breaths against her face and lording his height over her. “*Unreasonable?*” he hisses. “I want you to consider, for one second, waking up on Christmas morning to find out that your best friend chose to stay behind for the holidays to shag the person you hate most.” And he’s got his finger in her face. “You — you’re a traitor, that’s what you are.”

“*Ron!*” It’s both Harry and Ginny this time, but they don’t move to stop him.

No, instead Hermione sees the shadow cross over her. Feels his presence from behind — and suddenly she’s trapped between two tall bodies. Draco, taller and leaner. Ron, broader and stockier.

The fury in Ron’s eyes inflames at the sight of him, his chest rising and falling like a bull panting for breath.

“Step back right now,” says Draco, voice vibrating against her back.

“Oh, don’t you fucking—” Ron steps in closer, pushing against Hermione, and an instant later she watches Draco’s pale arm shove Ron back several feet. Just slam into the center of his chest, until he almost trips over his own trunk.

Draco steps smoothly in front of her, obscuring her view, but not enough for her to miss Ron ripping out his wand as he rights himself.

“Let’s go, Weaselby. See how you do against me when I’m conscious, yeah?”

“I swear to Merlin, I’m going to—”

“*Stop right now.*”

It’s Harry. Of course it is.

He has his wand out, too, and he’s stepped between them, alternating who he points it at. “Stop. We’re not doing this. Stop.”

She doesn’t think she’s ever seen Ron this furious. He’s practically foaming at the mouth, hunched over like he could lunge at them any minute. She steps out from behind Draco to get a better look, almost dazed by the whole scenario.

And Ginny seems to take her cue. Grabs Ron by the collar of his sweater with the prowess only a sister can have, starting to tow him backwards out of the hall.

“You—” Ron spits even as he stumbles over his feet. His eyes are locked on Hermione, venomous. “You’re nothing. You’re *nothing*.”

And he’s gone.

Then it’s just Harry, staring at the two of them. His hand flexes around his wand, and he drops it to his side. Walks over to his trunk — to the one Ron’s abandoned. Glances back once to say, “I don’t understand,” and his expression is flat. Empty.

Then he’s gone, too, lugging both trunks behind him.

She doesn’t cry. She turns off that reaction mechanically, like a switch, even as she feels somewhere deeply that she’s just lost a lot of things at once.

She’s glad Draco doesn’t try to comfort her. Expects she’d shrink away if he did. Flinch.

But she watches the tension in his body loosen beside her, and ever so slowly she releases her own, unclasping her sweating, bloodless hands.

“Could’ve been worse,” he says quietly.

She bites down on her tongue until she tastes blood.

“Could it have?”

Walking into the Gryffindor common room that night reminds her of Fifth Year, when Harry was facing all that backlash for speaking out about Voldemort. Only this time it’s her they’re all staring at.

She knows instantly she’s unwelcome.

It’s in the air.

Their stabbing gazes follow her with every step she takes, and she can’t find Ginny. Can’t even find Harry or Ron, though they’d be little comfort.

“Is this like a research project, Granger?” asks Cormac from the corner. She notices his face hasn’t completely healed. “Shag the Death Eater and then write an essay about it?”

“What are you playing at?” Seamus cuts him off, and for one painful moment she thinks he’s defending her. But he’s not — he’s adding on. “Whose side are you on, Hermione?”

She feels like she’s been cornered. Like every direction holds another face she doesn’t want to see. “The war is over...” she says quietly. “There are no sides.”

And it’s as though she’s combined Fiendfyre with the Draught of Living Death. An explosion.

From all sides, people shout.

“That’s rubbish!”

“Have you gone mad?”

"Bloody hell, Hermione!"

“Who *are* you? Can you even hear yourself?”

And she loses all of her courage in that moment, stumbling backwards and staring down at her escaping feet as she runs away like a coward. Chased from her own House like a pariah.

She’d known this was a possibility.

A probability.

McGonagall had warned her about it.

But she’d been consumed by hope. Hope that there was more to all of them than petty prejudice and bad blood. Hope that more of them could see past it, like Ginny.

Hope that maybe Harry, at least...

She can hardly see through her tears. Only knows when she arrives that she’s stumbled her way to the Dungeons — the last place her past self would’ve sought out for comfort or safety.

And the only place she has now.

Chapter End Notes

You guys are amazing with your playlists and your fanart! All my love! xoxo

Tumblr: <https://onyx-and-elm.tumblr.com/>

XXVIII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

January 3rd, 1999

Diary,

Well, it would appear the Golden Trio is not all it's chalked up to be.

Fool's gold, if you ask me, considering how quickly two-thirds of it was ready to drop the last third on her arse.

I don't feel guilty, though. And a good portion of it is entirely Granger's fault.

She's indecisive and impulsive.

Things would've gone over much more smoothly, I'd warrant, had she told the lot of them ages ago. I'm under no impression that they wouldn't have tried to hex me at every given opportunity, but they wouldn't have been able to play the betrayal card so easily.

And then, of course, when she did finally make up her fucking mind, she decided her best option was Rita Fucking Skeeter.

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for shock value — and I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy it immensely. But it was stupid and impulsive, like Granger is.

No, she's not stupid.

She's a lot of things, but she's not stupid.

Mother hasn't written, which I find odd, but then again maybe they've taken away her access to the Prophet.

No, all I got was an owl from my solicitor, informing me that this was possibly very good for my image.

Ha. Good one, Attlebusch. If only you could see the way the Gryffindors are looking at me now.

Draco

January 3rd, 1999

She isn't prepared the second time she knocks on Slytherin House.

Isn't thinking. Not about anything but Ron's last words.

"You're nothing."

And so it's really no one's fault but hers when Pansy Parkinson appears through the wall, because

anyone in a rational state of mind would have seen this as a possibility.

She's dressed in an elaborate black negligée and an unexpected pair of fluffy green slippers. Her raven hair is drawn up into a bun and she has some sort of sheen on her face — likely an anti-aging potion.

Hermione is subconsciously thinking how pretty she really is, until her face scrunches up at the sight of her.

“What do *you* want?” she hisses.

How can she answer that? She doesn't know herself. Doesn't know anything, anymore.

So she just stands there like a fool, tear-stained and disheveled, staring at this girl. This girl who couldn't be any more different than her. Any more her opposite. Staring at her and gasping through a sudden attack of wracking sobs.

She hasn't felt this pathetic in a long time. Perhaps ever.

But it's all coming to a head. All of those dirty looks, coupled with the look in Draco's eyes — Harry's silence, Ginny's absence. The cold, clinical smell of Malfoy Manor. The itch of her scar.

She feels like a cauldron left sitting on a flame, abandoned for far too long. And the pewter is finally melting. She's finally boiling over.

Here, in front of Pansy Parkinson in her nightgown.

If that isn't bad enough, a moment later she's sobbing in front of Theodore Nott, too.

He appears at Pansy's side, smelling faintly of Firewhiskey and eyeing her passively. “Told you it'd be Granger,” he says. “She's the only one who knocks.”

She feels like she might be sick. Feels like the epicenter of all ridicule.

“Is she having a seizure?” asks Pansy.

Her knees buckle. It all keeps getting worse. Can't possibly keep getting worse. *So much worse.* She skins herself on the flagstone, shins hitting hard, but the sting is nothing compared to the throb in her chest.

Nott's voice is muffled by the roar of blood in her ears.

“Possibly,” he says. And then suddenly she feels hands looping under her shoulders. “Right, Granger. Up we go,” Nott grunts, heaving her back onto her feet.

“Theo, *no*,” Pansy snaps.

“You know we'll get blamed if they find her convulsing in our corridor.”

Hermione sags against him. Can't think. Can't see through her tears. Can't *breathe*.

“We've never let a Gryffindor in,” Pansy argues. “And she's a *Mudblood*. That's a terrible place to start.”

Nott isn't listening to her. That becomes clear when Hermione feels herself being led through the nebulous, filmy sensation that is the false wall.

“She’s going to bleed all over our carpet,” is Pansy’s last feeble protest.

Vague hues pass before her watery eyes. Deep emeralds and blacks, the orange glow of a fireplace. And even in her shaking, incoherent state, she’s furious with herself for not being able to see better.

She’s wanted to see this for ages.

“Right, here we go — yes, let go, Granger. Let go. Down. I’m sitting you down.” Nott struggles to drop her into the soft depths of a black leather sofa, and with her muscles feeling like gelatin, it seems to consume her. Swallow her up.

“What the hell’s the matter with her?” Pansy shifts across her eye line. Just a glimpse of black lace.

“Panic attack, I’m guessing,” says Nott.

Hermione forces herself to focus intensely on the tremble in her fingers. Uses the focus to stop them — to make them still. And slowly, though it feels like mounting an impossibly steep hill, she begins to come to her senses.

Just enough to ask, “Where’s Draco?” in a barely audible rasp.

Pansy snorts from somewhere off to the left, and Hermione turns to her. Watches her slowly come into focus as the tears stop flowing. She’s draped herself across a deep green, tufted velvet chaise lounge. Looks almost like a painting.

“Went for a swim,” answers Nott from behind her. He comes walking around the edge of the sofa a moment later and hands her a black crystal goblet.

Idiot, she thinks to herself.

Why hadn’t she gone to the Lake? Why hadn’t she put any actual thought into Draco’s usual habits and considered where he was most likely to be?

Why had she thrown herself into this situation for no reason?

She glances down into the goblet, a mess of emotions — dazed and angry all at once. Firewhiskey stares back up at her, and for the first time in her life, it’s impossibly appealing.

She takes a generous sip. Grimaces at the burn. The spice.

“Yeah, that’ll put you right.” Nott collapses down into the adjacent sofa, the three of them arranged like the points of a triangle.

He’s being very...amicable. Has been for a few weeks now. She doesn’t know why. Doesn’t question it in this moment.

“Thank you,” she mumbles, goblet already at her lips for a second sip.

“You can’t stay.” Pansy’s words slice through the air. “Hope you know that.”

Hermione glances over at her again, cheeks red. Mortified by every second of the past fifteen minutes. “I know,” she says.

Slowly, her heart rate falls to a normal level. Her tears dry stickily against her face, making the skin feel tight. Swollen. The goblet still shakes a little in her hand. But a third sip emboldens her enough to sit up a little straighter, so she can look around.

Harry and Ron had said the Slytherin common room was dark and creepy. Had said it was cold and smelled damp. No light, no warmth. No comfort.

But now she thinks they only saw what they wanted to see. What they expected to see. And she pushes them from her mind, the thought of them too painful.

She takes in every inch.

Large, diamond-paned windows line the stone walls, lit with the serene, blue-green glow of the Black Lake. Dark shapes float past every now and then. Fish. Glimpses of Mer-creatures. Beside the windows, sconces hold gently flaming torches, each illuminating a different portrait.

Merlin, in his regal robes, hangs above the fireplace, his painting so large it's almost a shrine.

Her eyes sweep low. Take in the black marble study tables. The suits of armor. None of the furniture matches. No two pieces are alike. Velvet, leather, suede, marble, wood, granite. And yet it all goes together somehow.

The flagstone walls arch up, carved like a cathedral, columns and all.

It is more warm and comforting than she could have ever imagined. Regardless of all the decor she's certain comes from Borgin and Burkes.

Nott is watching her when she's finally looked her fill.

"Too gothic for your Gryffindor sensibilities?" He quirks a brow.

She sniffs. Wipes her nose with her sleeve and takes another sip, enjoying the slow burn in her stomach. "It's nice," is all she can think to say.

Pansy scoffs again and rolls her eyes dramatically. She yanks a bottle of Firewhiskey off a table behind her chaise — there seem to be bottles sitting just about everywhere. An endless supply.

"So what's gone hopelessly wrong for you now, Granger?" She yanks the cork free and knocks it back with prowess. "Get called names by a Hufflepuff?"

Hermione shifts where she sits, uncomfortable. Her skinned knee stings, a bloody patch on her jeans. She doesn't want to play Pansy's game. Not right now. Doesn't care about arguing or witty comebacks. Just diverts her stare to Merlin's proud, aged face and says, "By my best friend, actually." She goes to take another sip, but finds the goblet empty.

Nott juts his chin in the direction of the nearest bottle, on an end table to her right, and she's enormously grateful to have something to occupy her hands. To have more alcohol to numb her senses.

"I'm not exactly welcome in Gryffindor as of now," she adds blandly as she pours to the brim.

"What makes you think you're welcome here?" snipes Pansy.

Nott sighs. "Pans..."

But Hermione just shakes her head. "I don't think I'm welcome anywhere." And it's the cold hard truth, sinking into her gut like a bowling ball.

"Well, this can't be good," says a new voice suddenly, and Hermione jerks, sloshing Firewhiskey into her lap.

It'd been just the three of them until now, but Blaise Zabini is strutting over from a curling set of stairs she guesses leads to the dormitories. He's barefoot, yawning his way over in an expensive looking black velvet bathrobe.

"Wait, wait," Nott says, stretching both arms out behind him in the vague direction of Zabini. "Don't sit down." He waves his hand as Zabini reaches the arm of the couch. "Grab me the box of tarts from the table, yeah?"

Zabini wipes an aggravated hand down his face and backtracks — lobs the box none too gently at Nott's chest a moment later before stretching out languidly beside him. Tosses his feet into Nott's lap.

This entire situation is absolutely surreal.

"So, Granger's in the Dungeons," he says, folding his arms behind his head and flashing gleaming white teeth, a stark contrast to his smooth, black skin. "First Gryffindor ever — what a treat." Though he says it rather viciously, like she's trapped prey.

"No, no," Nott says casually, eating a tart. "Romilda Vane, in Third Year...though I doubt she remembers."

He and Zabini exchange lascivious grins as Hermione fights to hide her surprise.

Pansy's is plain as day though, and she goes a dark shade of livid purple. Glares at Nott.

"What brings you to the dark side?" asks Zabini.

"Kicked out of Gryffindor," says Nott around another tart.

"Ooh, well done indeed. Very impressive."

It's impossible to tell whether he's being sarcastic. She's hardly ever spoken to Zabini — possibly never. She has no notion of his personality. Only knows he was once very firm in his beliefs about blood purity, and was only days away from being Marked before the War, according to his criminal trial.

"She's *not* staying," Pansy stresses, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Why not?" Zabini sends another dark smile Hermione's way. "She kept Malfoy from losing an arm. Saved this one's arse from fucking expulsion, I'll bet." He kicks a tart out of Nott's hand. "Seems pretty handy to have around. What if I accidentally trip another First Year? Detention is mind-numbingly dull."

"*She's not staying!*" Pansy practically shrieks.

And perhaps it's all the Firewhiskey, but Hermione hears herself ask, "Why do you hate me so much?" in a quiet voice.

Pansy goes still. Everyone does. The silver clock on the mantle ticks loudly in the fresh silence.

Hermione continues, deciding it's most definitely liquid courage guiding her words. "I know I'm a Mudblood and a member of the Order. I know you despise my cause. But me...specifically me. Why do you hate me? Not once have you and I ever had an altercation."

Pansy's expression twitches — a stony, pursed look of wavering fury and uncertainty.

“It’s like you said,” she answers at last, primly. “You’re a Mudblood. What more do I need?”

“Somehow, I don’t believe you.”

Pansy’s lip curls up. “Does it look like I give a shit what you believe?” And with that, she swings her legs over the side of the chaise, sweeps up the bottom of her lace dressing gown and stalks off toward the stairs, tossing, “She can’t stay,” over her shoulder.

Hermione sinks a little deeper into the sofa once she’s gone. Doesn’t know why.

“She’s just sour you managed to get Malfoy to come back for seconds,” says Zabini.

The crassness of it makes her nose wrinkle up. Makes her almost, *almost* feel for Pansy. She finishes her second goblet.

“I’m rather surprised, though, actually,” Zabini continues. “They really turned their backs on you?”

She feels fresh tears prick at her eyes. Forces them to evaporate by digging her fingernails into the heel of her hand.

“I thought Gryffindors were the high and mighty sort. Forgiveness and honor and all that bollocks.”

“So did I,” says Hermione, staring straight ahead at the far wall.

Zabini leans back on the armrest. Closes his eyes and smiles contentedly. “Don’t we all love hypocrisy?”

And it just sums up everything perfectly. Flawlessly.

Nott sighs. “Eat a tart, Granger — you look like you’re going to cry again.”

She only just manages to catch it before it hits her in the face. Gives him a tucked lip non-smile but doesn’t eat. Doesn’t think she can stomach anything right now and doesn’t want to compromise the strength of the whiskey burning in her gut. She just turns it over in her hands.

It’s half past one in the morning when Draco finally returns.

She’s been drinking herself into a stupor with Zabini and Nott for over an hour, in relative agreed upon silence.

Draco strides in soaking wet and faintly blue with the beginning stages of hypothermia. He’s making his way purposefully towards the dormitory stairs, tossing a nod of acknowledgement to the three of them before doing a double-take.

One of these things is not like the others.

“The fuck?” he says flatly, all of the shock manifesting itself in his eyes. He hesitates where he stands, half-turned towards the stairs.

Hermione manages only a pathetic little wave with her goblet, spilling more whiskey.

“Good timing, mate — I think one more and she’d be sick,” says Nott, lurching to his feet. Zabini yawns and follows suit, and Hermione drunkenly realizes they’ve been keeping her company. Can’t really fathom it, though it seems to be the only explanation.

“What is this?” Draco makes his way over to them, brandishing a hand, incredulous. He sends

droplets of water flying in every direction.

“Didn’t they teach us drying spells in First Year?” asks Zabini around another yawn, apparently too bored to stick around for whatever comes next. He disappears up the dormitory stairs.

“Nott, what the fuck?” Draco says again, voice tight and low. He’s sort of fuzzy to her eyes from where she’s slumped on the sofa. She squints up at him, trying to form a proper outline.

It feels like the adults are talking.

“House turned her away,” says Nott. “Found her a sobbing mess just outside.”

“He gave me lots of whiskey. He was very nice,” Hermione hears herself announce. She spills some of this whiskey down Draco’s already soaked trouser leg and hiccups an apology.

“Bloody hell,” he murmurs.

Next she knows, Draco’s hooked an arm around her back, pulling her from the couch by her underarms.

“You are wet,” she informs him as he leans her weight against his side.

“She’ll be fine,” Nott says, running a sleepy hand through his chestnut brown hair.

Hermione just barely catches the interaction between the two of them. The way Draco taps the back of his hand against Nott’s shoulder, almost in thanks, before he too disappears up the stairs.

Draco looks at these same stairs doubtfully for a moment, adjusting Hermione against him each time she teeters. Then he sighs and seems to decide to put her back, this time on the larger chaise lounge.

“Oh, no...careful,” Hermione slurs as he lays her out on it, hands strong. She likes his strong hands. “This is Pansy’s couch.”

“Every couch is Pansy’s couch.” Draco’s voice is stern. Like a parent dealing with a naughty child.

It makes her frown. She reaches up desperately as he pulls away, taking hold of both his forearms after missing several times. Yanking him in close so he comes into focus. Water drips from his wet hair onto her face. “Do you hate me now, too?” she asks. Finds it to be a perfectly logical question.

Draco huffs at her, expression difficult to read in her state, although perhaps any other time it might be obvious. He pulls out of her grip easily and taps his fingers against her lips — a very gentle *‘shut up.’*

He conjures a blanket, throwing it over her. Conjures a waste bin on the floor by her head as well, an afterthought. Then he makes his way to the couch Zabini and Nott had occupied, stretching out on it.

She thinks she tries to reach out for him one more time before the exhaustion floods through her like anesthetic. Before her consciousness collapses into dark.

She startles awake to methodic ticking and pitch black.

Forgets where she is.

Her head throbs like never before — has her grasping desperately for the wand in her pocket. She casts a charm to dull the pain, sitting up as her eyes adjust to the dark.

The faint glow of dying embers in the fireplace starts to illuminate her surroundings.

And her heart feels like lead.

It wasn't just a vivid nightmare. She's really here, in the Slytherin common room, with nowhere else to go.

The clock on the mantle is the only sound. Ticks endlessly. She twists and squints up at it in the dark. Four in the morning.

She lets out a shaky breath. Propped up on her elbows, she can see the vague outline of Draco on the adjacent sofa. His chest rises and falls with sleep, but not slowly. Not evenly. With each inhale, it seems to hitch in his throat. Trapped. The arm he has thrown over his head twitches, hand flexing — into a fist, out of a fist, into a fist, out.

She guesses he sleeps just as restlessly as she does.

Swallowing to moisten her dry mouth, Hermione sweeps her curls from her face and struggles to her feet, swaying a little with the remnants of the Firewhiskey.

At this time in the morning, no one will be awake in Gryffindor. No one waiting to ridicule her. She can sneak into bed, likely without issue.

And then she'll sleep for a day. Sleep through classes.

Sleep until it all goes away. Forever, if she must.

Vanishing the blanket she vaguely remembers him conjuring, she tries to step carefully past the table between the couches. Overestimates her balance and the steadiness of her knees.

She trips dizzily, legs wobbling, and she knocks against the edge of the table, toppling a goblet.

"Bollocks," she whispers, but Draco's already shot up off his back.

"What in—"

"Shh..." She waves him silent through the dark. "It's just me."

Draco sits panting for several extended seconds before flopping back down on his back. "Merlin, Granger. You're taking years off my life." He wipes a hand down his face.

"I'm sorry. I'm leaving. I'm sorry," she whispers, feeling foolish.

She tries to skirt around his couch toward the exit, still struggling with her balance — but she only makes it to the armrest before his hand shoots out and grasps her by the thigh.

She jerks. Trips again, this time yanked sideways by his hand and landing on top of him. Knocking the breath out of him with a muffled *'oof!'*

"I'm sorry!" she whisper-shouts again, struggling to get off and find her footing, but he just coughs and belts her down, pulling her over him so that knees are no longer on stomachs and elbows are

no longer jabbing into shoulders.

“Sometimes I swear you’re not worth the trouble,” he mumbles into her neck, tipping them sideways so she’s squeezed between him and the back of the couch.

“What are you doing?” She continues to struggle, even as her body folds comfortably against the familiar planes of his. “I shouldn’t stay here.”

“No one gives a damn, Granger. Least of all here. Everyone already knows.”

She thinks it’s sleep talking. Is fairly certain he’d feel differently in the light of day, with a bunch of angry Slytherins staring down at them. But the way his breath whispers across the sensitive skin at the crease of her neck makes it hard to argue. Hard to resist.

The couch is still slightly damp and so is he. She shivers as the residual cold leeches into her and slowly lets her muscles go slack. Gives up.

Draco sighs sleepily when he notices. He sinks down deeper into the leather cushions and drives his knee between hers, sliding it up to rest against her inner thighs. Too close. Much too close.

“Not here,” she breathes, suddenly tense again. Trembling, but not with cold.

“Not doing anything,” he says against her throat. Clearly doesn’t realize that, no matter how still he is, she’ll never be able to relax in this position.

She lays there, breathing shallow, listening to the clock tick for a good five minutes or so. Isn’t sure if he’s fallen back asleep or not. Will in no way be able to herself. She’s wide awake, now.

And she’s thinking.

Thinking about his knee, just inches from where it shouldn’t be. Thinking about this room, so unfamiliar. Thinking about Nott and Zabini and Parkinson, and then about Ron and Harry and Ginny.

Thinking and overthinking, as always.

“I smell smoke,” Draco grumbles suddenly, surprising her, and he reaches up a lazy arm to tap his finger against her temple.

“Sod off,” she hisses, glancing sideways at him. His eyes are still closed.

“Does anyone worry as much as you do? Do they offer positions in worrying?” His words are slow and careless, possibly still half asleep. “You should look into that.” But his finger stops tapping and starts drawing little circles and swirls on her cheek.

Definitely half asleep.

“I have things to worry about,” she whispers, ignoring the pleasant tingles his touch is sending to her brain. “I’m losing friends left and right.”

Now he does open his eyes. Blinks slowly at her, gaze tracing over her face. He drops his arm — wedges the other beneath his head to prop it up a bit. “I’ll be honest, though you won’t like it. But part of me gets off on seeing you like this.”

Her brow furrows.

He elaborates. “Seeing you lose things. Struggle. Suffer. It’s immensely satisfying after watching you and the Wonder Twins triumph for so many years.”

“I’m sure it is,” she says after a long silence, feeling an ache blossom beneath her collarbone. She tries to assess why she isn’t furious at his words. Why they don’t set off alarm bells in her head. And yet all she can say is, “The Wonder Twins. Another Muggle reference you should know nothing about.”

Draco’s eyes flit between each of hers. He bobs his free shoulder in a shrug. “Full of surprises.”

She manages an unhappy smile.

“However,” he adds after a moment, adjusting his knee between her legs. Her breath hitches. “I will say that Weaselby’s going to have a very rough term.”

She squints at him. Is so distracted by his words that she doesn’t really register his hand as it glides its way down over her hip. Only notices when he starts unbuttoning her jeans.

She tries to stop him, pulse jumpstarting, but he pushes her hand away and slides down the zip, leaning in to brush his lips over her throat.

“I don’t like what he said.”

Her words come out broken — disjointed by the way his hand dips beneath the plain white edge of her knickers. “That...that I’m a traitor?”

Draco shakes his head, nose brushing against her earlobe. “Mm-mm.”

Her voice wavers. “That I’m nothing?”

He bites her neck suddenly. So hard she jolts, the pain unexpected. “Yeah,” he says against her skin, then laves his tongue over the abused flesh, like an apology. “That.”

A shaking exhale is her only response.

Draco draws a slow finger up and down against her, making lazy circles and sending shockwaves through her nerve endings. “What’s worse is you almost seem to fucking believe it.” Then he pulls his hand away abruptly, the sudden loss of sensation a pain all its own — only to make her watch him slip that same finger into his mouth. Suck on it.

A strangled noise fights its way out of her throat. She flushes bright pink.

“Which is fucking absurd,” he continues, sliding the wet digit free of his lips and guiding it smoothly back between her legs.

She gasps. Her hands find his shoulders, fisting in the damp fabric of his shirt.

“Pisses me off,” he says, fingers finding a comfortable rhythm — gliding against her and making her hips jerk up to meet them. “But not as much as he does.”

She buries her face in his chest. Can’t bear to have him watch her while he does this to her.

“I want to hurt him,” he purrs, words not matching his tone. Not matching anything as he teases her entrance, swirling his callused finger around it. “Fuck, I so badly want to hurt him.” And then he slides two fingers inside.

She muffles her cry against him, fingernails digging into his shoulders.

“Will you let me hurt him?” he murmurs in her ear, even as he pumps his fingers in and out, each time finding that odd, perfect spot she can’t describe. The one that makes her toes curl and her legs squirm.

“Don’t,” she squeaks — weakly, barely.

“*Please*, please, I want to hurt him.” His voice is rough. He increases the rhythm of his hand to match. “Let me hurt him.”

This is wrong. She knows this is wrong.

But knowing that does nothing to stop the oozing, aching pleasure from building up between her hips.

“No,” she whimpers, and he thrusts in a third finger in response, twisting so he’s almost laying on top of her. Leaning over her. Driving into her.

She can’t hide from him this way, and his lips capture hers with a bruising pressure. Bite. Suck. Hard. “I want to make him bleed. I want to cut him open with a Muggle knife.”

She writhes against him, both in protest and in earnest. Craving. Needing. Terrified.

“Say I can. Say you’ll let me.”

She can only shake her head, eyes squeezed shut, biting down on her tongue. She’s so close. Too close.

“Even if you don’t, I think I’ll do it anyway.”

And with that, he’s done talking. He hitches up her waist with his free arm, belting it under her to bring her closer. Tilt her, so the angle of his fingers is unbearable. And they drive in and out, in and out, so consistently — so mercilessly, until she’s balling his shirt into fists and convulsing against him. Crying out against the skin of his throat as the orgasm explodes through her almost angrily. Vengefully.

Her hands are shaking when she finally manages to let him go. His shirt is wrinkled and creased. His lips are swollen.

And his gaze is savage. Delighted. Wickedly delighted that he managed to do this to her.

She trembles, breathing out loudly in the sudden silence. Her shaking fingers find the smooth planes of his cheeks.

“Don’t — don’t hurt him. You don’t have to hurt him.”

He dips down. Kisses her too sweetly for what he says.

“I won’t make you any promises.”

Tumblr: <https://onyx-and-elm.tumblr.com/>

And the link to the requested official playlist:

https://open.spotify.com/user/0m8c7m6e6p1er78bupk0bo4r6/playlist/4ngt3C6EOJyStZ1Blq598e?si=Ogctd0XoSHmR_fDjZz_sEg

xoxo

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

January 4th, 1999

“Get a load of this rubbish.”

She shoots up off her back with a gasp and knees Draco in the thigh, and then he’s awake and cursing, and they’re both rushing to do up buttons. Both trying to make sense of Theodore Nott taking a seat on the couch between the two of them.

Hermione quickly charms herself — banishes her matted hair and any evidence of their inappropriate behavior. She hadn’t meant to fall back asleep, and she’s glancing around nervously for any onlookers in the common room.

But it’s just Nott, and he seems completely uninterested in their indecent state. He’s got the Daily Prophet in hand — throws it down on the table in front of them — and Hermione catches a glimpse of one of the lower headlines.

LETTING BYGONES BE BYGONES?

Witch Weekly’s Theories on Hermione Granger’s Tryst with Former Death Eater

She sighs, reaching out to turn to the corresponding article, but Nott slaps her hand away.

“Not that one,” he snaps, annoyed, then yanks open the Prophet with such force it tears about an inch on both bottom and top. “This shite.”

There’s a moving photograph of Draco and Narcissa Malfoy exiting the Ministry with their solicitor on the day of their appeal. It then switches to Pansy Parkinson walking through Diagon Alley with a hand in front of her face, warding off the press. Then to Nott with his solicitor, at some point during his appeal, showing him massaging his temples. Then to Blaise Zabini shoving his way through other members of the press while trying to enter King’s Cross Station.

The headline reads:

SIX MONTHS & WAR CRIMINALS STILL WALK FREE

“Have you ever even heard of this fucking organization? Or at least that’s what they’re fucking calling it?” Nott is asking Draco. “Crusaders For Justice?”

Draco shakes his head and rubs his tired eyes, squinting as he leans forward to get a better look at it. “Reckon they want us all in Azkaban.”

“No, mate.” Nott jabs his finger angrily into the paper. “They want us fucking dead. I read the bloody article. Here. Read this line.” He tears it some more ripping it back off the table, handing it to Draco and stabbing at the sentence in question. “Read it. Read that.”

Draco yawns and sleepily reads it aloud. “Since October of last year, the organization has been amassing major support and growing in numbers, advocating a zero-tolerance policy for accused Death Eaters and their allies. Dawlish, former Auror, founder of C.F.J. and champion of the cause,

calls for a re-evaluation of sentencing, arguing offenders should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.”

“Read his fucking quote.” Nott jabs the paper some more.

Draco’s lazy intonation fades as he speaks. “What use is a Ministry of Magic that cannot carry out justice where justice is due? These are witches and wizards responsible for the torture and murder of hundreds — whether they decided to get their hands dirty or not — and they are being protected by respectable institutions such as Hogwarts, Durmstrang and St. Mungo’s. Protection they do not and will never deserve. C.F.J. will be submitting a motion to reopen all closed cases against these individuals, citing an infringement upon the rights and safety of wizarding society. We intend to place a particular emphasis on what we and countless members of this community consider to be true justice: the Dementor’s Kiss.”

His voice is unsteady as he reads the last sentence, and Hermione glances up to see he’s gone pale. Sees him try to laugh it off.

He tosses the Prophet back to the table. “They’re just trying to sell papers. Next week it’ll be buried beneath another compilation of Potter’s best Quidditch maneuvers.” And he massages the nape of his neck, sitting back against the clammy leather. “It’s illegal, anyhow.”

“No, it isn’t,” Hermione murmurs, and for a moment she doesn’t realize she’s said it aloud. But both of them turn to stare at her, and she wishes she could bite her tongue. She sighs. Looks away, talks to the black marble table instead. “Muggles are protected by a law that prevents them from being tried for the same crime twice. Wizarding society is not. Because the safety and secrecy of this world is paramount, anyone can be retried on the basis that their current sentence allows them to pose a threat.”

There’s a drawn out silence.

Then Nott huffs. Blurts out, “Well, fuck,” and yanks a bottle of Firewhiskey toward him. It’s seven in the morning. “See? We’re all going to die.”

“I’m not saying it will be easy for them to prove it. I’m only saying it’s...well, it’s possible,” she adds feebly. Something thick and poisonous slithers into her gut. She isn’t sure what it is.

In her peripheral, she sees Draco snatch the Firewhiskey out of Nott’s hands. He takes a deep swig, and she wonders if any of them are ever truly sober.

“What do we do, then?” he asks. She hates that he asks. Hates that she’s expected to have an answer for everything. Hates that, in this moment, she wishes more than anything she had a better one. A different one.

“There’s nothing you can do. Not until—” She breaks off. Feels an intense and painful pang of guilt and quickly corrects herself. “*Unless*. Not unless you’re called to trial.”

They sit in more silence, all staring straight ahead. The dappled early morning light is tinged teal by the Black Lake against the windows. A pair of Second Year girls clamber noisily down the dormitory stairs, though none of them turn to look.

She catches broken pieces of what they whisper as they make their way out of the common room, tripping over one another and gawking at them. “ — *Granger* doing in Slytherin — ” and “ — Malfoy’s shirt’s all rumpled — ” and “ — do you think they... — ” and then “ — all *three* of them?”

Their giggles fade away as they disappear through the false wall, and all she can think is, *Marvelous. More gossip.*

“Give me that bottle, please,” she says.

She waits until breakfast is half over before sneaking into Gryffindor to change into her robes —
Sneaking into Gryffindor.

What a perfectly horrible and utterly ridiculous concept.

She feels distinctly unwelcome, even in the emptiness of the dormitory, as she does up the buttons on her blouse. Ties her tie with trembling fingers, the red and gold almost taunting her — feeling like a sick joke.

And when she reaches the Great Hall, with perhaps twenty minutes left of breakfast, she has no notion of what to do.

Her gaze shifts nervously to the Gryffindor table, finding Harry, Ron, Ginny and the others in their usual spot, though the typically high-spirited conversation is nowhere to be found. They’re talking in low tones to one another, expressions minimal. Measured. It seems obvious they know where she slept last night. The mood of their little section is dark. Divisive.

She can tell even from where she hesitates in the entryway.

And she can’t sit there.

She *can’t*. She can’t.

Her eyes slide desperately in the other direction when Harry catches sight of her, and maybe it’s those few sips of Firewhiskey swirling around in her otherwise empty stomach, but she finds herself walking towards the Slytherin table, legs numb. Gelatinous.

Nott and Zabini are arguing about that same article in the Prophet over pumpkin juice. Pansy is leaning against Zabini, bored as she braids her hair, plate untouched. And Draco is scribbling in the diary, as usual.

She ignores the absurd, almost audible thudding of her pulse as she shakily swings her legs over the bench. Takes the seat across from Draco. Next to Nott.

And every pair of Slytherin eyes at that table zeroes in on her instantly. She thinks she hears Ron’s voice kick up above the morning chatter, tumultuous — “...got to be *joking*...” although perhaps she’s imagining it.

Pansy is the first to manage a reaction.

“Oh, *wonderful*,” she hisses, rolling her eyes and dropping her braid to stab into her egg whites. She chews them furiously and doesn’t make eye contact again for the rest of those twenty minutes.

Nott raises an eyebrow at Hermione. “Fully committing to this traitor thing, then, are you?” he asks, and his voice is wry. Mocking. It isn’t friendly. But it isn’t exactly *unfriendly*, either.

And Draco...

Draco says nothing as he looks up from the journal.

But the expression on his face — the look in his eyes — is the clearest and most obvious one he's ever displayed to her.

A look of pure, vicious satisfaction. Victorious, as though he's just won some long-winded competition. The way his lip pulls crookedly up over his teeth is — it's evil, it's *evil*, that's what it is.

Because he knows now, for certain, that he's destroyed all her friendships. Ruined her reputation for good.

And he is ever so pleased.

She wants so deeply to hate him for it, too. Part of her does. The same part of her that has been and always will be against this — this *thing* between them, whatever it is.

But another part of her cannot help but see the honesty in that expression.

Because Draco will never be good. He knows that. He sees to it.

He will never *try* to be good.

And she's sort of fine with that. She almost needs that. Almost...almost *craves* it.

And she doesn't think she'll ever understand why.

Over the course of the day, she has scalding hot Pepper-up Potion spilled down her shirtfront by Parvati — “Sorry, you know me. *So* clumsy...” — which continues to sting even after a cooling charm; she watches Neville bite back on a question in Defense Against the Dark Arts, as though he's been specifically instructed not to speak to her and has only just remembered; someone hexes her with something rather creative that prevents her joints from bending for a half hour, and someone else actually *pulls her hair*.

It's petty. Juvenile. All of it.

And she convinces herself that it's not worth worrying over. After all, it's Ginny who casts the cooling charm and Ginny who unlocks her limbs and even though she remains at Harry and Ron's side throughout the day, she repeatedly sends reassuring glances her way.

Glances that suggest she intends to help her through this, even if just now isn't the right time.

But it still feels like a wrench in Hermione's gut when she feels the need to cast protective wards around her four-poster before crawling into bed.

And she doesn't think she sleeps at all.

January 7th, 1999

Diary,

Seeing as it is now a distinct possibility that I might die anyway, I'm no longer going to answer your asinine fucking prompts. You can report me to whomever you bloody like, but I fucking refuse, yeah? I'm done.

I'm going to write whatever I damn well please.

My solicitor sent me an owl yesterday — he's been contacted by Dawlish's fucking people. Minions, more like. Says he's trying to pursue every loophole that might allow me to avoid a retrial.

But he's a fucking rubbish solicitor, yeah? So I figure I'm going to fucking trial, and then eventually I'm going to fucking die.

And you'll probably be glad you don't have to read this filthy handwriting anymore.

Happy for you.

In the interim, I can tell you it's still immensely gratifying to watch Granger's life fall apart. Practically fucking orgasmic.

I did warn her I wasn't her type.

Or maybe I just warned you.

Still, every time I see her fight back tears, I feel fucking vindicated. I think back to all of those beatings I took from Father after we lost the fucking House Cup or I lost to fucking Potter in Quidditch — the ones that ended with him hexing my mouth shut for two days, sometimes three, until I ran the risk of starving to death — and I'm so fucking glad she's getting a fucking taste of it. I hope it's sour as vinegar.

But I also want to stop those tears before they fall. Want to kiss her eyes dry. Want to fuck away the pain until the only hurt she feels is that ache between her legs after I've had her again, and again, and again, and a-fucking-gain.

I don't care if she doesn't trust me.

I don't trust her.

But I love that it's hurting her so much to earn me.

No one's ever had to fucking earn me before.

It's also become quite clear that there's no need to cut Weaselby into little ginger strips. The way his face screws up when she so much as speaks to me is so fucking hilarious — looks like it hurts so much — that maybe there's very little I have to do.

Very, very little.

Draco

Tumblr: <https://onyx-and-elm.tumblr.com/>

Chapter Notes

A quick (not so quick) note regarding chapter 29: (If you would like to read my initial rant, please visit my Tumblr.)

The sheer volume of outrage I received over Draco's recent behavior is honestly very surprising to me. People are talking about trigger warnings and about walking away from this fic entirely, and I'm sort of sitting here thinking, well — canon Draco Malfoy is sort of a trigger warning in and of himself, isn't he? And this is not a fluff fic. I never claimed it was a fluff fic. His behavior is absolutely abusive and Hermione's is highly unhealthy as well and I have no intention of just glossing over that with hearts and rainbows and making him a hero in just a few chapters of measly character development. That would be untrue to me, untrue to the character, and untrue to you. Please remember that this is written from Hermione's point of view, which is flawed. She is an unreliable narrator, and if you zero-in on Draco's diary entries, you'll find a lot of evidence that he's still supremely fucked up and still coming at this relationship from a confused and vindictive angle. He hasn't had a magical transformation or a grand epiphany. He's just doing the best he can as the messed up, psychologically impaired person he is right now.

Many of you have been lovely and supportive of his portrayal in this fic, and I think a lot of you will truly enjoy where the two of them end up at the end of this, but I guess, due to popular demand, I'm required to warn you: **THERE IS EMOTIONAL ABUSE IN THIS FIC. ON BOTH SIDES. AND IF YOU'RE ABOUT TO READ THIS CHAPTER, GUESS WHAT? THERE'S EMOTIONAL ABUSE IN IT.**

I did my best to tag all of the potential triggers I could on AO3 before I even posted the first chapter. Fanfiction has a more limited format. But I love you all dearly, and if it is in your best interest and in the best interest of this fic, I would be happy to hear from you about what to include in a potential warning that I would then place in front of Chapter One. That being said, please don't be a tyrant in my inbox, as some have been. Be reasonable, and so will I.

I apologize for any pain I may have inadvertently caused. I don't want to alienate anyone. I just want to continue to keep this fic as raw as possible.

And for my ride-or-die's — those of you who've stuck with me and trusted me even beyond chapter 29, thank you so, so much. You mean the world to me.

But long story short, no. No, I'm not going to make Draco a sweetheart and a hero.

Not a chance.

xoxo

Onyx

January 9th, 1999

“So, what then? Do you fucking live here now?”

Hermione looks up from her Potions essay. Pansy is spreading out on her usual chaise lounge, the fire behind the hearth casting bright orange flickers over her pinched expression, her pursed lips. She’s in another fancy, lace-trimmed nightgown, hair tied up in a tight bun.

“Hello, Pansy.” She glances back down. Tries to remember how the rest of the sentence she’s writing is supposed to go.

“I asked you a question.”

Hermione bobs one shoulder. It’s all she can really manage. “Most of you don’t seem to mind.”

She’s been doing her studying and spending most of her free time in Slytherin over the past week, only returning to Gryffindor to sleep. She can’t focus with all the eyes on her — all the whispers. Can’t think straight having Ron and Harry in the same room, while feeling they’re so very far away.

Nott and Zabini seem to find it almost funny every time they answer her telltale knock. When one of them lets her in, she’ll usually sit with them in the common room — study, read, practice charms.

When Draco answers, things are more complicated.

She hasn’t really spoken to him since that morning — since that look at breakfast. Isn’t sure how to feel around him.

But he’ll let her in, and they’ll sit together in the common room, too. Exchange complicated glances every now and again, when one of them catches the other staring.

Her grand gesture — a gesture which has proven to be more horrific than grand — has had a...*convoluted* affect on their relationship. She’s proven what he needed her to prove. Proven she isn’t ashamed. And she wears the pendant every day.

But they aren’t an item. Aren’t a couple.

Aren’t even what she’d consider to be *lovers*.

In fact, it seems her grand gesture has done more to sway Slytherin House as a whole than Draco himself. Nott and Zabini seem less wary of her. Even people she rarely sees like Pucey and Bulstrode are growing more comfortable with her presence. Have stopped giving her dirty looks. As though they recognize what she’s given up. What she’s done to herself.

But with Draco...with Draco, it feels like he’s testing her.

Waiting for her to go running back to Gryffindor crying. Waiting for her to pretend she didn’t mean it.

Perhaps he doesn’t understand the permanence of it. The permanence of that moment when his lips touched hers, immortalized in black and white print.

“I mind,” snaps Pansy, and Hermione is pulled from her thoughts. Looks up at her again and

studies her carefully.

“Why?”

And she’s truly, truly curious.

Pansy Parkinson is an enigma. Weeks and weeks ago, Hermione had thought she had her all figured out. Thought she was little more than a bitter mixture of blood prejudice, House rivalry and general envy, all hidden beneath an almost synthetically pretty mask. Thought she’d clung to Draco’s arm all those years for the status and the potential inheritance, like Draco had said.

Now, though, she isn’t so sure. She certainly didn’t get a real answer out of her the last time she asked.

Because Pansy Parkinson seems to hate her so much, she almost acts as though she’s afraid of her.

Like now, in the way she fidgets as she splutters out, “What do you mean, *why?*” In the way her face goes bright red and her nostrils flare.

“Like I said,” Hermione answers, working to keep her tone even. Calm. “You and I, specifically, have never had an altercation. And my blood?” She sets her essay aside. Sits forward a bit to stare Pansy down, her dark eyes seemingly bottomless. “I don’t think that really matters to you.”

These eyes go wide and wild for a split second, and then Pansy’s sitting forward, too. Spitting out her words, “*You put my parents in Azkaban.*”

“You know I didn’t. Not me. Not personally.” Hermione feels her hands bunch into fists. Struggles to keep that steady tone. “When the gavel came down, they were simply on the wrong side of things.”

“*Fuck you, you filthy little—*” Her sharp voice echoes through the empty common room, but Hermione cuts her off before she can finish.

Asks what she’s really wanted to know all along.

“Are you in love with Draco?”

Pansy chokes on the word ‘Mudblood,’ which feels almost poetic in a way. Sends an absurd surge of glee through Hermione’s bloodstream, but it dissipates quickly as she then watches Pansy go very, very pale.

“What?” she deadpans.

“Are you in love with him? Really, truly in love with him?” She can’t stop now that she’s started. Has to see this through to the end. “I thought for a long time that you weren’t, but now I’m realizing I may’ve been wrong. It seems to be the only reason I can think of — the only reason you’d hate me as much as you do.”

Pansy is frozen in a state of bewilderment for what feels like a full minute, her perfectly symmetrical face wiped clean like a slate.

Then her expression breaks and she huffs, sitting back, the movement so sudden it startles Hermione.

“As the brightest bloody witch in our year, I would’ve expected you to be more creative.”

And this, from Pansy, is almost a compliment.

But she can't really focus on that because she's — she's saying no. She's saying no, and Hermione is *confused*.

More than anything, she thinks, she hates being confused.

"You're not?" she breathes, brows drawn in tight. Tight enough to cause a tension headache.

Pansy huffs again and kicks back in the chaise lounge, sprawling out her long, bare legs and crossing them at the ankles. "No, stupid girl. I'm not."

"Then why—"

"I hate you because I know exactly how easy it would be for you to ruin their lives." She makes a sweeping gesture to encapsulate all of Slytherin House. "My friends. My family for the past eight years. I hate you because you've wormed your way into our midst and they're all too stupid not to trust you, but I can see right through you. And I know. I *know*. One wrong move from any of them, and you'll use that fucking golden pedestal wizarding society put you up on after the war to eviscerate them."

Hermione ruminates on this for about ten seconds.

And then she shakes her head. "No."

"I beg your fucking pardon?"

"No. Again, I simply don't believe you. Maybe months ago, that would've made sense. But you've seen the way I look at Draco. And you've seen the way my House looks at me, now." She doesn't know how she's so certain, but she is. "You're lying. It's something more."

"Fuck you."

"You're in love with him," she says again — states it like a fact, and Pansy's jaw goes tight.

"*Fuck* you."

"That's what it is. You're in love with him."

"Shut the *fuck up*, Mudblood!" She's up out of her comfortable sprawl, leaning forward again, purple-faced and white-knuckled.

"Just admit it."

"Shut up! *Shut up!*"

"Say it. Say you're in love with him—"

"Fucking *shut up!*"

"You'll feel better once you do—"

"I swear to *Merlin*, I'll—"

"Say it!"

“Fuck you!”

“Say it!”

“I’M IN LOVE WITH HIM!” Pansy shrieks, and she sweeps an arm across the black marble table, sending crystal goblets flying against the hearth. Shattering them into thousands of tiny pieces.

Hermione sits back. Gathers a shaking breath, trying to pull herself down from the fever of moments ago.

The common room is deathly silent. It’s half past eleven. She wonders who they’ve woken up.

Pansy runs trembling hands against the sides of her bun, smoothing out what’s come loose in her rage. She sits back almost daintily, folding her hands in her lap, as though she hasn’t just been screaming.

“I’m sorry,” Hermione hears herself say. “I’m sorry that you are. But I’m glad to know the truth.”

And that’s when Pansy lets out this little peel of tragic laughter.

So forced and so obviously holding back tears. “You don’t know anything,” she says around the laughs, sniffing and running a finger carefully below her eye. Preventing any smudging. “It’s not him.”

Hermione blinks at her.

“I’m not in love with Draco.”

And her fragmented brain rushes to piece together the new information, scrambling and unscrambling previous thoughts, knowns becoming unknowns. Unknowns becoming knowns. The memory of her first night in the common room flashes through her head.

“I’m not in love with Draco,” Pansy says again, completely composed, wiping at more stray tears. “I’m in love with—”

“Theo.” Hermione finishes for her.

And it all suddenly almost, *almost* makes sense.

Pansy releases a slow breath through her nose, face tight. “Theo,” she finally forces herself to say. Finally confirms.

And Hermione realizes how painfully obvious it should’ve been. The looks she gives him. The way she hung around that night, with Nott and Zabini. The horror on her face when she heard about Romilda Vane, who — come to think of it — had been mysteriously hexed the next day.

It even makes sense that Pansy would drape herself all over Draco.

Hermione had spent too many nights in the girl’s dormitory hearing Parvati talk about making boys jealous — about how it was the only surefire way to get their attention. She’d thought this was absolute bollocks at the time — still does, but apparently Pansy had been similarly misinformed.

And all of that — it all makes sense.

But...

“Theo has nothing to do with me,” she says.

And that’s when Pansy’s face goes from solemn to feral in what must be record time. “Oh, yes he does, Granger. Don’t play dumb. He’s Draco’s Crutch. They’re practically conjoined at the hip. By getting involved, you’ve already managed to get Draco sent to the Hospital Wing twice. Almost to Azkaban.”

She stands. Towers over where Hermione sits like a skeletal mannequin.

“But if you do anything — *anything* to hurt Theo, I will kill you. Do you understand me?”

Hermione can only stare.

“I will *kill* you.”

And for once, it’s perfectly clear she isn’t lying.

January 10th, 1999

She reads two of the letters.

Decides she can’t put them off any longer and chooses the two she expects will be the most painful, so she can rip them off like band-aids.

Harry’s and Ron’s.

Ron’s turns out to be little more than a paragraph of furious, illegible scribbles, with only a few words she can make out. Namely, “*fuck*,” and “*how dare*” and, darker than the rest, “*why?*”

Harry’s hurts more.

Hermione,

This doesn’t seem like you.

I don’t know what’s happened or what Malfoy’s made you think of him, but you need to know that he’s wrong for you — and this isn’t just about Ron.

Malfoy’s not a good person, Hermione.

I’ve seen things you haven’t.

This is dangerous. You need to stop before it goes any further.

Write me. Please.

Harry

She squints her eyes painfully, squeezing back tears where she sits cross-legged on her four-poster.

The curtains are drawn — they're always drawn, now. And Harry's handwriting is smearing as the ink runs with stray droplets.

She doesn't know what she was expecting — what she was hoping for, after that day in the Great Hall.

Possibly just one word of understanding. Just *one* word.

Roughly, she wipes her cheeks dry and pulls out a clean sheet of parchment from her nightstand. Clears her throat and addresses it to both of them.

She writes only one sentence.

Please understand that this is not something I could choose.

And she pads off to the boys dormitory, pushing the folded parchment beneath the door. Hoping beyond all hope that they'll try — just *try* — to see her side.

She hates hope, she realizes.

Hope is going to ruin her.

January 11th, 1999

They keep glancing her way, and not, she thinks — practically *prays* — with their usual measure of fury.

She's purposefully seated herself next to Pansy today, so she can face the Gryffindor table, though this comes with both Pansy's noxiously powerful perfume cloud and her obvious disdain. Even so, Hermione is less leery of her since the other night.

Feels she at least knows a bit about what makes Pansy *Pansy*. And she's much more conscious of the way her eyes follow Nott. Everywhere. Like searchlights on a beach.

It is well and truly a *wonder* she never noticed before.

But Harry and Ron have captured her full attention now. They've read her note and she thinks possibly — maybe, just maybe — *perhaps* that they might be willing to speak to her.

Ginny's furtive glances and indistinct nods tell her she's right.

And when the lot of them stand and make their way out of the Hall to head to classes, she's almost elated.

Progress, however infinitesimal, is still progress.

But she doesn't want to push her luck.

She returns to Slytherin that evening, like always, afraid if she charges into Gryffindor now, she'll shatter whatever fragile neutral state they've created.

She knocks.

Wonders idly if she'll ever be given the password — and then wonders whether that would

actually be a good thing.

She has herself duly prepared for Pansy's usual fiery glare or Nott's mocking grin, but it ends up being one of the rare instances in which Draco answers.

"Granger," he acknowledges.

She realizes he only calls her Hermione when they're — when he's...

She flushes. Tries to hide it by pretending to scratch an itch on her cheek. "Malfoy," she replies, in the spirit of fairness.

And then she spends another useless minute preparing herself for another one of their usual, inordinately tense study sessions by the fireplace before he surprises her again.

"Have an Astronomy project to finish," he says, edging his way gracefully around her — and indeed, she sees he has a roll of parchment in his hand. A quill in the other.

"Oh," she says stupidly as her eyes follow him. Watch him start to make his way down the Dungeons corridor. "Right." And she feels her chest fill up with this ridiculously pathetic sensation that she *refuses* to accept as humiliation.

He's almost disappeared around the corner, though, and she's almost finished deciding she'll spend the next few hours wandering aimlessly, when he tosses back at her, "Are you waiting for an invitation?"

A sharp, cut little breath exits her mouth.

A little of the tension in her shoulders smooths out.

She follows.

"Wasn't this due ages ago?" she asks, watching as Draco lazily charts Canis Minor, one arm draped over the telescope. "Before the holidays?"

He makes a guttural noise — nods. "Tomorrow's the last day to turn it in for partial credit."

She hugs her knees a little closer. Glances sideways past the railing she's sitting against.

It's a gorgeous night.

The sky is cloudless and black as ink, the stars glistening like luminescent freckles on its sable face. The chill of the air only occasionally brushes up against her, breaking through Draco's warming charm. It's a pleasant contrast.

She tries not to ruin the view by thinking of Dumbledore.

Though she can't help but wonder how Draco feels about being up here.

Says instead, "I thought you kept up with your studies," to take her mind off of it.

Draco takes his eye away from the telescope, raising an eyebrow at her. "Judgmental, are we?"

She tries not to let her eyes linger on the rather hypnotic 'V' created by the top two undone buttons

of his shirt. Shrugs. “Simply making an observation.”

He jolts that eyebrow once more, then takes a final peek through the telescope, jotting something short and jagged on his chart. Next she knows, he’s rolling up the parchment. Tossing it aside with the quill before she thinks he’s given the ink enough time to dry.

Then he’s stalking over to her, and when he’s a few feet away, he’s cast completely in shadow, the feeble light of the tower’s torches unable to touch him. He stops when the toes of his shoes knock against hers. Looms.

She stares up into his dark face, unable to snuff out the small, squirming burst of something low in her abdomen.

He reaches down. Lifts the bottom of her tie, then starts to twist it around his hand. “Yes, well, I’ve been...” He yanks, and her hands break apart around her knees, legs struggling to push off the ground as he drags her up. “...*distracted.*”

He doesn’t let go of her tie, even as he crowds her up against the stone pillar beside the railing. He tangles it tighter around his knuckles, using it to pull her — force her chest to mold against his.

Her breath hitches.

His free hand snakes up along the curve of her shoulder. Creeps around to the back of her neck to delve into her curls. And he forms that tight, tight fist she’s grown to love — the one that almost stings, strained strands yanking at her scalp.

She makes a little noise she can’t really define as his chin slides into the crevice between her throat and collarbone, almost like it was made to fit there.

“Is that a sufficient excuse?” he whispers against the shell of her ear, and she can’t help but buck against him. Her nerve endings are raw. Exposed.

Too many days have passed since he’s last touched her.

He laughs low at the way her body responds, and the deep vibration of it sends another tremor through her.

“Well?” he asks, tongue darting out to trace her earlobe, then sliding up along the arch of the cartilage. “Is it?”

She hisses out another breath, hands unconsciously splaying out over his chest. Kneading. Grasping at fabric, trying desperately to reach the skin beneath.

“Yes,” she gasps, because he’s released her tie, and his fingers have traveled low to toy with the hem of her skirt.

“Mm,” he hums as he suckles her earlobe. That pulse in her abdomen doubles. Triples. She quickly becomes aware of an aching emptiness she’s not quite familiar with. Has a vague idea of how to be rid of it.

Her hands, still moving of their own accord, find his belt buckle.

“You seem as though you want something, Granger,” he says. Taunts.

She yanks at his buckle, and his hips collide with hers. The teasing lilt in his voice makes way for

a groan, and she bites down on her lip as the hard outline of him presses against her thigh through her skirt.

“What do you want?” he breathes.

She manages to unfasten his buckle — tears the belt out from around his waist and hears it clink against the flagstone when she tosses it aside.

A sharp breath breaks free from his lips and gusts against her ear. A domino effect that makes her jolt once more and then grind her hips into his.

He shoves her hard against the wall, taking away her power, her leverage, and grinding roughly against her instead. Forcing a whimper out of her throat.

“What do you want?” he asks again, pulling away from her neck to look her in the eyes. He takes her chin in hand and squeezes tight, tilting her head up towards him. “Tell me what you want.”

She feels bold. Electrified by the incendiary craving between her hips. Allows one of her palms to whisper over the front of his trousers.

“This,” she breathes.

She’s rewarded by the searing flash in his eyes. The way his lip curls up, aggressive — predatory.

“This?” he echoes, squeezing her chin tighter, bringing his lips in close — so close, but not close enough. Ghosting them over hers as he rolls his hips.

“*You*,” she amends, gasping and nipping at him. Pushing against his grip, unable to kiss him fully.

His eyebrows jolt up, almost like a challenge, and he nuzzles his nose against hers. “Me?”

“Yes,” she whispers, moaning when he loosens his hold on her chin the faintest bit. Allows her to open her mouth against his lips. He drags his tongue up along hers, wet — filthy. Her knees are shaking.

“Yeah?” he says into her mouth, both hands finding her hips. Yanking them tight against him.

“What do you want me to do?” But he seems to have a very clear idea, fingers curling around the backs of her bare thighs. He pries her legs apart with them, and she can’t help a muffled little shriek.

“*Please.*”

“Mm-mm...no, Hermione.” He shakes his head against her kiss and her toes curl at the sound of her name on his lips. “I want you to tell me. Tell me what you want me to do to you. I want to hear you say it.”

He gives her tongue another filthy lick, saliva dripping down their chins. She just wants more. More, *more*, impossible amounts of *more*.

“I want to hear what it sounds like on your tongue.”

Her cheeks are stained red, and she doesn’t think she can say it, but it must be the way his hand slides up her inner thigh. Delves between her legs and gives her a taste of what it’ll feel like to relieve all of that tension.

“I...I want...”

“Come on, Granger,” he growls, dragging a finger up and down against her. “Be brave.”

She sighs into his mouth. Shifts her nose against his, eyes falling shut. Her voice comes out raspy and foreign. Doesn’t sound like hers at all.

“I’m not going to say it.”

And she’s proud of herself. Proud to be able to resist, if only in the weakest form. Proud not to give him everything he wants.

He groans loudly against her tongue, “Of course you aren’t.” And she feels his hand fist in her knickers. “Because when have you ever not been so —” He yanks them. “—*fucking*—” Rips them. “—*difficult*?”

The elastic strains. Bruises her hips as it snaps and falls away.

“Come here. Spread your legs,” he demands, and a shockwave of anticipation shoots through her at his words. At the realization that he’s not planning on taking off his shirt, nor removing her skirt.

It’s the sort of sordid fantasy she hasn’t really allowed herself to have.

She does as he says, more instinctively than intentionally, arms folding around his neck as she parts her thighs and allows him to hitch her legs up around his waist. He presses her back against the pillar for balance, and she finds she loves this angle. Loves being a little taller than him — looking down on him, her lips against the sharp plane of his cheek. Her breaths disturbing the blond wisps on his forehead.

The pink glow of the contraceptive charm paints the backs of her eyelids. She tries to steady the trembling in her forearms — knows he can feel it against the nape of his neck.

“Take a deep breath,” he murmurs against her jaw.

A nervous laugh bubbles out of her throat. “You sound like a surgeon.”

“Yes, well — you’ve never done it like this before. Unless, of course, you lied about being a virgin.”

She laughs again, breath coming in ragged puffs. He doesn’t warn her again. She wasted the first one.

And suddenly he’s there.

She gasps. Her head smacks back against the stone, a pain she doesn’t notice — won’t notice until tomorrow. Because he’s *right*. He’s so, so right. This is different. The angle. The depth. It changes everything.

It *hurts*.

But it also simultaneously quenches the thirst brought on by that horrible emptiness. That need. Addresses it like a prescribed medicine. And the *sound* he makes — the way his head drops down onto her shoulder...it makes the pain fade.

“Fuck,” he hisses.

“*Please*,” she whispers, because he’s not moving. Not taking care of that extra itch. That throb deep and low that still needs attending.

His hands are trembling, too. They shake against the exposed skin at her waist, sliding up beneath the fabric of her blouse to grab hold.

And slowly — too slowly — he starts to shift her against him. Starts to guide her hips to move, to invite him in, expel him out — over and over.

She makes some ridiculous sound. It might be a word, might not. She doesn't know. Only knows the perfect pressure. The violent pleasure of that one spot he always seems to hit.

She tenses at the sensation. Accidentally squeezes some foreign muscle group, and whatever it is, it gets a strong reaction out of him. Makes him jerk and groan and adjust his grip to push her back tighter against the stone, so he can shift up the rhythm. Speed up. Thrust deeper. Harder.

She gasps. Slides a hand up to tangle in his hair just as one of his hands abandons her waist to slide along the outside of her thigh. Squeezes and hitches it up further, driving deeper still.

And his teeth are latched onto her throat — her fingernails are scraping at his scalp — their disjointed pants are echoing through the tower — and she starts to feel that pressure build, fold in on itself, rise — and he's not stopping, not slowing — and she's encouraging him, *encouraging him* — saying things she'd never say — has never said — *please* and *don't stop* and *like that, yes, please, yes, just like that* — and he's *listening*, he's incredible — and his tongue is tracing continents on her skin, and she's so —

Something loud hits the floor. Heavy — a deep thud, like books. They both jerk. Draco's rhythm cuts off abruptly. She gasps. And his teeth free her so she can whip her head to the side.

She can't understand it.

Can't comprehend it.

Can't fathom that it's Ron.

It's *Ron*.

Standing at the top of the stairs. His book bag is on the floor and his mouth is agape and his eyes are — they're wide and horrified and disgusted and disbelieving and so many things — too many fucking things at once.

They're frozen. All three of them.

There is no conceivable way to hide what they're doing, and yet her frazzled thoughts are still wondering if it's possible. If there's some excuse she can make, some lie she can tell.

"Ron..." she rasps out, voice broken. A croak.

He doesn't pick up his bag. Just puffs out a short, furious breath as his tortured eyes flit between them once more. And then he's gone. Down the stairs as quickly as he came. Quicker.

There's a wrenching, deafening, colossal moment of silence.

Draco pulls out of her — a strange, conflicting sensation that doesn't match anything else she's feeling. He sets her down. Holds her until he seems convinced she can balance on her own.

Her eyes haven't moved from the stairs.

"Oh my god..." she whispers, and there's no tone to her voice. Just air.

Her chest throbs and she forces herself to look away — to look at Draco and hope for some semblance of advice, of a plan. Of comfort. Of anything.

But what she sees makes her nauseous.

Abruptly and physically *ill*.

She takes in his passive gaze and his stony expression with horror. Can't understand. Can't fathom. Can't breathe.

“You *knew*.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

January 11th, 1999

He doesn't move. Not an inch.

His eyes are cold and hooded and masked — she can read no expression in them.

“You knew. You *knew*. You planned this.”

His warming charm fades away, and an icy gust of wind sweeps up against them. She barely feels it.

“Planned is a strong word,” he says, no emotion in his voice, either. Nothing. Emptiness. “But you can always count on Weasley not to finish his work on time.” He cracks his knuckles. Rolls his shoulders. Casual. Always fucking casual. “So, no — less of a plan and more of an educated guess.”

“You already finished that project,” is all she can manage to say, deadpan.

He has the nerve to shrug.

She thinks she's going to be sick. Right here. On the floor. Feels the bile rise up in her throat. But no — *no*, she isn't going to let that happen. Isn't going to be that pathetic. *Refuses*. No, she doesn't need to be sick, she needs to...she needs —

Hermione takes one step forward and musters as much force as she can.

Backhands him across the face.

His jaw is a cold, hard slab of stone against the sensitive, thin skin of her knuckles. Stings, the pain hot and sharp. And the resounding crack is loud in her ears.

Malfoy doesn't make a sound. What force she managed has swept his neck to the side, and for a moment he stays facing that way, allowing her to watch the angry scarlet bloom across his cheek.

His eyes are tight when he slides them over to her again.

“You are *sick*,” she breathes, feeling her blood boiling beneath every inch of flesh. “Twisted and sick.” She's unsatisfied and unfulfilled by the violence. She isn't sure anything could satisfy her in this moment.

But the slight flicker in his expression — the crack in the stone — is a start.

Even so, it's painful just to look at him.

She can't. She needs to leave. She needs to *run*. She — Ron. Ron is the priority.

Ron.

Malfoy's still fucking talking.

“Maybe so, Granger.” He shrugs again. *Again.*

And the poison bubbling up in her veins seeps out. Curls her lip and lashes out like a whip on her tongue.

“I hate you.”

And no. No, that’s not enough. Won’t hurt enough. Needs to *hurt*. Needs to hurt as much as she does.

“You’re *nothing*.”

That’s it.

That’s the pain she needed to see.

The way the breath exits his mouth and the way his shoulders deflate with it. The way his jaw slackens and his sharp eyes go dull. The way he blinks.

It gives her legs the strength to move.

And she’s running.

January 11th, 1999

Diary,

Nobody fucking taught me.

Nobody sat me down and explained. Explained how the fuck I’m supposed to feel. What I’m supposed to do. How I’m supposed to act.

Mother and Father never told me, ‘Yes, Draco, this is how much it’s going to hurt,’ and ‘This is how hard it’ll be to trust,’ and ‘This is what you should never do. Never. Ever.’

No one ever drew that fucking line for me.

No one ever fucking prepared me for the way it was going to feel. For how little fucking sense anything was going to make.

For the way she started looking at me and talking to me and seeking things from me.

Like comfort. Like safety.

What the fuck was I supposed to fucking do with that?

Seriously. Seriously.

I asked her to fucking prove it, and then she fucking did.

The fuckery here is twofold.

A: This is fucking Granger. Granger, who never fucking does anything out of her fucking comfort zone unless it’s for Saint Fucking Potter. Granger, who would never put herself or her reputation on the line for me in a million fucking years. I could’ve taken bets on it.

But then also, B: I'm fucking me. When the fuck, in the last eight years — no the last eighteen years — has anything ever gone the way I've wanted it to? The way I've asked for it to?

Therefore, fuck Granger and her fucking grand gesture. I thought maybe I could handle it. I thought maybe those fucking Patil twins or the Weaslette would come back from holiday and bounce around with joy for her, at least.

But Granger fucking crucified herself for me.

And then suddenly it was my move. My turn to prove something. My turn to prove I wasn't everything she thought me to be. My turn to sacrifice something. To lose something.

And I didn't know how. I still don't.

So, fucking excuse the hell out of me while I try to find some semblance of what's comfortable. What's familiar. What I'm used to.

At least my feelings about Weaselby are fucking consistent.

Merlin, you should've seen his face. I want a portrait of that face to hang over my mantle for fucking eternity. It was everything I'd hoped for and more. Every ounce of, 'Yeah, Weasley, watch me. Watch me fuck her. Watch me fuck the girl you thought was always meant to be yours. She's not yours.'

It was fucking flawless.

But then her face.

She had to go and ruin everything with her face. She's always ruining everything with her fucking face.

She looked at me like she didn't even fucking know me.

And I don't know how to deal with that either. I hate that.

I hate that.

And then she said —

Fuck, I just want — I need to —

Merlin's fucking deformed right tit, what the fuck am I talking to you for?

January 11th, 1999

After searching the Great Hall, the Courtyard and even the bloody Quidditch Pitch, she's decided she has to accept it.

He's gone to the worst place he could go. The place she's most afraid to follow.

And when finally she's mucked up the courage to walk to the end of that corridor, even the Fat Lady gives her a strange look. In the grand scheme of things, it probably has little to do with the gossip and more to do with her frazzled appearance, but in this moment Hermione's fractured state of mind can't differentiate between the two — and it sends the first in a series of tears down her

face as she croaks out the password.

She stands in the dark hall between the portrait hole and the common room for several, seemingly endless minutes. Can hear voices — Ron's specifically, and Seamus's, but she can't piece together what they're saying.

She knows how badly this will hurt. It doesn't take a Boggart to remind her how afraid she is of pain.

Still, she also knows the longer she stands here, the more likely she is to lose her nerve. The more likely she is to lose Ron...lose Harry, forever.

And the fear of that is much stronger.

Gathering her fingers into bloodless fists, she swallows the knot in her throat and takes the few remaining steps into the light. The warm glow of the fireplace is almost caustic as it pulls her from the protection of the shadows.

But her presence isn't immediately noticed.

And she can only stare.

Ron is...

Ron is in *tears*.

He's slouched in one of the armchairs, hands matted into his scarlet hair, and he's listening to something Dean's trying to say to him. Some form of comfort or sage advice — *something*. His eyes are rimmed with red, his breathing shallow and panicked, and wet tracks mark the lengths his cheeks.

She — she's only seen Ron cry once.

For Fred.

The sight of it knocks the breath out of her. And the sound it makes exposes her to them.

All of their heads whip to the side — a pack of wolves setting eyes on a threat — and she actually falters. *Falters*. Stumbles one step back at the sheer force of it. Of the expressions on their faces.

Furious. Protective. Poised to fight.

Like she's dangerous.

Except for Ron.

His gaze is broken. Gone is all of the violence and aggression she's seen over the past week. Gone is the disgust and the rage. What's taken its place is worse. Far worse.

Because he looks like a child.

Like this confused, hurt little boy who doesn't understand. Doesn't understand, and cannot understand, and he looks *desperate*. Desperate and betrayed.

"You need to *leave*," snaps Seamus, and suddenly he's cutting off her view. Standing in front of Ron. And *there* — there's that Gryffindor courage, only she never expected it to be aimed against

her.

“I need to speak to him,” she says, and her voice is barely there. A wheeze. All she can manage. “No. No, you don’t. You need to leave.”

“Seamus, *please*...” How did she get here? How is it that she’s pleading? Pleading with Seamus Finnegan to speak to her closest and dearest friend?

“*Leave!*”

“Seamus...”

Ginny’s voice. Ginny’s voice is a — it’s like a salve on a third-degree burn.

“Move out of the way,” she says. Hermione can’t see her behind him.

“You’re *joking*.”

“Come on, Seamus. Just...just move.”

Seamus’s face wrinkles up and he breathes hotly, angrily, in Hermione’s direction for a moment more before throwing up his hands and charging a few feet away to one of the bookshelves.

And Ron’s wrenching face comes back into view, but so do Ginny and Harry behind him, leaning against the mantle. Ginny’s expression is a complicated mixture of pity and uncertainty, and Harry’s — Harry’s is blank.

She’s known him long enough to know how well he can hide his emotions.

Something Ron has never been capable of.

Her eyes find him again, reluctantly — afraid, afraid of the agony it sends rippling through her chest.

“Ron...” she says. It’s a whimper, at best. She takes a few unconscious, stunted steps forward, but her heart rate kicks up, because the animosity of the gathered Gryffindors is palpable. Like a black cloud.

She pushes through it.

Comes to stand in front of Ron’s armchair. His hands slide from his hair down the sides of his face, warping his features before pressing together in front of his nose, as though in prayer.

“You...” she starts, but her voice cracks. Forces her to start again. “You were never meant to see that.” She fights back tears, but they prove heavy and adamant. Start to roll down her cheeks. “*I*...I never meant for you to see that.”

Ron blinks hard up at her. Once. Twice. She’s never seen his eyes like this.

“Why are you doing this?” he whispers against his hands. “*Why?* Why are you doing this? Why?”

She shakes her head desperately — sends tears flying off the edges of her jaw. “I didn’t — I didn’t choose to. I swear, I never wanted this. I tried...I tried to tell you, I couldn’t choose—”

“You’re *breaking my heart*,” he rasps. His hands fold into one tight, collective fist.

And a sob wrenches free of her lips. She chokes on it. Chokes back another. “*No*, I never wanted this — I’m *sorry*. I’m so, so sorry. Ron — I can’t, *I’m so sorry*. I never wanted—”

He shoots out of his chair so suddenly she almost falls over, staggering back.

“*He doesn’t love you!*” Ron shouts, throwing a hand out to his side — startling her. Startling everyone. “He doesn’t! He never will. *I — I* am the one who loves you.” And he jabs a finger so hard into his own chest that it has to hurt. “I have always loved you!”

She backs into the opposite chair, thighs knocking painfully against its arm. “Ron, I...” She can’t see through her tears.

“Why am I not good enough?!” he cries. “What does *he* fucking have that I don’t? What does *he* — why does *he* get to — why...” He can’t even finish a sentence. His words are coming in desperate, panted bursts. His chest is puffing in and out, and he’s panicking. He’s — “What’s wrong with *me*? What’s wrong with me? Why not — why — why not *me*, I don’t—”

She can’t stop herself.

She rushes forth and yanks him into her arms. Buries her head in his over-warm shoulder and hears him release this agonized little howl — feels it rip out of his chest.

And then his hands are fisting in her curls and he’s dropping his face to her crown, and he cries. He just *cries*. She holds him and he cries and he holds her like he’s going to fall through the floor if he lets go.

The space around them is deathly silent. It’s only the two of them. Only their ragged sobs and uneven breaths.

She knots up the heavy knitting of his sweater in her fingers, soaking the space on his chest with her tears. She isn’t sure what will happen when she lets go. Isn’t sure whether she’ll ever get to feel this again. So she doesn’t. Won’t. Holds on and presses into him and fills her nose with his familiar scent — his warm, sweet, musky scent she knows so well and misses so dearly.

And it’s minutes. She doesn’t know how many. Doesn’t know how long they stay like this.

But they stay until Ron’s chest stops jerking against her and her shoulders stop shaking.

When she feels him start to loosen his grip, she panics. Can’t let go until she’s sure he knows — until she’s sure he understands.

And she pulls her face free of his chest and stretches up on her tiptoes and says into his ear, “I will *always* love you.” She takes his shoulders in hand and gives him a little shake. “Always. Know that. You have to know that.”

And then she lets him go.

Her fingers ache instantly at the emptiness — at having held on so tightly for so many minutes. Her face is swollen and hot and her eyes sting. Her head aches. She forces herself to step back, and the room swims back into focus.

Ron is in a similar state, face wet with tears, nose running. But his brows are sloped like ski jumps and his expression is — it’s sad. It’s heartbreakingly sad.

But it isn’t angry.

Everyone around them is staring. They're shuffling uncomfortably and whispering things to one another, and they clearly have no idea what to do. What to say, if anything.

She doesn't know what to say, either.

Nor does Ron.

But she finds her sore gaze pulled almost magnetically to Harry.

And his face is no longer blank.

It's a combination of sadness and confusion and uncertainty, but it also has the faintest tinge of what might be hope. Just might be. Dangerous, indefinite hope.

It's enough.

And seeing it puts the sturdiness into her shoulders and the strength she needs into her voice to say, "I'll go, now. I'll go."

She leaves behind a silent Gryffindor Tower — more silent than she thinks it's ever been — only this time, when the Fat Lady falls into place behind her, it doesn't feel final.

Doesn't feel permanent.

That night she sleeps on a hard, unforgiving cot in the Hospital Wing, with a stomach full of Dreamless Sleep Potion and a disquieted heart.

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr: <https://onyx-and-elm.tumblr.com/>

Chapter Notes

Sorry about that misleading Tumblr post yesterday loves, but this chapter took an unexpected twist and I had to roll with it.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

January 11th, 1999

Dearest gormless bureaucratic wazzocks,

If there ever was a time to drop your high and mighty principles, grow a soul and send those bloody drugs, it's now.

Because he just walked into the dormitory and asked me to beat the shit out of him.

And that's just —

That's...

If that doesn't prove you've failed him, I don't fucking know what does.

I don't know what happened. He probably won't tell me.

But I can tell you he needs those drugs.

Send them, or I'm going to hex this journal so it turns your fingers green for the rest of your miserable fucking lives.

And yes, you can record that as an official 'threat of violence.'

Fucking go for it.

Theo

January 22nd, 1999

It reminds her of the way a balloon deflates.

Slowly. Pathetically. Going from full and colorful and smooth to small and dark and wrinkled without much warning at all.

That's what it's like watching him. And it's all she can do.

Watch.

In a matter of days, Malfoy has become a mere shadow of himself. He's lost weight. Five pounds, if she had to guess. His cheeks are gaunt, the skin under his eyes a violent and obvious shade of purple. His lips are still blue — she knows why now. But everything else is new. His posture, his

behavior. He even blinks more slowly, though she's rather furious at herself for having any idea at what rate he should be blinking.

As far as she can tell, he hasn't attended a single lesson since that night in the Astronomy Tower — which means he's probably failing most of his classes. He doesn't even bother with robes. He cycles through the same three jumpers over and over again — black, charcoal gray, forest green, black, charcoal gray, forest green.

And this is only what she's observed from meals.

She's been sitting next to Ginny, back at the Gryffindor table.

That first morning after, she'd had to will quite the artificial backbone into being in order to get her legs to move in that direction.

But when she'd managed it, Ginny had taken her hand instantly under the table. Squeezed. And even without the verbal confirmation of anyone, it seemed generally accepted that she was allowed to sit there.

After all, they'd never actually *forced* her to leave.

Most of that had been her own doing. Her own fear and uncertainty multiplying and spreading like a virus each time she got a dirty look.

She knows full well it will take time to be on speaking terms with Ron. But Harry did manage a 'good morning' today, and Ginny has been gradually bringing her into conversations.

It's timid. Tepid.

But it's more reassurance than she's had in weeks, and she refuses to push it. Regardless of how childish she finds it all to be.

Malfoy's situation, on the other hand, seems to be rapidly spiraling out of control. If his appearance isn't enough, the behavior of the other Slytherins certainly functions as its own bright, flashing red flag.

They're watching him as though they're waiting for him to detonate.

And she realizes she is too.

Realizes that, at any given moment, all of the trauma and the fury and the abominably bad choices that make up Draco Malfoy could finally culminate into something explosive. Could finally bring him down. Collapse his cracked, teetering stone pillar of stoicism — the only thing keeping him standing. They're all just waiting for it to happen.

This is about more than the Astronomy Tower. Has to be.

But she shouldn't care. Shouldn't be worried or even curious. What he did was vile. Always will be.

And she isn't the sort to forgive easily — if at all.

Besides.

Draco Malfoy doesn't know how to apologize.

“Flint was just arrested,” says Dean suddenly around his pumpkin juice. She rips her eyes from Malfoy’s pale, expressionless face — turns to listen in, careful not to lean too far forward. Careful not to overuse her welcome. Dean’s reading the Prophet. “Picked him up in Marseille.”

“Marcus?” asks Harry, glancing up from his breakfast. “What for?”

“War crimes. Aiding and abetting Death Eaters.”

“He was already tried for that,” says Ginny.

Dean nods, speaking around the rim of his cup. “Retrial. Says they have grounds to reopen the case.”

“It’s happening,” Hermione breathes aloud — doesn’t mean to. Most of them turn to look at her, save Seamus, who might never warm back up, and Ron, but...well, that makes more sense.

“What is?” asks Harry.

She covers feebly. Isn’t sure how they’d feel about that conversation in the Dungeons. “Nothing. I...I suppose I just assumed the first trials weren’t the end of it.”

“Serves ‘em right,” barks Seamus, though it’s very clear he isn’t talking to her. “If you ask me, the lot of them got off easy the first time round.” Then he does turn though — meets Hermione’s gaze for the first time in days and shoots her the most pointed look he can manage. “Especially the ones they let back into Hogwarts.”

She bites down hard on her tongue, but Ginny’s hand is on her forearm under the table in a millisecond.

“Oh, shove off, Seamus,” she scoffs, keeping her tone casual. “Is there ever a time when you *aren’t* starting fires?”

Seamus goes an angry red, cheeks puffing out, but Neville quickly changes the subject, talking about how his cactus has grown over a foot this month.

Hermione bumps her shoulder against Ginny’s — a silent thanks.

“So,” she murmurs when the conversation has split off in several different directions, “how’s that Jackson Pollock project going?”

Hermione struggles to swallow a piece of toast. Manages, just barely, and then quickly sips some water. She’d forgotten. It seems like ages ago they’d come up with it. And, she guesses, a part of her hadn’t thought there was a point anymore.

But Ginny can’t support her outright. Not yet. She knows that.

This is the best she can do.

“I...” she says at last. “I think I’ve given up on it.” And she glances reluctantly to the side — meets Ginny’s eyes. She has a fiery brow quirked.

“Why?”

She’s a little surprised by the question. Tries to word it properly. “Because...I don’t think I like writing about him. His work is too messy. Too chaotic.”

Ginny blinks once. “I thought that was what you liked best about him.”

Her eyes slide away — find Malfoy again, in his corner. “So did I.”

He has the journal out on the table, but he isn’t writing. He’s absently tracing his fingers over the cover. His knuckles are bruised. Scabbed over.

She gathers a slow breath, “But I’ve reached the point where I have to write about the parts of his life that I don’t like. And...and I don’t know if I’m the right person to write about them. I can’t.” *Can’t deal with it. Can’t self-destruct alongside him.*

When she looks back at Ginny, the expression she finds swirling in the deep brown is unnerving. An expression that almost says she knows something. Something Hermione doesn’t.

It makes her feel helpless.

And then she says something she could’ve never expected.

“I think you should write the end.” She turns back and starts to butter a fresh slice of toast, ignoring the shock in Hermione’s eyes. “Just to see if it turns out differently.”

January 29th, 1999

It’s eleven-thirty in the evening and the Fat Lady is screaming.

Hermione shoots upright in bed, yanking aside the curtains around her four-poster. Ginny is already on her feet, and Parvati has fallen from her mattress onto the floor.

“What in *Merlin*—” she shrieks, stumbling up from the ground, tangled in her scarlet sheets.

They yank on bathrobes and rush down the spiral staircase into the common room, Romilda’s hair still in rollers, Hermione’s a bushy, riotous mess.

They almost collide with a good portion of the boys’ dormitory at the foot of the stairs.

“What’s happening?”

“I don’t know—”

“Who is—”

“*What in*—”

Neville shouts over the chaos, ripping his wand from the pocket of his striped pajama trousers. “I’ll investigate!” he announces, with all the bravado one could possibly build up from cutting the head off a cursed snake.

Harry and Ron have wands out too, and as they follow behind Neville, Hermione feels herself reaching for her own.

Slowly, a good three-quarters of Gryffindor House crowds into the pitch black hallway leading to the portrait hole. The Fat Lady’s shrieks have tripled in volume, and now it’s possible to catch

fragments of words.

“STAY AWAY! HEATHEN! BACK! GET BACK! DUMBLEDORE WILL HAVE YOUR WAND SNAPPED FOR THIS — I’LL SEE TO IT! THREATENING A LADY! HOW DARE—”

“I’m opening it on three!” shouts Neville. “One! *Two!*”

He shoves the back of the portrait aside, and the Fat Lady’s screams spike up to an ear-shattering level as the light from the corridor floods through the entryway.

“Fucking *finally*,” snaps an all too familiar voice.

Neville’s wand is pointed at Pansy Parkinson.

Hermione stretches up onto her tiptoes to see over Harry and Ron’s shoulders. Pansy looks ruffled — slightly. As ruffled as she can look, being the way she is. Like everyone in the hallway, she appears to have thrown on her robe in haste. She’s barefoot and her raven hair is tousled from sleep. She has her wand out and that usual perturbed expression on her face, but there’s an undertone of panic in her eyes that Hermione recognizes instantly.

“Parkinson? What’s going on?” demands Neville.

“SHE THREATENED ME!” screams the Fat Lady, though no one can see her — her portrait is pressed against the wall, her cries muffled. “SAID SHE’D HEX ME INTO BLACK AND WHITE IF I DIDN’T LET HER IN, HOW *DREADFUL!*”

“You have no business here,” says Neville, and Hermione can hear without looking that he’s puffed out his chest. “Why are you trying to get in?”

“Oh, get the hell out of my face, Longbottom — I’ve wasted enough time trying to get past this fat oaf—”

“FAT OAF?!?”

Hermione casts *Silencio* on the Fat Lady almost instinctively, pushing through the tightly packed crowd until she’s standing at the front beside Neville.

“What’s going on?” she asks. Her heart rate has picked up, and there’s a sinking in her gut. A worry. A fear she can’t quite describe, like a cold hand squeezing her stomach.

“You need to come with me,” says Pansy, face hard. “Now.”

“She’s not going anywhere with you.”

And her heart throbs painfully, because it’s Ron. And he’s trying to protect her and she *craves* that. Wants that element of their friendship back more than anything. But — she knows. She has to disappoint him. She has to go. It’s Malfoy. It’s something to do with Malfoy. She knows. She *knows*.

Pansy wouldn’t come here unless it was her only choice.

She slides past Neville. Steps off the small ledge onto the carpet of the corridor. “Is it…” she starts to ask, but Pansy’s jaw goes tight.

“*Now*, Granger.” And she whips around, charging off.

Hermione casts a feeble glance over her shoulder at all the confused, staring faces. “I — I’ll be back soon. I —” She manages a helpless shrug. “I’m sorry, I don’t—”

“*Granger!*”

She jolts and rushes to follow, leaving Gryffindor behind, her thoughts racing a mile a minute.

They’ve made it all the way to the Dungeons, and Pansy hasn’t stopped to say a word. Hasn’t slowed her pace even a fraction or glanced back to be sure she’s following.

Hermione’s slightly out of breath — about halfway down she’d noticed her hands had started shaking. She has them gathered into fists at her sides, sweat collecting between her fingers.

When they reach the false wall, Pansy hisses out a password she can’t discern, and instantly the temperature drops at least twenty degrees. She gasps audibly as the cold rushes over her skin, passing through the bricks after Pansy and stopping short at the sight.

Her senses are overwhelmed.

It’s bright and cold and *loud*.

Several people are shouting, and spells are being cast left and right at what looks to be a solid wall of ice in the middle of the Slytherin common room.

“What took you so long?” someone shouts, and suddenly Theo is crowding in front of her view, and her shocked eyes are struggling to refocus on him.

“Stupid fat bint wouldn’t let me in,” says Pansy. “Has anything changed?”

“Haven’t even made a dent.”

“What’s happening?” Hermione breathes, struggling to see past Nott’s broad form. The wall of ice spans all the way around the couches by the hearth, stretching up to meet the ceiling. It’s foggy and blurred, at least a few feet thick, but through its pale blue glaze, she can see a shadow sitting on one of the black leather sofas.

She doesn’t have to ask who it is.

“What did he do?”

Out the corner of her eye, she sees Zabini blast the wall with a hearty incendiary hex, the common room glowing red for a moment. The ice cracks but doesn’t budge.

“It’s the pain,” says Theo. “Finally made him lose his fucking mind.”

“His arm?”

Theo shoots her a complicated glance. “Mostly,” he says.

She stares. All she can do is stare.

Malfoy’s shadow is unmoving.

“Well, for fuck’s sake, *do something*,” snaps Pansy, giving her shoulder a shove. “That’s why we

brought you here. You're the know-it-all."

"We need McGonagall," she deadpans.

"Use your head." Nott's voice is gruff. "If McGonagall sees he's at this point, he'll be committed. St. Mungo's Psychiatric Ward for the rest of the term, if not longer."

"What do you expect me to do?" She couldn't force emotion into her tone if she tried. Can't think straight. Can't feel anything. She can only stare.

Blaise joins them in the corner, sweat beading on his brow. "He's been in there over an hour. He'll freeze to death soon enough."

She shifts her gaze away from the three of them. A group of confused First Years has huddled in the opposite corner. She can't imagine what they're thinking.

Nott grabs her arm with an almost bruising pressure, but his voice is gentle — pleading, as he fills her eye line again. Forces their gazes to meet. "Do something. Anything."

She draws in an unsteady breath. She doesn't want to help him. In fact, it's the last thing she wants to do. That look in his eyes, the night in the Astronomy Tower, is stained into her mind. What light she'd started to see him in throughout the previous weeks seems to have collapsed into black.

Nott squeezes tighter. She lets out a little hiss of pain.

"I don't care if you hate him," he says through gritted teeth, as though he can read her thoughts. "Do something. Do something, or it's murder."

"Don't you *dare* try to put his on—"

"Please." His grip falters. So does his voice. And it silences her immediately.

The whole of the common room is deathly quiet.

"You're the only one he'll listen to."

In the moments that follow, all she's really aware of is the tense, impatient tapping of Pansy's foot off to the side.

They're all like her.

Nott, Zabini, Bulstrode, standing in different places. Even Pucey and Goyle. All sweating, exerted. All tense.

For whatever it's worth, he means something to them.

And she tries to keep that at the forefront of her brain as she pushes past them and approaches the wall. Tries to shove her own stubborn feelings back into the dark — tries to pretend they no longer exist.

"Can he hear me through the ice?" she hears herself ask, but she's operating on autopilot.

"Yes."

She puts her hand against the scorchingly cold wall, feeling it start to fuse to her skin almost instantly, like dry ice. It's a powerful spell, whatever it is.

“Draco,” she says loudly. It echoes.

For a moment, the dark shadow doesn’t move — an eerie spot of blurry black. But then she sees his head shift toward her voice.

“I understand this takes away the pain.” She doesn’t sound like herself. “I’m sure it even feels good. But I...” She thinks carefully on her next words. Thinks back to everything she knows or thought she knew about his personality. Because this is that detonation they’ve all been waiting for, and if she isn’t cautious — he could...he...

She swallows back a sudden surge of panic and pain. Her voice is scratchy. A rasp.

“I think something may’ve gone wrong with your spell. Why...why don’t you let me see if we can alter it?” And her own tone reminds her of that way she hates being spoken to. That skittish animal tone.

She wonders if he hates it as much as she does.

His shadow has gone still again. There’s a pregnant pause.

“Draco...” she says again, unable to prevent some of the fear from leeching out.

But then the ice makes a strange noise. A crackling. Something’s shifting.

And she hears his cold, muted voice float through. He sounds like a ghost.

“You can come in.”

Something dark and heavy settles in her chest. It’s a simple enough phrase, but it bears a massive weight.

With a shaking breath, she tests the wall. Watches as her finger glides through, instantly enveloped in crippling cold.

She glances back to Nott and the others, uncertain. It’s the first time she thinks she’s seen Pansy look at her with anything other than annoyance.

Because they all know, and she knows — he isn’t in his right mind. Isn’t safe right now. Isn’t sane right now.

And if she walks through that wall, he might not let her back out.

She knows.

And trusting him is like trusting a starving dog not to eat a plate of meat set in front of him. Trusting him got her into this mess. Trusting him ruined her life in a lot of ways.

She looks back at his shadow. Sees him turn away. Hears the crackle of the ice starting to reseal.

She steps through.

Tumblr: <https://onyx-and-elm.tumblr.com/>

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

January 29th, 1999

It must be twenty degrees below freezing. At least.

When she steps through the wall, it feels like shards of ice are being driven through her skin. Every muscle tenses, every joint locks into place. Her eyes fly shut instinctively, as though to guard against it, and she shoves her hands into the already cold pockets of her bathrobe.

But somehow she forces her lids to open. Watches the steam cloud of her breath rise in front of her as her gaze settles on him.

He's sitting on the sofa the way one would as they read the morning paper. Casually. Loosely. One knee propped up, his elbow resting on it. As though his fingers aren't dark blue. As though he isn't frozen against the leather. She can see where it's fused to his clothes. His skin.

He glances sideways at her, and his eyes are vacant.

"Granger," he nods. Sounds bored.

And she wants to slap him again. Cruel, unfeeling *bastard*.

"What are you doing?" she asks instead, voice trembling with the cold. She's already lost feeling in her toes.

"Enjoying an evening to myself," is his answer, and just like that, all of her caution flies out the window, sucked out of her just like the warmth.

"No, you aren't," she spits. "You're being selfish. Disgustingly selfish."

His gaze doesn't change, but his posture adjusts. He sits back a little. Looks her up and down. Says nothing.

"Your friends are out there." She points behind her angrily, breath coming in steamy bursts.

"Worried sick. You've dragged them all out of bed to stand around this ridiculous bloody *igloo* of yours, and they're casting useless spell after useless spell trying to *save your life*."

He blinks at her.

She fumes. "Pansy had to go to *Gryffindor* to get me. She had to threaten her way in. You made her do that. *You*."

He snorts, then. Examines his fingernails. "Pansy, in *Gryffindor*. That's an image."

"*Why don't you take anything seriously?!*" she shouts, voice bouncing off the icy walls.

And just a fraction of the strange, indifferent fog over his eyes clears. He looks up at her. "Why do *you* always assume I'm trying to die?"

She folds her arms over her chest — a dual purpose, to guard against the cold and against him.

“Perhaps because you’re always putting yourself in deadly situations. Correct me if I’m wrong.”

“You sounded much more polite on the other side of that ice,” he says.

“Well, now that I can see how much of a *child* you’re being...” She can’t stop herself. Can’t put any restraints on the anger that’s built up from that night, even though she knows she needs to be more careful. Knows this is precarious. But she can’t stop it. It’s compulsive.

Malfoy cracks his knuckles. Resumes his bored expression. “Isn’t that what you’ve always thought of me?”

She sniffs with fury. “Don’t pity yourself.”

He drops both elbows onto his knees. Rubs one eye. “Why are you here, Granger?”

And she splutters — gestures aimlessly, trying and failing to form some sort of response to that.

“This has nothing to do with you,” he says.

“You’re *joking*, Malfoy.” She starts to pace. It feels like the blood is freezing in her veins, and she’s trying to keep her knees from locking up. “You — look at you, you’re self-destructing! This is a cry for help —”

He wrenches himself free of the couch, and the ice that’s formed around him cracks loudly as he gets to his feet. He drags up his frozen sleeve, and she swears she’s about to roll her eyes. About to chew him out for using that bloody Mark again as an excuse for all of his vile behavior.

But...

She *smells* it. Smells it before she sees it.

Burning flesh.

Something she hasn’t smelled since they cremated the unidentifiable bodies after the battle.

She recoils instantly, backing away, but her eyes have already locked onto it. Won’t budge. She can’t even blink.

“*What...*” she breathes, but her voice is swallowed up by the icy air. She backs into the wall. Hisses at the cold sting.

What had once been a festering, infected wound has morphed into a rotting, charred, unrecognizable slab of decaying flesh. The top layers of skin on his forearm are eaten away — and for a moment her eyes can’t comprehend that bright white gleam.

The bright white of bone.

His arm is decomposing.

“A cry for help,” he echoes, and she’s only too happy to look away. To have an excuse to look at anything but the gore.

But meeting his eyes straight after has an unexpected effect. Makes her suddenly appreciate how beautiful they are — which is idiotic and distracting and the last thing she should be thinking about right now.

She should be trying not to vomit.

“Wrong again, Granger.” Then he laughs humorlessly and drops his arm away. She’s glad for it. “Do you know, I think the only thing standing between you and genius level intelligence is how much you think you already know. You think you know everything.”

She tries to shake her head, but the cold has cemented her joints — keeps her neck straight. She can’t feel her fingers.

And yet he’s moving so fluidly. His voice doesn’t tremble.

“Why...why didn’t you tell someone?” she manages at last, and the insides of her lips sting instantly as the air hits them.

“We all have our problems.”

A nervous laugh bucks out of her like a convulsion — perhaps a last ditch effort to stay warm. “R-Right...” she says around clacking teeth. “B-Because becoming a l-living corpse is just — just one of those...things...”

Malfoy cocks his head to the side, studying her passively. “You’re cold.”

She belts her arms around herself, digging her nails into her skin. “And you’re dying.”

He blinks. Slowly. He’s every shade of blue.

“D-Drop the enchantment. So I can — can help you.”

The hand of his good arm flexes at his side. Hers are frozen into a fists against her chest. Numb.

“Thought you hated me. Why should you help me?”

She sucks in a frigid, furious breath through her nose. It stabs the walls of her throat on the way down. “*Drop* the enchantment.”

His stone expression cracks. She sees an inkling of vulnerability spring to the surface, like the last drops of water mined from a drying well. “I don’t want them all to see.” And he juts his head past her shoulder — past the wall of ice.

“T-Then...then they won’t. I’ll — we’ll find a way to fix it. In private. J-Just drop the enchantment.”

She watches his throat constrict as he swallows, all the thick veins visible and darker than ever.

“Give me your word.”

She’s almost in tears, she’s so cold. Can hardly function. “*Malfoy—*”

“Your word.”

She stamps one foot into the ground, desperate to keep it awake. “*Alright*. Y-Yes. Yes. You have my word.”

He blinks at her one last time. A resigned, sleepy blink.

“*Finite.*”

The melting ice is flooding the common room.

It's soaking the carpets and dousing the fire that keeps resiliently trying to come back to life.

Left and right, Slytherins of all years are casting drying charms in efforts to fight mildew and mold and, well — drowning.

Hermione has Malfoy's arm slung over her shoulder.

As she'd predicted, the moment the cold started to fade, the pain took its place, and his knees buckled. He's nearly dead with hypothermia and also with decay. There isn't time for fancy explanations or decorum.

But she tries her best to keep her word as Pansy, Theo and Blaise swarm them.

"Merlin's bollocks, mate, what were you thinking?"

"Draco! Draco? Is he even conscious?"

"Mate—"

"I —" She's forced to think on her feet, even as the blood is rushing painfully back into her extremities. *"I need to get him into warm water. Immediately. Where's the dormitory?"*

Pansy, for once, leads the way without a single complaint. Without question.

And Hermione does her best to adopt Madam Pomfrey's sternest of tones as they enter.

"Get everyone out."

"Shouldn't I—"

"Everyone. Out. Now."

Not a moment later, Pansy's corralled what few boys managed to sleep through that chaos out into the common room, hurling abuse at them the whole way — and then the door is closing behind them. She doesn't think she's taken a full breath yet.

Malfoy is slumped against her side, silent. Barely holding up his own weight.

And an odd part of her brain is wondering whether she's seen him near death more times than otherwise.

She tries to gather her bearings. The Slytherin boys' dormitory is dark, with only the sleepy glow of the Black Lake past the windows to illuminate the shadows of the beds. They aren't in a circle like Gryffindor, but rather in straight, equidistant rows leading all the way back to a fireplace on the far wall, its flames long dead.

She can only assume the door to her immediate left leads to the lavatory — drags Malfoy towards it as he grows heavier and heavier against her.

The washroom is black-tiled. Reptilian. Cold, when she so badly needs warmth. But there's a black

marble tub beneath one of the glowing windows, and she decides her excuse about warm water is hardly the worst idea.

She's running out of options as it is.

Malfoy groans, his face smushed into her shoulder. She can't let him fall asleep.

Quickly, though it's a struggle to prop him up and free her wand arm, she manages to fill the tub with lukewarm water. Anything hotter would surely shock and burn his frozen body.

Shivering, her knees wobbling, she slowly helps him to sit on the tub's rim, and then can do nothing more elegant than give him a push so he slides over the edge. Water sloshes all over the floor at the great splash, and her cold fingers ache as slightly warm droplets strike them.

Right. She needs to focus.

"Malfoy, stay awake," she snaps, prodding his icy shoulder as he settles into the bath, shirt going distractedly transparent. He cracks open one bloodshot eye, though she can't be sure he's really seeing her. "It's very important you stay awake," she repeats, more to herself, as she casts a charm to gradually heat the water.

Malfoy's arm slips off the edge of the rim and splashes into the bath, and instantly both his eyes fly open and his body goes rigid. A cut scream rips out of his throat as she rushes around to the other end of the tub to pull it back out. Blood and pieces of burnt, dead skin start to taint the water.

Her stomach heaves as she holds his arm — so much lighter than it should be, so much flesh already missing. She can't fathom what to do. Knows already that Pomfrey would amputate it.

But she — she can't. She *can't*.

"*Malfoy*," she snaps again without looking at him. He's gone quiet. The submerged parts of his body have gradually begun to fade from blue to white, but she's quickly realizing that the warmer he gets, the faster the Mark decays.

It's dark magic. A curse, maybe. She's never read about anything like it. Why him? Why his Mark, and not the others?

But in the time she wastes thinking about it, she watches one of the last tendons in front of the exposed bone of his forearm melt away. She swallows back bile. She has to make a decision.

And the Imperius Curse isn't the cure for everything.

Swiftly, with shaking fingers, she conjures clean bandages, dittany and the only thing she can think of — embalming fluid.

Malfoy's unconscious. There's no helping it. No asking his permission.

She steadies herself, tightens her grip on his wrist and gets to work.

"Wh—what are you doing?"

His voice startles her, and her wand slips from her blood-soaked grip.

It's been two hours, and the steam from the now hot bath is making her sweat.

He's awake.

And he's staring at her handiwork with wide, weary eyes and she's trying not to allow herself to be terrified that he'll hate her for it.

She clears her throat, voice raw from long silence. "I...I did what I had to do."

But she doesn't blame him for the horror in his gaze. Because Malfoy is looking at the remnants of his forearm, which she's spent the past hours clearing of all muscle, fat, blood and living tissue. From his wrist to his elbow, all that remains is bone, and she's rinsing the loose skin around it with the embalming fluid.

From the look in his eyes and the wrinkle in his nose, it's clear he can smell it. He knows what it is.

Hermione sits back on the damp tile, joints aching, head throbbing. "The, erm...the Mark was cursed. It would've eaten everything away if I hadn't removed the entire infection. I think it must have something to do with you trying to tamper with it. The Mark must've had some dark magic in place to prevent that sort of thing. I don't know. That's my theory. And I — I know it must be a shock, and I'm sorry, really, I am — I didn't know what else to do. I — I'll stuff it with cotton wrapped in wire and mend the skin around it, and — and there are a few charms I can cast to keep your fingers functioning, but — well, erm, the arm itself won't have any feeling. I...I'm sorry. I'm sorry." She stops her rambling. Gathers a deep breath, looking anywhere but his eyes.

And for a long while, the silence is filled only by the quiet thrash of the water around his body as he breathes. Water she's drained and refreshed twice to clean all the blood out.

"So..." he says at last, and she's only slightly relieved to hear some of that regular snark in his tone, "you've taxidermied me."

She bites down on her bottom lip. "Essentially. And only a piece of you."

He huffs. It might be a laugh.

"How does it feel?"

"I don't feel anything."

She winces. Truly, this isn't her best work and she knows it. But she'd been too panicked in the face of his certain death otherwise, and she doesn't really want to think about what that means. "I'm sorry."

Their eyes meet at the same time.

"I don't feel pain, either," he says, gaze direct. Uncompromising. Sober. She hasn't seen his eyes like this in weeks. "It's not burning."

She glances away quickly when their stare lingers too long. "That's...that's good, then." And she lets go of his wrist for a moment. Slips off her knees to sit more comfortably, knees stiff and aching from where they've been pressed into the tile. Her bathrobe is destroyed.

Malfoy watches on in silence as she conjures the cotton caged in wire she promised, and idly she realizes he must not be squeamish. He seems perfectly calm as he stares at his own bone.

But perhaps he's in shock.

She's glad to have her hands preoccupied, though, because he starts talking and she knows she'd have nothing better to do than fidget.

"Surprised you came," he murmurs, the water thrashing as he pulls out his other arm to sweep back his sweat-soaked hair. The heat of the bath has brought color to his cheeks. It's an unusual sight, and she's careful to only catch a glimpse of it before refocusing.

"Pansy said it was urgent."

"And you trust Pansy, now?"

Hermione sniffs, the spike of usual annoyance almost comforting. "What does it matter?"

She feels him shrug — his arm tugs against her hold. "Suppose it doesn't."

She looks up to compare the size of his other forearm to the shape of the caging, accidentally catching his stare.

"But I'm wondering why you've gone to all this trouble. Certainly not for the sake of morality. I think that ship has sailed."

Her eyes tighten. "Hasn't anyone ever told you how to say 'thank you?'"

His response is instant and unashamed. "No."

She huffs, looking away and starting to tug angrily on the wires. But when his free hand takes her wrist, she starts — accidentally jams her already sore knee into the hard wall of the tub as he sits up.

"I also don't really know how to say that I'm sorry..." he murmurs. "No one told me how to do that either."

She swallows the thick knot in her throat. Wills herself not to look at him.

But it's like a magnet trying to avoid metal.

Their eyes meet once more. The look she finds in those blue-gray depths has the breath whistling out through her teeth. Water drips from his chin and his chest rises and falls deeply, smoothly, white dress shirt plastered to it like tissue paper. The steam billows up around him in curling wisps and suddenly he's leaning in and she is too and it's too hot and her fingers are shaking and she tries in earnest to chase away that creeping fear, that creeping doubt, but—

"Don't," she breathes, pulling back just before his lips can find hers. She squeezes her eyes shut. "*Don't.*"

Moments of frozen silence pass.

Then she hears the water lap as he sits back into the bath. Only then decides that it's safe to open her eyes again.

The cotton and wires are in place.

Swiftly and without preamble — without looking at him — she casts the spells she'd practiced before to restitch his skin and give life to his fingers.

He gasps audibly, because the Mark is gone. She made certain of that.

“I cut it out of you,” she says, eyes on the tile. “Figured you deserved at least that.” And then she’s standing on stiff legs and gathering her damp, bloodied robe in tight around her. “I’m sure your friends will want to know you’re alright.”

She leaves before he can get another word out.

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr: <https://onyx-and-elm.tumblr.com/>

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

January 30th, 1999

Diary,

I forgot.

I didn't think it was actually fucking possible to forget what it's like to feel normal, but I fucking forgot.

And now I have to figure out what to do with myself.

Because I don't know who I am without that pain. For two years now — fuck, almost three — I've based everything off of it. Been making room for it. Accommodating it. Accounting for it. Expecting and preparing for it.

But now, no thanks to you lot, it's gone.

And of course — of fucking course she had to be the one to take it away. Because it wouldn't be my life and my luck if I didn't have to owe her one more thing. Always one more thing.

I feel...blank now, without the pain. None of my other feelings can possibly function as aggressively as it did, have as much power over me as it did.

Fuck, I'm wondering if I actually fucking miss it.

No.

No, that's not what I miss.

I miss the life I had before it.

Draco

February 1st, 1999

It's one of the only times she's late — and, conveniently, it's also one of the worst times she could be.

But she hasn't been sleeping well.

Therefore, on the rare occasions she does manage it, it's immensely difficult for her to wake back up, and today she's slept through all of breakfast as well as those precious fifteen minutes leading up to Defense Against the Dark Arts.

She scrambles in, hair askew, just as Hestia's going over the day's lesson, and it's embarrassing

enough to interrupt with her tardiness.

It's so much worse that the last seat available happens to be next to *him*.

Worse still that now, out of nowhere, he's chosen to start attending classes again. Why today, of all days? Why? After she's resolved — made a bloody *pact* with herself — to stay away from him?

She stops dead a few feet from the door, everyone staring at her — including him. And Hestia.

“Miss Granger, wonderful of you to join us.” There's no real bite to Hestia's tone, but she may as well have slapped her. The whole situation has spiraled so wildly out of control so fast. “Have a seat.”

Malfoy wears a neutral expression as she makes a halting approach, her hand cramping in its fist around the strap of her book bag. Her eyes find his left arm instantly, a safer target than his eyes. Nothing seems amiss — all of her real work is hidden beneath the white sleeve of his shirt and his hand appears to be resting normally on the desk.

Still, though, that's only what it *looks* like. All manner of things could've gone wrong internally.

But she's not about to ask him. Not about to guide herself towards any situation that involves talking to him. She's decided. She's *decided*.

She stayed up half the night talking to Ginny after coming back from the Dungeons, and together they reached the conclusion that nothing positive could come from this. That Jackson Pollock was a dead end. Period.

She's decided.

She finally takes her seat. Jackknives herself against the back of the chair, staring straight ahead and fruitlessly trying to force all of her attention onto Hestia.

She has to start breathing through her mouth as soon as his scent gusts up against her.

It reminds her of too many things. It's too easy, now, for her to pinpoint exactly where each subtle aspect of his musk comes from. The oaky citrus from his cologne. The watery freshness from the soap he uses. The clean linen from his clothes. And the peppermint. Of course the peppermint, from those breath mints she's tasted on his tongue — the ones she's stolen from his mouth on occasion and swallowed herself.

She flushes a deep red — manually adjusts her attention once more, staring at Hestia with so much force her eyes start to water.

Malfoy hasn't moved. She can sense his eyes are straight ahead as well, and she's relieved at that. Can't be sure what his gaze could do to her at this point.

And she soldiers on through the first half of the lecture by reminding herself that this is one of the last times she'll have to be this close to him. She's decided. From here on out, it'll be easier. And by god, she'll never be late again.

But then Hestia announces the interactive portion of the lesson, and it becomes abundantly clear that all the odds are stacked against her.

“I want nice, clean duels. Pair up with your desk mates. One of you will choose to act primarily on the offensive, the other defense.”

Everyone stands, and Hermione feels as though the floor drops out from under her as she follows suit. Feels that all of her strength and conviction vanishes with the desks as Hestia charms them away.

She casts a desperate look in Ginny's direction and finds only sympathy. No bright ideas. No escape plan.

What? What has she done to deserve such bad luck?

Aside from losing her virginity to Malfoy, on what now appears to have been a whim. And then proceeding to go back for more. Which is a terrible direction for her thoughts to go.

Other pairs have already started their duels, the room alight with the glows and crackles of different spells, but she can't even bring herself to look at him. Hears him awkwardly clear his throat as they find an empty spot over in the corner.

"Which do you —" he starts, but she cuts him off.

"Offensive." That, at least, she's certain of.

There's a drawn out silence. She finally forces herself to glance his way, finding him a tall, lanky shadow a few feet from her, wand loose in his hand.

"Right," he eventually replies. As usual, she can't read his tone. He's flattened it out, like an iron to a shirt. And she's already glanced away, but she sees the shape of him settle into a dueling stance in her peripheral. "When you're ready."

It isn't meant to be condescending, but she chooses to take it as such, eyes tightening as she meets his eyes once more. She uses the anger to fuel her first spell.

"*Stupefy!*" she shouts with a rough flick of her wand, unduly disappointed when his casual *Protego* bats it away.

She sinks into a better stance, facing him head on now. Casts it again, this time with more strength. Again, he deflects it, but he has to move quicker. Seems a little surprised.

She likes the look of that.

"*Stupefy!*" she casts once more, hoping to lull him into a false sense of comfort. Hoping he'll think that's all she intends to work on today. But his protective charm has only just escaped the tip of his wand when, in quick succession, she rattles off, "*Reducto! Flipendo! Levicorpus!*"

Shocked and unprepared, he's only able to deflect the first one, fumbling for a tighter grip on his wand. The second knocks him back, and then he's catapulted several feet into the air with the third, hitting the ground hard on the way down.

A bizarre and rather intense wave of pleasure rips through her as she watches him slowly find his feet, rubbing the back of his head where it hit the stone. A few students turned and watched it happen. Seamus is laughing, and she thinks she sees Ron and Harry exchange smiles.

Maybe they thought she'd go easy on him.

Maybe they thought he still had her wrapped around his finger.

Her thoughts fly unbidden to the night of the Hallow's Eve Ball. To Theo's words. She pushes

them away, fingers going white and bloodless around the base of her wand.

Malfoy is watching her warily, his own stance much more defensive than it had been before. And she sees they've also caught Hestia's attention; she's always on the lookout for situations in which she might need to intervene.

Hermione wonders whether this will be one of them.

But then Malfoy calls out, "*Expelliarmus!*" and her mind goes blank as she blocks it — blocks the second that follows.

"Rictusempra!"

Malfoy blocks that one right back. She grits her teeth. If it worked before, it'll work again.

"Flipendo!" she cries, and then quickly as he blocks it, instinctively blurts out, "*Incarcerous!*"

Hestia's cut gasp from the corner is overshadowed by Malfoy's, and before she realizes what she's done he's writhing on the ground in the ever-tightening bind of her conjured ropes.

She falters. Steps back and lifts her wand to stop it, but Hestia is much faster.

"Finite!"

Malfoy remains panting on the ground for several seconds after the ropes are gone, but Hestia steps in front of him and blocks her view.

"That is not a spell we use during classroom duels. Surely, you are aware of that, Miss Granger."

Hermione can only bring herself to nod. The rest of the classroom has gone silent.

"Fifteen points from Gryffindor," Hestia says, as though it matters. As though anyone still cares about the House Cup. "And you are dismissed for today."

Now *that* — that matters. That is much more meaningful.

She feels her face go hot with shame, swallowing thickly as she turns and collects her book bag. She's careful not to look Malfoy's way as she makes a hasty exit, head down.

What's gotten into her?

She never would've pulled something like that in previous years. Had to duel Malfoy on more than one occasion for classes and always managed to keep her temper in check.

She's being careless. *He* makes her careless. Makes her emotions run too hot and too high, always on the verge of boiling over.

And as she makes her way down the staircases, unsure what to with herself for the next half hour, she's even more convinced that removing him from her life is the only solution. The best option.

She'll cut him out like a cancer if she has to.

They're leaving Potions when it happens.

Despite being off to a particularly bad start, the rest of the day has been good to her. Ron, having loved seeing Malfoy land on his arse, is in high spirits. He's been more open and talkative — he's even made a few jokes.

She wonders if it's possible that Ron's only happy when Malfoy isn't, but doesn't linger on the thought.

As they ascend from the Dungeons, Harry, Ron and Ginny split off to play an informal round of Quidditch before dinner. She decides she'll spend the next hour in the Library — possibly drafting a written apology to Hestia and practicing some spells. She has loads to catch up on, after all.

But as the corridors clear out around her and she rounds a corner into an empty hallway, there's a flash and a little crack and then the tripping jinx has her flat on her face.

She gasps against the flagstone, chin throbbing, and she struggles to find her footing — collect everything she's dropped.

The caster doesn't let her, and the contents of her bag spill out across the floor as another jinx knocks her onto her back.

She fumbles for her wand, casting *Protego* just as a third jinx comes spiraling her way.

Its source steps into view.

“What in *god's name* do you think you're —”

“Don't talk, Granger,” Malfoy snaps. “Just listen.” There's no way she's doing that. She leaps to her feet and hurls a *Flipendo* at him, but he blocks it easily and proceeds to speak around the parade of jinxes that follow, fending them off one by one.

“It's occurred to me that perhaps you just don't really have an outlet for all of...” he pauses to gesture at her as a whole, “*this*,” and then he ducks when she launches another *Incarcerous* his way. He clearly hasn't learned from last time.

She can't believe he has the nerve to attack her over a petty classroom duel. Opens her mouth to tell him such as she launches more hexes.

“I can't *believe* you—”

His *Flipendo* catches her by surprise and she stumbles back several feet with the force of it.

“I said listen, Granger.” He throws another, and she almost doesn't have time to block. “Because I think we've stumbled onto something brilliant here.”

A hex is halfway out her mouth when his words register. “I...” she shifts, wand pointed at him, “excuse me?”

“This,” he drawls, gesturing between them as though it's obvious. “It's clear. You need this.”

“*Excuse me?*” she says again, with more force this time.

But instead of answering, he tosses aside his own book bag and splays his arms wide. “Go ahead, Granger. Have at me.”

Her brows knit themselves together with enough pressure to give her a headache. “I...*what*...”

“Take out your anger. Let’s duel,” he announces, not a drop of hesitation in his voice. “Clearly, you need a way to rid yourself of all the rage you’ve built up towards me. We won’t get anywhere until you do. So do it, Granger. Be rid of it. I’m right here.” He spreads his arms wider.

“You...” She huffs incredulously. “You’re *joking*.” A fraction of her brain has zeroed-in on the words ‘*we*’ and ‘*anywhere*’ and proceeds to overanalyze them into oblivion, because Malfoy seems to somehow think they can get past this. Get past what he did.

“I’m not,” he says flatly, and there’s a challenge in his eyes.

That addictive, daring flare she can never seem to resist.

But — no. *No*. She’s decided.

Decided.

“Leave me alone, Malfoy,” she forces out. Struggles to turn away and rip her bag back up off the floor, casting an *Accio* to collect all that’s spilled.

“Coward,” he calls after her as she starts to walk.

She’s surprised how naturally it comes out. “*Fuck you*.” And she doesn’t look back, picking up her pace, acutely aware of his doing the same.

Another tripping jinx skids past her ankles — an intentional miss, but enough to make her gasp. She tosses a bewildered, furious glance over her shoulder as he casts another and then she breaks into a run, because she can’t do this. They can’t do this. He’s not going to do this. Not again. *No*.

Breath coming in short little puffs, she sprints around another deserted corner, desperate to escape.

“*Alohamora!*” she hisses at the first door she sees, yanking it open and throwing herself inside without realizing just how close behind her Malfoy really is.

He bursts into the disused classroom before she can lock it behind her, and all she can think is, *Idiot, idiot, you’re an idiot, Hermione.*

She’s trapped.

She backs against the far wall next to a pile of broken desks, wand out and trembling. “Leave me alone,” she snaps again, surprised by the level of fear in her voice.

Malfoy locks the door behind them wordlessly — wandlessly, standing tall and foreboding in front of her only exit. “No,” he says, and nothing more.

Then it’s only spells.

One after another after another, over and over, back and forth.

He comes at her with an arsenal of tricky little hexes she’s never seen before and she’s forced to creatively adapt, heart pounding in her chest as the already impossible situation escalates beyond belief.

The room glows with the lights of their spells, blue and violet and red, the ones that miss knocking into walls and breaking glass.

She can hardly believe this is happening. Can hardly believe his nerve.

Bastard.

“Bastard!” she screams aloud, hitting him with a rather powerful *Stupefy* square in the chest. He gasps and stumbles back but recovers quickly, responding in turn with a *Rictusempra* so unbearable she doubles over.

Little by little, the distance between them closes, spells growing brighter and louder as their targets converge. They’re screaming obscenities at one another and using the worst spells they know — all the ones short of lethal — and when she hears the word ‘*Mudblood*,’ she fucking loses it.

“*Expelliarmus!*” she cries.

They’re only two feet apart. And as his wand flies off to the side, she tosses hers away and charges forth, palms shooting out in front of her to shove him back hard.

Oh no... she realizes too late.

Because she’s just made this physical and she isn’t sure how he’ll—

Malfoy shoves her right back, hands hot for once as they close around her shoulders and force her away. She staggers, aghast, then comes charging back again with renewed fury, shoving and clawing at him as he blocks her little assaults.

“Feel better, Granger?” he baits, yanking at her wrists.

She lets loose a little shriek and rips an arm free, unable to stop herself before her palm connects hard with the smooth plane of his face.

The slap echoes.

She gasps at herself. Shrinks back.

And Malfoy fixes her with the darkest glare she thinks she’s ever seen, letting out a little hiss through his teeth. Her pulse hiccups at the sight.

Next she knows, he’s coming at her fast, and she’s backpedaling, and he has her arms in his bruising grip all at once and then he’s shoving her back so hard she slams into an old, creaking bureau. Knocks a drawer loose.

Her hips throb.

He takes hold of her again, crowding into her space and throwing her back against the wood once — twice more. “This what you fucking *want*, Granger? Yeah?” A third time. “*Is it?*”

She shoves at him, panicking — waiting for him to actually hit her. Hurt her. *Really* hurt her. Her nails pierce what flesh she manages to grab onto.

“Tell me you hate me,” he seethes, inches from her face, ripping her clawing hands away and holding them by the forearms in a vise. He gives her a rough shake. “*Huh?* Tell me. Fucking tell me.”

“I hate you!” she splutters, tears pricking at her eyes, anger boiling in her chest. She’s — she’s *furious*, she’s livid — she’s...confused — she’s so many things, so many fucking things at once.

“Again!” he demands with another shake, hot breath whipping against her face. “Say it again!”

“I hate you!”

“Yeah?”

“Yes!”

“Tell me!”

“I HATE YOU!” she scream, beating her trapped fists as best she can against his panting chest. “I hate you for what you did! I hate you for using me like that! Using Ron like that! I hate you for making me think I could trust you! *I hate you!*”

“Good!” he roars, and then as the echoes of their shouts dissipate there’s an unbearably tense moment of silence.

Her eyes flicker, terrified and furious and confused, between both of his, and his bruising grip on her forearms doesn’t ease up. He pants like a bull down into her face, sweat beading on his brow. She smells that peppermint...

His mouth lands on hers like he means to fuse it to her. Slams down hard and knocks their teeth together, noses colliding, foreheads meeting. She lets out this cut little gasp, but all that does is open her mouth to him and then his tongue is sliding in.

And it takes about three seconds for the alarm bells to shut off — for her to push back against him, lips closing over his — kissing back, *fighting* back.

He frees her arms with a low groan and instantly she’s tangling her hands in his hair. His own hands roam, one diving low to hitch up her thigh — hook it around his waist, the way he seems to like it — the other coming to clasp around her throat, and that faint voice in her head that’s reminding her how much she *absolutely shouldn’t be fucking doing this* melts away. Just evaporates.

She makes a desperate sound into his mouth, breaking away just to breathe — but the absence is too painful, too much of a loss, makes her dive back in before her lungs are full. He kisses her hungrily — devours her mouth until her lips are swollen and possibly bleeding and her eyes are clouded over with lust.

She needs to stay away from him. Put a stop to all of this.

Eyes on hers, Malfoy lets go of her throat — sucks a finger into his mouth slowly, languidly, letting her watch. She’s mesmerized. And then he’s bunching up her skirt around her waist and he doesn’t even bother with teasing touches or hesitations. He dips his hand beneath her knickers and thrusts that finger in deep.

Hermione throws her head back with a sharp gasp, skull smacking against one of the bureau’s higher drawers. She doesn’t notice. Doesn’t care.

She needs this more.

“Fuck,” he growls as he hitches her leg up higher, working his finger into a rhythm. “I didn’t think you’d be wet.”

The flush of embarrassment fights with the flush of arousal on her cheeks. She doesn’t dare lift her

head up and look at him. Just watches the ceiling, panting up at it, seeing it sway back and forth with the rocking of her body against his hand.

“You like it when I throw you around, then, yeah Granger?” His voice is husky. Broken by his labored breathing. He adds a second finger and her eyes flutter shut. But then his hand abandons her thigh and finds her throat again. Forces her head up so she’s looking at him. “*Yeah?*” he asks again, eyes burning. His rhythm kicks up a notch.

“Fuck you,” is all she can manage, but he grins unexpectedly. Grins in that way she likes — that crooked, curled-lip, sharp-toothed grin, that one that makes her want to lay down for him, surrender to him, let him do what he will with her.

Malfoy drags her in close, putting his lips at her ear. “That’s the idea.”

“*Prick,*” she breathes, closing her eyes again.

And he curls his fingers inside of her — momentarily hits some delicious spot that sends sparks scattering behind her eyelids.

“There!” she gasps out, hands raking through his hair, eyes snapping back open to find his desperately.

“What?” he pants, and for a moment all the anger — all the roughness is gone from his face.

His fingers go still, right over the spot, then slide away. She hisses. Scrapes her nails down his scalp, whimpering — watching his eyes roll back into his head for the slightest moment. “No, *no!*” She squirms against him. “Go back. Go *back.*”

His fingers move again, almost as though he plans to pull them out. “What are you —”

They graze the spot. She jerks. Shrieks. “There! *Fuck.*” Her head thunks back against the bureau once more and she can’t believe the words coming out of her mouth, but she — she needs...she just...“Right there. Right there,” she pants, over and over, chanting it like a prayer. “*Please.*”

And she feels Malfoy’s fingers go still. Actually feels him piecing it together. Understanding.

In the next instant, he’s all power once again. He’s got control back.

Hand tightening around her throat, his lips return to her ear. “There?” he asks — taunts, his fingers swirling over the spot in a way that makes her see colors. Neon colors. Tracers and lights. Fucking hallucinations.

“Yes!” she gasps out.

His tongue traces the shell of her ear. “Like that?”

She moans loudly. Doesn’t care who hears. “*Yes, like that...*”

He pulls his fingers out immediately. The loss is physically painful. And when she throws her head back up to protest, she finds him licking them clean and forgets what she planned to say...

Then, all at once, he’s yanking at her hips. Twisting her. Demanding. “Turn around.”

“What?”

“Turn the fuck around.” He yanks one hip so hard she loses balance and swivels, front forced

against the bureau instead.

She hears him undoing his belt buckle. Sucks in a sharp breath.

And then she feels the hard length of him as he crowds his warm body up against hers — but before he does anything else, his chin comes to rest on her shoulder, and his left arm slides past her waist into her line of sight.

Panting, she stares down at it as he rolls up his sleeve, voice vibrating against her. “Do you see that?” he asks.

“Yes,” she breathes — she does. She sees the clean skin and the faint pink scar where she sewed him back up. Sees the slightly paler shade of it, indicating there’s nothing beneath.

But her eyes start to flutter shut when his mouth finds her ear once more, tongue toying with the lobe as he nibbles at it. “Here’s the problem, Granger,” he says, and she leans her head back so it falls onto his chest, the ache in her lower abdomen turning slowly to a burn. “You took that away — all that pain, all of that hate. But once that was gone, so were you.”

She goes abruptly still.

And even as his hands start to lift the back of her skirt — drag her knickers down her thighs — she can only listen.

“Do you know what it’s like to feel empty? To feel nothing?”

Yes. She does. But she doesn’t answer. Can’t.

“That’s what you did to me.” His voice is shifting from a calm murmur into a growl. “You took away everything. I couldn’t feel anything. No pain, no you, nothing.” And then a cold laugh falls from his lips. “And I’m sorry, but I just don’t accept that.”

He’s inside of her before she has any way to prepare for it.

A cut cry leaps past her lips and she bucks over the edge of the bureau, shocked at the intrusion, at the angle — at his words. All of it.

His hands curl around the fronts of her thighs and pry them further apart. Instantly, as a result, he sinks deeper, and she gasps as a stab of pleasure shoots through her. As that throb starts to squeeze the good nerves.

“I don’t,” he continues, as though she can follow along. As though he isn’t slowly fucking her against a bureau. “I refuse. I fucking *need* you.”

Her fingers curl into fists against the wood, eyes squeezed shut.

“F-Fuck you,” she manages feebly.

And suddenly he’s doubled that slow, deep pace, thrusting hard into her so she cries out. Gasps with each surge, her breaths coming in a cut staccato. Still, she tries to talk herself through it. Tries to ignore that steadily building tension between her legs that each of those thrusts is threatening to snap.

“How...how do I know — *fuck* — how...should — should I be — oh, *god* — should I be...be expecting Ron to come in—”

Malfoy drives in deeper than ever — a hard, punishing thrust that rips a shriek from her throat. “Don’t fucking talk about him. Not right now.” And his hand slides up and around her body to rest on her throat again. “Not while I’m doing this to you.”

And she’s effectively silenced. Can’t manage anything more as his steady rhythm starts to slip away — grows haphazard and desperate as he starts to lose control. She’s right there with him. Her legs are shaking — threatening to buckle.

“Tell me you understand,” he gasps against her shoulder, hips grinding hard into hers, that ache so rich and full between her legs. “Don’t take it away,” and now he sounds as though he’s pleading, chest rising and falling fast against her back. “Don’t. Don’t take away the only thing I can feel. The only thing I *want* to feel.”

She opens her mouth to warn him, because she’s going to fall off that edge. Tumble over it and into the waves of ecstasy below. If he hits that spot one more —

Malfoy gives a furious gasp, grinding out, “*I’m fucking in love with you.*”

And the orgasm rips through her like a tsunami.

Has no regard for the reeling state of her mind or the sudden throb in her heart. Just ricochets with all its electricity and all its gelatinous pleasure through every vessel and vein in her body.

Almost as though it’s contagious, it hits Malfoy next, and she feels him tense up against her — feels his thrusts falter — and then he’s groaning into her shoulder, biting down as his own release battles its way out.

In the silence that follows, they’re left trembling. His breaths are short and cold against her clammy skin. Her knees are wobbling.

She swallows the knot in her throat.

Her voice is hoarse.

“What did you say?”

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr: <https://onyx-and-elm.tumblr.com/>

Chapter Notes

Hello, loves.

First, thank you so much for your marvelous patience over the past few weeks. It's been a bit shit, to say the least, but I'm so honored by your comments and reviews and well-wishes and so blessed you've all chosen to stick it out.

Second, this chapter is short. I'm sorry. But it needed to be short. It demanded to be short. I physically could not force it to extend another sentence.

But third (and best), my updates are going to be back in control and I'm so, so excited for where this is going!

I love you all. Thank you so much.

February 1st, 1999

backpedal
back-ped-al
verb

to renege on, back down on, fail to honor, shift one's ground, take back, reconsider, withdraw,
abandon

It's the definition she sees in his eyes the moment she turns around.

A blind panic. A bottomless vulnerability.

She only catches a glimpse of it, because now he won't look at her. Can't, it seems. He zips his trousers and tucks in his shirt with trembling fingers, gaze fixed firmly on the flagstone between her feet.

"You should go to dinner," he says in a flat voice. "They'll come looking for you."

It's only when she tastes blood that she realizes she's been biting down on her tongue. Her pulse is staggering its way back to normal and the flush in her cheeks and down her neck is hot — sweltering.

More than anything, she wants to open her mouth and dare him to say it again. Dare him to own up to it. Deal with the consequences of it. Accept it.

But not since Second Year — not since he crashed his broom chasing after Harry and the Snitch, not since he looked up, bruised and battered, at his father in the stands — has she seen him look so vulnerable.

So like a child.

And it makes her bite down harder.

Just this once, Malfoy, she thinks as he smooths his tousled hair and paces awkward lines, no doubt bracing for her reaction.

For a fight.

Just this one last favor. This once.

She clears her throat. Sees him tense at the sound of it. But she just straightens her skirt and goes to find her discarded wand.

He glances up at last as she heaves her bag onto her shoulder.

And all she can manage to say is, “Right, then,” almost inaudibly.

He blinks.

She leaves.

For the entirety of that evening, Hermione feels as though she’s been dropped ten meters onto her head.

She can’t form coherent thoughts. Doesn’t really want to, to be honest. It seems as though it would be physically painful to try.

She just keeps hearing his voice. That low, familiar, breathless husk.

Saying words she doesn’t understand.

Saying words that shouldn’t be said.

How dare he? How dare he let such careless, violent words come out of his mouth? Words with such dire consequences.

Then again, Malfoy’s never been good with consequences.

She can’t even allow herself to hear the words in her head. Truly, she almost believes if she manages not to think about it, it’ll be like it never happened. Like he never said it.

She’s practically a ghost at dinner. Doesn’t eat. Doesn’t speak. Ginny can obviously tell something is amiss, but she’s both smart and kind enough not to draw any more attention to it.

That isn’t to say no one else notices. Both Harry and Ron raise wary eyebrows at her on separate occasions, but she manages to pass it off as embarrassment. Humiliation at her dismissal from class this morning.

She wonders if she’ll ever get to stop lying to them.

The logical part of her brain warns her not to pretend she has no choice.

The other part is busy retracing every moment spent in that disused classroom.

She toys with the idea of a sip of pumpkin juice as she remembers the heat of his breath on the back of her neck. Tips the goblet past her lips but never manages to swallow.

Spits it out across her empty plate instead.

Oh, no...

““Mione?”” everyone seems to splutter at once.

Her hand trembles as she hurries to vanish the mess with her wand. “Sorry, sorry,” she babbles. “Choked. Just choked. I — erm. I think I’d, erm, best...best be off to bed. Yes. Bed. Erm. Goodnight.”

Lying. Always lying.

But she can’t go to bed. Not when she’s been so *stupid*.

For what must be the hundredth time, she turns her back on the confused faces of her friends and hurries from the Great Hall.

“Fool,” she mutters to herself as she storms toward the Dungeons. “Bloody, bloody *idiot*.”

She walks right past Slytherin.

That’s the last thing she needs in this moment.

No, it’s the Potions classroom she wants.

Slughorn is still at dinner, elbows-deep in stew and sausage. He’ll be none the wiser. And she takes a moment to convince herself that he wouldn’t mind — seeing as this is an emergency.

But, oh, to imagine what her First Year self would think if she could see her right now.

“Alohomora.”

She shuts the heavy door quietly behind herself and casts a charm to light the many candles.

If she had time to stop and think about it, she might’ve come to realize that — at the very least — this served as a distraction from other, more...uncertain thoughts.

But her soul focus in this moment is the potion she’s not even sure she remembers how to brew.

The other Gryffindor girls always used to call it “Last Resort Liqueur.”

Both for its sickly sweet taste and its connotations.

“Absolute *moron*,” she hisses as she gathers what she hopes are the correct ingredients.

She made a promise to herself years and years ago — ages before she was sexually active — that she would never forget to perform the contraceptive charm.

Clearly, twelve-year-old Hermione had no idea what it’d be like to be caught up in the moment.

Caught up in...Malfoy.

A shiver mixed with the slightest twinge of despair rides up her spine. She shakes her head free of the thought of him and tries to concentrate on brewing.

One sprig of Jewelweed, or two? Half a teaspoon of Honeywater?

Is there supposed to be any Honeywater at all?

She starts a fire under a cauldron and begins adding ingredients to the best of her knowledge. Hopes to base it off its scent — to bring it as close as she can to what she remembers from those few practice brews.

At the back of her mind, she's picturing Madam Pomfrey's shrewd gaze. Thinking back to her lecture.

A lecture which now seems justified.

Bloody Malfoy...

It's his fault, too. Not entirely, though at least partially. But — no, it isn't smart to think about him.

Her curls begin to twist and frizz as they always do, steam billowing up in her face. A powerful, molasses-like scent starts to fill the classroom.

What's the worst that can happen if she's gotten it wrong, she wonders?

Nausea? Fever? A change of hair color?

It can't be anything compared to the incident with Millicent Bulstrode's cat...

No, the worst it can do is not work. And by god, she needs it to work. She can't — she can't even *fathom* what that would...

That would just

That would just complicate...

That would —

Bloody hell, don't think about it.

Before she's even certain it's finished, and certainly before it's had the chance to cool, she ladles a cup full of the dark violet brew into a flask and downs it in one go.

The heat burns her throat, the sweetness itching across her tongue and making her stomach clench.

She grimaces. Chokes down the last of it and then begins to cough.

Better this, than —

Stop thinking about it!

A warm pulse engulfs her stomach. She glances down and catches a glimpse of the violet glow before another cough wracks through her chest.

Thank *god*.

She tries to heave a sigh of relief, but manages only to cough some more. She coughs until her eyes water, face buried in her sleeve as she waves her wand around in the other hand, clearing away the evidence.

At first, she thinks it's the flasks and jars of ingredients causing the raucous. Thinks they're responsible for the thuds and crashes she's suddenly hearing, perhaps as they hit the backs of the cupboards they're returning to.

It's only when her wand hand goes still and the coughing subsides that she realizes the noise is elsewhere.

It's out in the corridor.

She can hear it through the Potions classroom door. Rapid footsteps — several pairs, by the sound of it, with different, uneven strides.

And shouting.

Hermione goes very still. Holds her breath to listen.

For a long moment, she's too confused to manage anything else.

Then she slowly manages to make her way towards the door, pressing her ear against the thick, rough wood.

“No! *NO!*” she hears — it's a boy's voice, though she can't tell whose. It echoes off the walls, and she thinks she can hear his feet scuffling on the floor. “You can't! It isn't *legal*, you *can't!*”

“*Stop!*” comes from somewhere else, and she almost gives her ear a splinter as she adjusts to hear it better. “STOP IT!” That voice.

She knows that voice.

Pansy.

“*Stop it!*”

Open the door, Hermione, a foreign voice inside her head commands.

Like a threat. Like a warning.

Open the door.

She steps out into chaos.

Aurors.

Aurors are everywhere, charging through the Dungeons corridors in their thick, black robes towards the Slytherin common room — and the ones going back the other way have students in their grasps.

Again, she finds herself frozen. She presses herself back against the Potions door to avoid a trampling, eyes locking on Pansy at the far end where she struggles in the grip of burly, grunting man. Pansy is scratching and spitting and cursing and altogether putting up quite an admirable fight — but Hermione can see her wand in the man's grip, and ultimately he manages to put her in a full body bind.

“This is absolutely *unacceptable*, Mr. Dawlish! I *insist* you leave at once!” McGonagall's familiar voice booms across the corridor, and Hermione's head snaps in her direction.

She's following hot on the heels of a purposeful looking man Hermione vaguely recognizes as

Dawlish. And she's wondering why she's —

Why is that name...?

“Oh, god.”

It's happening.

Just like Theo said it would.

“I have Ministry orders, Headmaster. It's in your best interest to stay out of our way,” the man Dawlish snaps, the hem of his robes whispering against Hermione's shins as he storms past.

Across the way, Millicent Bulstrode is being dragged through the hidden barrier of the Slytherin common room, screaming bloody murder. “No! NO! What did I do? Tell me what I did! What did I *do!*?”

Over and over, Hermione can hear the same phrase being barked out by different Aurors.

“Adrian Pucey, you are hereby charged as a supporter to the Death Eater cause...”

“...as an accomplice to the Death Eater cause...”

“...as a bystander to the Death Eater cause...”

“...your sentence is to be reevaluated...”

“...pending new evidence...”

“...solicitors have been notified.”

“...surrender your wand...”

“Pansy Parkinson, you are hereby charged — ”

“Blaise Zabini, you are hereby charged — ”

“Millicent Bulstrode — ”

“Theodore Nott — ”

“Draco Malfoy — ”

Hermione's breath catches in her throat. Her legs lock. Her mouth goes dry.

“...you are hereby charged as an accomplice and a weaponized agent to the Death Eater cause. Your sentence is to be reevaluated, pending new evidence. Your solicitor has been notified. Surrender your wand.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

February 2nd, 1999

It's two in the morning.

She's been sitting in McGonagall's office for more than four hours, sipping long-cold tea from a cup that clinks whenever her shaking hands put it back on the saucer.

She'd been honest with Draco and Theo about the possibility of this — about the viability of what was claimed in the Prophet. Logical Hermione had been forthright that it could be done.

But she's come to realize that logical Hermione and the rest of herself are disjointed. Out of step. *Separate*.

And the rest of herself never saw this coming.

"What can I do?" she asks for the hundredth time, voice a dull croak.

McGonagall sits tiredly in Dumbledore's old chair, still pouring over the countless indictments she'd been handed by Dawlish shortly before he incarcerated a good fourth of her student body. "You can get some rest," McGonagall says, voice somehow both stern and compassionate — an undertone of exhaustion.

"I *can't*—"

"Miss Granger..."

"I just stood there, Headmaster." Hermione sets down her teacup on the edge of the desk. Wrings her hands. "I just stood there. I *watched*. I can't—"

"I know how much you care for Mr. Malfoy—"

"All of them," she deadpans, unable to control it. Admitting it both out loud and to herself for the first time. "I care about all of them."

McGonagall quirks a sage brow.

"I need to know what I can do."

"As I said, Miss Granger, you can get some much-needed rest—"

"Headmaster—"

"*Much-needed*," McGonagall interrupts, raising her voice as she stands, "so that you will have your wits about you when we go to the Ministry tomorrow."

Hermione blinks. Blinks twice.

"We?"

“Yes,” she says curtly, vanishing both their teacups — a clear indication of dismissal. “As their Headmaster, I cannot function as a character witness. You, on the other hand...”

“Yes,” she blurts immediately. “Yes, absolutely. I’ll do it.”

“Think carefully on it, Miss Granger. Think on the consequences and the cost before you fully commit yourself.”

“I know—”

“It will be exhausting. Painful. Alienating. A media circus, if you will — and your own character will be called into question—”

“Headmaster, I want to do it.”

McGonagall clutches her shoulder gently. “*Think* on it,” she says. “I insist. And meet me here at nine o’clock, if you’re truly up to it.”

Hermione bites back on anything further she planned to say. Makes herself nod. Makes herself stand. Her legs are numb from so many hours in the chair, and a steady ache has built up at the base of her skull.

“Thank you, Headmaster,” she murmurs, heading for the door. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Think on it.”

The dormitory is quiet but Ginny is awake. Of course she is.

“What are you doing?” she asks through the parted, crimson curtains of her four-poster, watching as Hermione lays out her nicest blazer. Her nicest skirt.

“I’m going to the Ministry in a few hours,” she says quietly. At least she can tell Ginny the truth.

“Mione, there’s nothing you can—”

“You don’t know that.”

Ginny sighs. Sweeps the curtains aside and comes to sit on the corner of Hermione’s bed. Hermione is brushing nonexistent lint from the pencil skirt, pointedly avoiding her eyes.

“I thought you made a decision,” says Ginny.

Hermione swallows thickly. Unfolds and refolds the skirt.

“I thought you decided you were done. No more. For your own sake—”

“He said he loved me.”

It comes out in a rush. A breathless, almost incoherent whisper. It’s the first time she’s allowed herself to acknowledge it, and hearing it from her own mouth is like a weight dropping into her stomach.

Ginny goes very still. Hermione sees her mouth open and close once or twice from her periphery, but can’t bear to look at her head on.

“...When?” she finally manages to ask.

Hermione clears her throat. Starts refolding the blazer instead. “A few hours ago.”

Ginny glances down at her hands. Up at the ceiling. Sighs.

“Git,” she says after a moment, and Hermione’s eyes lock on her at last. Ginny shrugs. “I mean...it just — that just complicates *everything*.”

Hermione nods numbly. Feels a small pulse of satisfaction at hearing her own thoughts validated.

“And his timing is rubbish.”

She manages a weak smile.

Ginny seems to hesitate before asking what she does next. “Does this mean you’ve forgiven him?”

Hermione glances away. Catches a glimpse of the broken pendant, sitting lonesome on her nightstand. “No...” she murmurs. “No, I don’t forgive him.” She swallows another knot in her throat. “I don’t think I’ll ever *truly* forgive him. For any of it.”

“...But you love him.”

She forces herself to meet Ginny’s eyes, even as her words stab, gouge, flay something deep inside.

“I don’t know what I feel.”

Ginny’s gaze is sober. “I think you do.”

Hermione shakes her head. “Stop it, Gin.”

“It’s the tru—”

“*Stop.*”

Ginny’s lips snap shut. She gives her a tucked, doubtful not-quite smile. “Okay,” she says, and she slips off the edge of the bed. Heads back to her own.

Hermione puffs out the breath she didn’t know she was holding.

“Family name?”

Hermione tugs nervously on the hem of her blazer, standing slightly behind McGonagall as she produces a list and retrieves her spectacles — clears her throat.

“Accrington, Bainbridge, Berrow, Bulstrode, Carter, Cowley, Cram, Davis, Dedworth, Evercreech, Goyle, Greengrass — both of them — Lofthouse, Malfoy, Meads, Montague, Nott, Parkinson, Phipps, Pucey, Rowland, Sykes, Thatcham, Whitehead and Zabini.”

About halfway through the list, Hermione starts to panic. There are more than she realized — and some of the names she doesn’t even recognize.

How does she defend someone she doesn’t know?

Think on it, McGonagall had said...

The flustered clerk is struggling to take down all the names, and McGonagall seems to be making a point of reading them as swiftly as possible, perhaps to solidify the ridiculousness of the situation.

“And what is it you’ll be needing?” he barks, aggravated, shaking out his quill hand once he’s finished.

“Hearing dates, full lists of charges, and we will require visitor badges as well.”

The clerk squints at her. “Visitor badges to see which?”

“All,” McGonagall says primly.

His lip curls up in irritation. “I’m fairly certain that won’t be—”

“Give the Minister my name,” she snaps. “He will authorize it, I assure you.”

That’s possibly the only thing working in their favor. Kingsley as Minister. Still, there isn’t much he can do to override a Wizengamot decision — nothing, in fact. These trials will determine everything.

She doesn’t realize she’s biting at her nails until a cuticle tears and bleeds. She has to force herself to fold her hands behind her back.

The clerk leads them grudgingly through the atrium, handing them visitor badges, and they pack into an already crowded elevator.

But she isn’t prepared for —

“Miss Granger?”

“It *is* — it’s her!”

“Hermione Granger, bless my soul — it’s an honor.”

From all sides, witches and wizards extend their arms to shake her hand, even as McGonagall does what little she can to ward them off.

By the time they step out, she’s dazed and shaken up, glancing back over her shoulder and staring, incredulous, as the elevator zooms backward and down.

“I didn’t realize...” she mumbles, but McGonagall is already leading her away.

“Try to relax.”

They’re on one of the lowest floors of the Ministry — the temporary holding cells; a large, ward-guarded amalgamation of cells with capacity enough to contain all those awaiting a trial.

It’s dark and cold — and it reminds her too much of the Department of Mysteries. The black tile floor, the dim glow. She shivers and earns a concerned glance from McGonagall.

“Here we are,” grunts the clerk, unlocking a door that leads to a long, multi-celled corridor.

“Which cells?” asks McGonagall.

“I’m certain you’ll figure it out.”

He and McGonagall exchange glares as he locks the door behind them, and then — for a long

moment — it's silence.

McGonagall squares her shoulders. "I think it's best I let each of them know our intentio—"

Hermione has already started off down the hallway. Hears McGonagall sigh. "Miss Accrington?" she calls out and begins her work, but Hermione is already so far down the corridor she barely hears.

She casts *Lumos*, repeatedly swaying her wand from side to side and occasionally catching sight of a squinting, familiar face — but not the familiar face. Not the one she needs to see.

Her pulse is gaining speed, her breaths coming in short, nervous puffs, and the light of her wand is fractured by the trembling of her hand. She hadn't realized until now how desperately she needs to —

"Granger?"

It's Zabini.

She cuts her brisk pace short so suddenly she almost trips, rushing to the bars his arms are dangling lazily through.

"Are you alright?" she blurts instinctively, dimming the light when he grimaces into it.

He quirks an eyebrow. "As good as can be expected." Then he gestures limply at her. "The fuck are you doing here? And with...is that McGonagall I heard?" He nods toward the far end of the hall she's come from.

"I — yes, she's...we're here to...well—"

"Help?" And his tone is so disbelieving — so sarcastic, it's almost tragic.

"Yes," she says, watching his face screw up in confusion.

"McGonagall, I get — but *you*..." He hesitates, and then a moment later his expression wipes clean. "Oh. Right. You're here for Malfoy."

She shakes her head. "I'm here for all of you."

"Don't have to lie to spare *my* feelings, Granger, trust me—"

"*I'm not lying*," she snaps, suddenly exasperated. Overwhelmed. "I'm here for all of you. As a character witness."

Zabini stares at her a long while, expressionless. McGonagall's distant voice calling out names fills the silence.

"Why?" he asks after what feels like more than a full minute.

She adjusts her grip on her wand. "Because," she answers feebly.

"Because why?"

"Because."

And then she lowers her wand, and he's bathed in shadow once more.

“Sit tight,” she says, and then she’s back to her search. Back to pacing a furious, nervous path down the corridor, wand whipping left and right.

She wants to call out to him — but she’s terrified her voice might crack. Terrified to show him just how deeply unsettled and unhinged she is by all of this.

She needs to keep up a front. To stay strong.

For all their sakes, and for her own.

She passes cells of prisoners from elsewhere — older witches and wizards who look as though they’ve been there a long while. Passes what she thinks might be a body. Many of the cells are filled with more than one, due to overcrowding.

Her wand hesitates on a pair huddled in the back corner, and it takes her a second to realize that it’s Pansy.

Pansy with...

It’s Theo. His head is in her lap — unconscious, or so it seems from the bleeding gash at his temple. And she’s just...she’s stroking his hair. Murmuring to him.

Doesn’t even seem to register Hermione’s presence.

It’s almost hard to look away.

But she forces herself to move on.

Before long, it seems as though there are hardly any cells left — and she starts to panic. Picks up her pace, so accustomed to finding each cell empty or filled with someone else that when at last her *Lumos* ricochets off of blinding platinum, she almost walks right past it.

Skids. Freezes.

“Draco...?”

His head whips up from where he’s seated against the wall, and he stares at her through a black eye.

“Granger — ” Seeing him jump to his feet in the blink of an eye almost shatters her resolve.

“*Merlin*, what are you doing? Is it even safe for you to be here?”

His hands — knuckles bruised — curl around the bars and she finds herself instinctively meeting him in the middle, wrapping her own hands around them beneath his.

“Who did that to you?” she breathes, lifting one finger to point to his eye.

“Fucking Dawlish — does it fucking matter? Answer my question, Granger.”

“What question?”

“Is it *safe* for you to be here?”

Her chest throbs painfully because she thinks it might actually be worry in his eyes, and that isn’t — that can’t —

God.

“It’s safe,” she murmurs. “I’m here on your behalf.”

Draco shakes his head instantly. “Don’t. I already know what you’re thinking, and don’t do it. Don’t.”

Her brows knit together. “What do you mean, *don’t*?”

“I mean *don’t*, Granger — Merlin’s fucking tit. Don’t be stupid.”

If there was any reaction she’d been expecting, it wasn’t this. “I’m your only option for a fair trial —”

“It won’t be a fair trial. With or without you. No matter what.” His voice is harsh — tense. A rush of words that don’t make sense. “I’m warning you, Granger, don’t fuck with these people. Don’t get on their bad side—”

“What are you *talking* about?” she demands. “*Who*? The CFJ? They’re just a—”

“They aren’t *just* anything, Granger.”

“What are you—”

“Marcus Flint is dead.” His voice echoes off the walls. Echoes into the ensuing silence.

Her fingers flex — clammy with sweat — against the bars.

“What?” she breathes.

“He’s dead. He was exonerated, and the next day he was dead. Suicide. Sound likely?”

“What are you—”

“His solicitor is dead, too.”

“Stop...”

“*Dead*. Catastrophic Floo accident. Again — sound likely?”

“Stop it, Draco — how do you even—”

“My solicitor came by early this morning. Told me he was dropping out. Had to. Fears for his life. I’m warning you right now, Granger. Anyone who gets involved ends up dead.”

“How can that—”

“*It doesn’t matter!*” His sudden shout — the way he yanks on the bars — makes her stumble back a step. “It doesn’t fucking matter. You have to leave. Get whoever came with you and fucking *leave*. Now.”

“I’m not going—”

His hand lashes out from between the bars and snatches her arm in a vise. “*Hermione*, I’m fucking *begging* you.” His unswollen eye is glassy in the partial light of her wand. Bloodshot. Crazy. “I’m begging you. Please.” He squeezes her arm, and for the briefest of seconds, his thumb swipes

across her skin — a caress. “Please. Go.”

Her breath hitches.

“*Go.*”

Chapter End Notes

<https://onyx-and-elm.tumblr.com/>

Chapter Notes

I can't apologize enough. Thank you all for your endless patience.

February 8th, 1999

“Well...” Seamus pauses for effect. “There’s finally some peace and quiet around here.”

Scattered laughs. A few looks tossed at the near-empty Slytherin table. Hermione catches herself grinding her teeth, hand tightening on her quill. She struggles to keep her eyes down — keep her focus.

She doesn’t have time for any of it.

In the deceptively long elevator ride out of the Ministry’s holding cells, amongst McGonagall’s pinched silence and her own vacant state, it’d become abundantly clear there was only one thing to do.

What she does best.

Malfoy’s warning hadn’t gone unheard. But it certainly hasn’t earned the response he was hoping for.

Because she isn’t intimidated. Isn’t scared.

She’s furious.

At the Ministry. At Seamus’s smirking face. And at him.

Because how dare he ask so much of her? How dare he ask her to act so against her nature? So against everything she stands for and believes in...

Asking her to sit this out is no different than asking an apple to taste like a peach.

So she’s elbows-deep in research. Isn’t even trying to hide it from the rest of the Gryffindor table, though they seem not to notice or care. Not enough to actually put together what she’s reading and subsequently writing down.

As far as she knows, all they see is Hermione Granger attending to her studies. Like always.

Only Ginny knows that it’s Slytherin family lineages she’s taking note of. Historical events involving the Parkinson and Nott families she’s committing to memory.

Only Ginny knows what’s filling the bottom drawer of her nightstand.

Ginny who, for the first time since that morning at the Three Broomsticks, looks unsettled. Looks as though she regrets encouraging and consoling her.

Hermione wonders if she thought it was just a phase.

The corner of Harry's Daily Prophet keeps flashing with Malfoy's face — an unwelcome distraction. He glares out from the black and white at the world. At her.

Almost too perfectly. Almost as though he's saying, "Don't you dare. Don't you dare do this."

But the danger hasn't come into her mind even once since he brought it up. Rather, her head is full to bursting with the intellectual challenge of it. Of defending the products of generations of zealots and murderers.

Of making them look redeemable, even when their family ties stain them black.

Nott is particularly challenging. His ancestors have been tangled up in enough genocides and cover-ups to make Muggle mass murderers blush.

But Hermione doesn't waste time. With the trials looming just days away, she's made a solemn promise to lock old Hermione away. Safe, sensible Hermione.

And the moment she'd arrived back at Hogwarts from the Ministry, she'd split off wordlessly from McGonagall. Found the first, most pliable-looking Slytherin she could — one of the few who remained — and bribed her with Galleons, forbidden spells and a year's worth of completed essays.

In exchange, Hermione now has a foot-tall stack of pastel and neon-colored journals hidden in her nightstand, one of them violently and familiarly purple.

She studies them each night before bed like bibles. Doesn't stop to let herself feel ashamed. Feel perverse. Like she's intruding, even as she is.

A necessary evil.

She needs to know these witches and wizards better than her best friends if she's to have any hopes of defending them.

Some don't have journals, presenting complications — but those select few also weren't sentenced to psychiatric treatment, making them easier to defend in the first place.

And then there's Malfoy.

His high profile is one of the most powerful factors working against him. Almost no one would hesitate to take a stab at the Malfoy name if given the opportunity. It's his defense that requires the greatest attention to detail — and yet, even without being there, he somehow manages to make things harder still by impairing her focus. Constantly. She catches herself lingering on his entries. Entries totally irrelevant to his trial, but entirely relevant to that throb in her chest.

Diary,

My fucking Amortentia smells like flimsy hot chocolate now and I'm not fucking okay with it.

-

Diary,

Viktor Krum can go fuck himself with his own broom.

-

Diary,

I'm reading fucking Shakeshaft or whatever for indexing purposes. Filing away quotes to insult her with when she says I know nothing about Muggles.

I know fuck all about Muggles.

But I want her to think otherwise.

-

Diary,

Hypothetically speaking, how hard do you think it'd be to convince someone you're no longer a twat?

-

Diary,

She's a cunt.

I think I need her.

...

Merlin, what a cunt.

Her hands are shaking by the time she closes it each night — always the last journal she reads. The hardest one to put down.

And those moments — when her head hits the pillow, just before her eyes close, as she stares at the endless, gruesome red of the curtains —

It's then that she's scared.

““Mione?”

He finds her in the Library, the night before the first set of trials. Zabini's and Pucey's.

Blaise and Adrian, she reminds herself. *Blaise and Adrian*.

She can't use surnames. Not in court. Not if she's trying to humanize them.

“Hi Harry,” she says distractedly, not looking up. Sifting through old Prophet articles. She reads through a paragraph or two before noticing that he hasn't said anything. That he's just lingering there, shifting from foot to foot. It makes her nervous. “What is it?”

“I, erm...” His eyes flit between hers and the floor behind his glasses. “I know what you're doing.”

She bites down on the inside of her cheek. “Well, yes, I’m doing resear—”

“I know you’re defending them.”

A tense silence ensues. They blink at one another, and she believes they’re both entirely aware this will be a defining moment for them. For their friendship. For their future.

“Don’t lie,” he says finally, voice low and quiet.

“I’m not going to lie to you again, Harry.” She’s surprised at the sobriety of her tone. “I don’t see the point.”

“Good.”

She nods. “Good.”

Still, he lingers. She sighs, stirring a few sheets of parchment. “Say what you came here to say.” His fingers twitch at his side. Harry — her Harry, always having such trouble standing still.

“You shouldn’t do this,” is what he manages. What she’s been expecting.

“I know.”

“But you’re still going to…” Not a question.

“Yes.”

Harry clears his throat. Shifts awkwardly and then digs into his pocket. “Right, then. Erm. I’m supposed to read this to you.”

And her expectations fly out the window as she spots all-too-familiar handwriting on the corner of the page he uncrumples. Her mouth runs dry. “What are you —”

“Just remember that I’m not the one saying any of this, yeah? I’m just reading what he wrote.”

Harry doesn’t meet her eyes. His face is colored by a blush, but she can’t tell whether he’s nervous or embarrassed. Can’t focus enough on it to be sure.

He clears his throat again and dives in.

“Read this to her if she decides to be a stubborn little axe wound about things. And for fuck’s sake, Potter, don’t censor anything or she won’t fucking believe you.”

Hermione sucks in a sharp breath.

“Granger, for once in your life don’t be a fucking idiot. Yes, I’m calling you an idiot. You’re an idiot for thinking I’m enough of an idiot to think you’re pliable enough to listen to anyone other than yourself.” Harry struggles with that line. *“And you’re also an idiot for being so fucking stubborn. It’s entirely your fault that I have to involve Saint Fucking Potter. I already know you never do what you’re told. I know you didn’t listen to me. I know you’re going to try to go to the Ministry tomorrow.”*

Do yourself a favor, though, and just try not to be a cunt for two fucking seconds and fucking listen to me.

I’d have sent this directly to you, but I know you’d burn it before you finished it and then what’s the fucking point? I’m trusting Potter — Merlin, what a fucking concept — to force you to listen to

the whole fucking thing. I'm suffering a hand cramp for it, so you're going to suffer too.

This thing? You and me? It's been good, yeah?

I can admit that. I can. I've enjoyed myself. Not to speak for you, but — "Harry's blush deepens considerably — *"judging by the sounds you've made, I'd say you've enjoyed yourself too."*

She flushes to match. Adjusts her posture awkwardly in the library chair.

"Here's the thing though, Granger. We can enjoy it all we want but it still doesn't make us right for each other. And sitting here having nothing to do but think has put a lot of shit in perspective for me. Like, seriously, how many fucking times does catastrophic shit need to happen for us to take the fucking hint? We're volatile. Toxic. Pointless."

Her hands gather into tight fists beneath the table.

"To simplify, this whole thing between us has just been an exercise in self-harm and it isn't fucking worth it. In time, I'm sure you'll come to agree. So I hope this helps free you from this ridiculous notion that you have to defend me. You'll do more harm than good. I've got a new solicitor who comes highly recommended and that's all I need. I don't need you."

She squeezes her eyes shut. Thinks of that jagged scrawl saying exactly the opposite in his journal.

"So please stop sticking your nose where it doesn't belong and stay out of it. Okay? I'm going to pretend you're nodding. Okay. You can stop reading aloud now, Potter, you utter dickh— oh, erm. Right." Harry stops. Winces because he knows he has to meet her eyes.

But she can feel it. The expression on her face has warped to blank, her stare passive. For a moment, Harry looks relieved, but then seems to realize this is all the more concerning.

"I'm sorry, 'Mione," he says. "I know it was harsh and most of it was unnecessary, but that's Malfoy for— well, I mean. Anyway, I'm sorry. But I do think he's right."

She blinks at him. "Do you?"

"Only about not going to the Ministry," he rushes. "Not about you being a waste of time or any of —"

"Thank you, Harry," she says flatly, looking back down at her research.

"Mione—"

"Oh, on your way out..." She scribbles quickly on a spare scrap of parchment. Folds it and holds it out to him. "Would you mind taking this with you, please? To send back?" Somehow, miraculously, she manages to keep her face entirely blank. Her voice toneless.

Harry looks at her like she's grown a second head. Horrified, like she's covered in blood, or something of the sort.

Like he doesn't know her.

"Erm..." he manages after long silence, "yeah. Yeah, sure."

"Thank you."

She watches him leave, his steps a little wobbly, his eyes a little dazed. Knows for a fact he'll

unfold the letter the moment he's out of sight.

But she doesn't care anymore.

What does it matter if he sees? What does it change?

Nothing. The answer is nothing. And all he'll see is:

You're right. I never do as I'm told. Try harder next time.

XXXVIII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

February 9th, 1999

DEATH EATER ARRAIGNMENTS BEGIN

Inside the Numerous Retrials Commencing Today

She spots the headline on the corner of another witch's Daily Prophet as they enter the Ministry, and the words make her suddenly nauseous. The courage and bravado she can absorb from extensive research only goes so far, and imagining every argument she's going to make in her head is one thing.

Actually doing it is another entirely.

She's had lives depend on her knowledge before — Harry's, in particular, so many times during the war — but never like this.

She's never had to stand in front of someone who knows her words are the only thing between them and the Dementor's Kiss.

You're being dramatic.

No, she isn't, but she can't allow herself to mentally unravel before she even reaches the courtroom.

She steels herself. Adjusts her posture — jackknifes. Her fingers toy absently with the hem of her pinstriped blazer. McGonagall's bony hand squeezes her shoulder.

The doors pull apart.

How exactly did McGonagall describe it? A media circus, wasn't it?

Yes, that's precisely what this is. Tightropes, ringmasters, fire and all. She's had her photo taken at least a hundred times and she hasn't even said a word yet. Merely sits in the otherwise aggressively empty character witness box.

The Wizengamot assembles slowly. Lazily. As though to say they're perfectly aware the lives on the line today aren't theirs.

Hermione breaks out into a cold sweat. Her mind is suddenly blank, save the one thing she shouldn't be thinking about right now. The words of a reporter, thrown at her on the streets outside the Ministry this morning.

"Don't worry, Miss Granger — today can just be practice!"

McGonagall's sharp grip had tried to prevent her from turning to face the man, but Hermione has

never known how to leave a question unanswered.

“Excuse me?” she’d asked. Demanded, rather.

Hidden behind his camera, the man had snapped a shot of her and announced — quite plainly and without any reservations — “For when you defend Draco Malfoy. That’s of course the only reason you’re here, isn’t it?”

McGonagall had dragged her away before anything further could be said, but now his words bounce around the inside of her skull.

Practice...

Just *practice*.

Human lives aren’t *practice*.

But she has to consider whether a small, concealed part of her had been looking at today that way. Can hardly bear to think about it.

It’s even more surprising that the reporter was able to piece things together so quickly. Nowhere publicly did she state that she would be operating as a character witness today.

Almost every other reporter had inquired as to why she’d come to “spectate.”

But there was no shortage of whispers and hushed gasps when she’d taken her seat in the witness box.

“Ladies and gentlemen, silence please. Thank you.” The gavel strikes, Kingsley’s deep voice echoing through the chamber.

Hermione drags herself back to the present.

Kingsley isn’t acting as Chief Warlock — he’s merely presiding over the trials as a spectator. He won’t be acting as judge, jury and executioner, the way Fudge did. Which is admirable. Really, it is.

Only, today she wishes he hadn’t made that decision. Then at least she’d know the verdict would be a fair one.

No, the Chief Warlock is actually a Chief Witch in this instance. Hermione sees the swish of her hair as she comes to replace Kingsley at the main podium, thanking him for the call to order.

And her throat closes up.

It’s Faith Burbage. Younger sister to Charity.

Hermione knows she’s being photographed. Can’t afford to let her emotions show on her face — but if she could, she’d scream.

How is this a fair trial? How — *how* can they allow someone so emotionally involved to preside over these indictments? Someone whose sister died in the house of one of the accused?

Her fingers start to shake, and to make matters worse, Faith glances down at her, lightly aged face pursing into an unreadable expression. Her eyes flit away just as quickly, but it’s enough to assure Hermione her presence isn’t appreciated, nor welcome.

Plum-colored robes swishing, Faith waves a hand and the members of the Wizengamot, along with the spectators, take their seats.

“Thank you for being here,” she says, removing a pair of glasses to perch on her nose, and Hermione finds herself searching her tone for any semblance of leniency.

She finds none. This woman is a stone wall.

“Today, we begin proceedings with a reexamination of the case for one —” she glances down at the parchment in front of her, “Adrian Pucey, charged with supporting the Death Eater cause. Please bring in the accused.”

Hermione blows a slow breath out from between her lips. And Adrian Pucey rises into the chamber in a cage.

It reminds her of those rides at Muggle playgrounds. The metal ones that spin and spin and spin. That make you want to get off. Make you want to be sick.

Her notes are dog-eared and torn, her fingers trembling each time she fumbles for a different page, certain — always so certain — that she must be forgetting something. A better answer. A different answer. One last thing she can use. One last piece of evidence. One more step back from the Dementor’s Kiss.

The Wizengamot’s prosecutors are battle ready. Steadfast. They refuse to let her come up for air.

“Describe an instance in which Mr. Zabini contributed to the betterment of Wizarding society.”

“Is it not true that Mr. Pucey’s grandparents were schoolmates and friends of Tom Riddle?”

“Look at this photograph, please — do you deny that that is Mr. Zabini, top right?”

“Did Mr. Pucey ever express doubts to you about his family’s Pureblood supremacist beliefs?”

“Do you recall Mr. Zabini accompanying Draco Malfoy on Death Eater patrols the night of May 1st, 1998?”

“Can you look at this photograph?”

“Do you recognize this handwriting?”

“Please produce some evidence of your amicable relationship with Mr. Zabini.”

“Miss Granger, stay with us please.”

“Do you know who this man is?”

“Has Mr. Pucey ever used degrading language with respect to your blood status?”

“Miss Granger?”

“Focus please, Miss Granger.”

“Miss Granger —”

“Hermione?”

“Hermione, you’re back —”

“Mione?”

“Are you...”

She crawls numbly into the depths of her four-poster, ignoring every utterance of her name from the Great Hall all the way up through the Gryffindor common room. Lays face first in the crimson pillows until she can’t breathe, then shifts onto her back. The tight elbows of her blazer pinch. Her eyes itch. Her neck aches.

“Cleared of all charges.”

Adrian had not been present in enough Death Eater propaganda — in enough damning photographs — to garner a conviction. She’d come to that conclusion early on in his trial, but his frightened blue eyes — locked on her in such a way, so desperate, so unsure — had prevented her from giving anything less than every sentence of research she’d collected on him.

Tired and irritated, the Wizengamot had likely chosen to save their strength. There were more important battles to be fought, after all. They’d released Adrian after only forty-five minutes of testimony.

But the wings on her heart were short-lived, and soon to be plucked out.

Blaise Zabini’s trial took nine and a half hours. Only brief pauses were allowed for use of the lavatory and to procure water. By the end of it, Hermione could see his legs shaking in the cage, exhausted.

Several times throughout, she’d reminded herself that this level of scrutiny was neither good nor bad. Trials end quickly when they are clear cut.

Just as Adrian’s had, for the good.

And as Lucius Malfoy’s had, for the worst.

To the Wizengamot — and to Hermione, though she’d never care to admit it after all the research she’d done — Blaise was an enigma. Shrouded in mystery, he’d appeared in many of these damning photographs, and he’d been standing on the wrong side when it all ended.

But his cool demeanor over the years had worked in his favor, as he’d maintained silence in the media with regard to blood purity and his loyalties, even when his parents were so fiercely outspoken.

That, Hermione decided, saved his life — and not her useless, never-ending testimony about his good marks in class, that one great-great aunt back in his family who turned away from all things Pureblood, and his general polite manner.

By the end of it, she was fumbling. Grasping for straws.

And her stomach had well and truly dropped, eyes locked on Blaise — a mask of indifference — when they delivered the verdict.

“You are hereby sentenced to a year’s probation, and you will be required to pay damages of 12,000 galleons.”

Her eyes had fluttered shut in relief, then flown back open to see Blaise’s reaction.

Was he relieved, too? Or was he angry? Did he have the money? Was the probation too—

As the cage descended, Blaise met her eyes, allowing his mask to crack with the briefest of smiles and the slightest of nods.

After that, she’d used the adrenaline to successfully return to Hogwarts, but upon setting foot on the grounds, every inch of her shut down.

She’d done hardly anything, and today was just day one.

How in god’s name is she expected to save them all?

February 10th, 1999

There’s a one-day gap between that first stretch of trials and Pansy and Millicent’s arraignments. McGonagall has excused her from classes for the duration of the proceedings, but that in no way makes today any kind of respite.

The first thing she lays eyes on when she sits down to breakfast is the Prophet.

HERMIONE GRANGER: OUR BRIGHTEST WITCH GOING DARK?

War Hero Turned Death-Eater Sympathizer

She can barely stomach her toast.

The photograph splashed across the front page under the headline shows a small, hollow-looking girl with fear in her eyes. She doesn’t even recognize herself.

Everyone at the Gryffindor table is reading the article, save Ginny and Harry. Ron isn’t present.

“Went for an early morning fly,” Harry tells her when she asks.

No one says anything about the trials — thank heavens for small mercies — but the air is thick with words unspoken.

Only they are spoken. Just not by who she expects.

As the owls flutter in with the mail and Hermione focuses intently on successfully chewing and swallowing one bite, a pair of talons drop a plain, unaddressed envelope on her plate.

Like a magnet, all eyes find it instantly, and for a moment she doesn’t want to pick it up.

It turns out she doesn’t have to.

It floats upward on its own, and there’s a collective intake of breath because everyone — *everyone* — knows what that means.

The letter opens, and the voice of Draco Malfoy explodes across the Great Hall.

“GRANGER, YOU TRAITOROUS BITCH! I MADE YOU SWEAR! I MADE YOU SWEAR NOT TO. YOU KNOW WHAT YOU’RE UP AGAINST! YOU CAN’T EVEN PRETEND YOU DON’T BECAUSE I TOLD YOU, YOU SELFISH FUCKING CUNT, HOW CAN YOU—”

Stunned and speechless, her wrist flicks impulsively — instinctively — and sets the Howler ablaze. Malfoy’s furious voice cuts short, echoing away into nothing and leaving a silence so heavy she feels as though she’s weighted to the earth.

The letter crumples to ash.

Hermione drops her head into her hands and doesn’t look up until she feels an empty table around her.

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr: <https://onyx-and-elm.tumblr.com/>

I've also joined Facebook for reasons unknown to mankind and I look like a serial killer with my blank profile. Onyx Elm -- add me loves, let's be friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

February 11th, 1999

She wakes up in a cold sweat at half-past two in the morning.

In her dream, she watched Pansy Parkinson sink back below the floor of the Wizengamot chamber, caged and blank-faced, the words “*hereby sentenced to death*” echoing off the walls.

But in life?

No, sorry, that’s just not good enough.

She throws off the covers and leaves the dormitory behind, belting her robe around her as she takes the steps two at a time down to the dark, empty common room. With a swish of her wand, a fire springs to life behind the grate — and in it, she tosses every note she’s ever taken in preparation for the trials. All those histories and records she spent countless hours digging up.

None of it worked. Not for Blaise, not for Adrian. Those family lineages and words of good faith meant less than nothing in that courtroom. They had no impact whatsoever on the Wizengamot’s final verdicts. What mattered was only the cold hard evidence, and something she’s slowly realizing means more than anything else —

Intent.

For Blaise and Adrian, it was their apparent lack thereof. Their passiveness — the Wizengamot’s belief that they had seemingly been pulled by the current into dark waters. That their drive went no deeper than that.

For Pansy, it’s hardly that simple. Pansy was *active*. Like Draco, Pansy had been sent on missions.

Unlike Draco, Pansy had completed them.

Hermione’s hands shake as she slams down a blank sheet of parchment, quill poised above it, waiting for something. Anything. Some stroke of genius to prove that Pansy did what she did for good reason. She doesn’t even need to prove it, she just needs to be able to argue it. She needs to—

“‘Mione?’”

She jumps, and the quill falls from her trembling hand.

Harry stands at the foot of the dormitory stairs, glasses and hair askew, Marauder’s Map in hand. “Sorry, erm...” he says, holding it up, “sometimes it helps me sleep to look at it. I saw you pacing and then you, well — you sort of stopped and went very still and I got a little worr—”

“I’m alright, Harry,” she says quietly, looking at him — *actually* looking at him for what feels like the first time in a long while. He’s thin. Thinner, even, than he was leading up to the war. And he looks tired. And she wonders how exhausting it must be for him to put a smile on his face every day.

“Oh — yeah, right. Alright.” He turns. Takes a few steps back up. Some inner instinct warns her

that, in some unspoken way, this is a last chance.

“I’m scared,” she blurts, desperate.

He goes still. The little clock above the mantle ticks endlessly.

“I’m...” she swallows a lump in her throat, “I’m scared and I’m very alone.”

What feels like an eternity passes before he says anything, and all the while Hermione feels herself going red in the face — feels tears pricking at her eyes — because she knows she sounds weak and ridiculous and pathetic and—

“That’s the one thing you’ve never been able to do, you know,” says Harry, not turning around just yet.

She slaps away the first tear that dares to escape, sniffing. “What?” She’s fairly certain she doesn’t want to know the answer.

“Ask for help.”

A muscle in her forehead twitches — spasms. She stares at Harry’s back until he does a little corner turn and meets her gaze with one eye.

Another long silence.

Then he quirks one brow and she realizes he’s waiting for her. Giving her an opportunity — that last chance. He’s...he’s *offering*.

To help.

And she realizes, though it’s like a cannonball sinking into her gut, that he’s right. She never asked. Never knew how.

The clock ticks away thirty more seconds, and then Harry starts to turn back. Takes one more step up—

“Help,” she whispers feebly. Clears her throat. “H-Help...help me.” Two more tears track long, wet streaks down her face. “*Please*.”

Still, more silence.

But then Harry turns fully to face her, and there’s a ghost of a smile on his lips.

“Did she have any House Elves?”

“I don’t know. Possibly. Probably. None that were treated well, I’m sure of it. They wouldn’t speak on her behalf.” Hermione is upside down at this point, literally. She’s lying flopped over the arm of the sofa, mangle of curls brushing the carpet, staring at the ceiling. Desperately hoping a change of perspective might help her to think more clearly.

That, or she’s hoping all the blood pooling in her skull will somehow knock an idea loose.

Harry is bent over a pile of notes they've taken down over the past few hours, early morning light slowly creeping through the diamond-paned windows like a threat.

They'd wasted time, in the beginning, talking about the 'why' of it. Necessary time, she supposes, because she needed Harry to understand. He deserves to understand. That's not to say she did a bang-up job of explaining herself.

"She's sort of awful..."

"I know."

"And she used to make fun of your teeth—"

"I know."

"And your hair—"

"I *know*, I just — I see more to her, Harry. I'm — I'm logical, and I have to think about the circumstances, and when you think about the circumstances you — you just...well, she makes more sense. The world she grew up in."

"What about when you were staying with Slytherin?" He sort of winced as he said it. "Was she nice to you, then?"

"No."

Harry opened his mouth. She beat him to the punch.

"But she let me stay."

And that was the extent of it. After that, Harry let it go. Didn't ask any more questions with regard to the 'why,' and instead the two of them shifted focus to the ever-elusive '*how?*'

Four long hours of trying to find some spin on Pansy Parkinson that could make her look redeemable.

Four long hours of nothing.

She's trying to hide how much she's panicking, which is possibly a third reason for lying upside down. Harry's eyes are bloodshot with exhaustion.

"Okay, okay." He stands up suddenly, voice a little louder than it's been. He claps his hands together. "Okay. New plan. Can I see her journal again?"

Hermione throws out an arm sideways and slides the peach-colored diary towards his feet. Lets her head flop back again. Not only had Pansy had seen fit to hex the words 'STUPID FUCKERY' into its cover, but she'd also taken the time to Ward-guard its contents, so that whenever anyone opens it they find only blank pages.

Because it couldn't possibly be any *more* difficult to defend this girl.

"You won't be able to break them, I already tried," she says, finally sitting up and enduring the head rush of a century.

Harry lowers his wand and sighs. "I understand wanting privacy, but this seems excessive."

Hermione gathers a pillow into her arms and squishes her face into it. “A bit, yeah,” she mumbles into the fabric. “Probably didn’t want Theo to read it.”

“Who?”

She drops the pillow and lays back against the armrest. Massages her temples. “Theo. Theodore Nott. He’s in our year—”

“No, I know who he is, ‘Mione, I’m just — I mean, why him? What does it matter if he sees it?”

“Oh, erm...” She’s put her foot in her mouth, she realizes. Swore never to tell anyone. “Well, it’s sort of private.”

Harry cocks his head at her, a very familiar look on his face. The same look he’s always given her when he thinks she’s being unreasonable or unrealistic. “Hermione—”

“Harry, I *promised* her—”

“I really don’t think she’ll care at this point—”

“It’s not even important, it’s just—”

“Hermione, tell me.”

She heaves a great sigh and rubs circles into her eyes, a sharp prickle of guilt in her chest. He’s right. She has to concede that he’s right.

“Fine. Fine. It’s just — she’s in love with him. So that’s probably why. She didn’t want him to happen upon it because I’m guessing she mentioned it more than once in her entries. You see? Useles—”

“‘*Mione*, that’s it!” Harry exclaims, so suddenly and so loudly she almost falls off the sofa. Someone rolls over in bed above them, the dormitory floor creaking.

Hermione looks at him like he’s grown a second head.

“Don’t you see?” He waves the journal out in front of her. “That’s what you tell them, Hermione! That’s how you spin it.” He drops it triumphantly on the coffee table with a hollow smack. “It’s a love story.”

“Harry, I don’t—”

“Theodore Nott was a Death Eater, yes?”

She hesitates, brows furrowed. “Yes. Unmarked, but yes.”

“And don’t we do everything in our power to stay close to the ones we love? To protect them?”

Hermione sits up straight, lips parting.

“So, that’s it, then.” He taps the cover of the journal one more time for good measure. Right on the word ‘FUCKERY.’ “Everything she did, she did for him. For love.”

If his words hadn’t blown her eyes so wide, they would’ve made her laugh — like something out of a truly terrible romance novel. But instead, she’s silent. Speechless.

Until—

“Oh my god,” she breathes.

A genuine smile splits Harry’s face.

“Oh my *god!*” She leaps up from the sofa and takes his face in her hands, kissing him square on the nose. “You are *brilliant*, Harry Potter. Well and truly *brilliant*.”

He dips into a mock bow, but stops short when she takes hold of his arm, eyes serious. The humor bleeds away.

“Will you come with me?” she asks. Squeezes. “If it’s not too much to ask...”

He puffs out a breath, and in the next instant, he’s dragging her head up against his chest, smelling warm and familiar. Like Harry. “You just have to *ask*, ‘Mione.”

It’s only when she pulls away and finds his shirt damp that she realizes she’s crying.

“EXTREMELY DISAPPOINTING, UNACCEPTABLE”

C.F.J. Founder Responds to First Trial Outcomes

It’s the headline being sold all across the Ministry atrium this morning, but she doesn’t take the time to read it. Her focus is sharp like a needle point, and everything else is background noise.

Besides, today it isn’t her they’re taking pictures of. Isn’t her they’re bombarding with questions and bright flashes. It’s Harry.

A few paces behind her, in step with McGonagall, he holds a hand in front of his face to guard against the assault, repeatedly saying, “Sorry, I have no comment,” as they pass through as quickly as possible.

McGonagall wastes no time charming the lift doors to shut early as they slip inside, and the noise falls away as they sink down.

“Sorry, Harry,” Hermione says, but he only shrugs. Accustomed to it, after all these years. McGonagall excused him from classes so he could accompany her, and she’s grateful for it in more ways than one.

The moral support is only a part of it. She’ll admit, she feels a great deal more powerful walking into the courtroom with him at her side. Feels unstoppable, like she used to, when it was just the three of them against the world.

“Headmaster,” Hermione says as they reach the doors. She nearly forgot. “Would it be possible for you to request visitor access to the holding cells again? For this afternoon?”

The doors swing open. McGonagall makes a flustered noise, but squeezes her shoulder none the less. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Cameras flash. Purple robes swish. Kingsley calls everyone to order, just as he did the first day, and as Harry moves to sit amongst the spectators (several witches and wizards actively get up and

move to be closer to him), Hermione makes her way to the empty character witness box.

Faith Burbage resumes her position at the podium — delivers an identical greeting — though, if possible, the angle of her jaw is even sharper today. No doubt she was disappointed, too, by Tuesday's outcome.

Out the corner of her eye, Hermione catches sight of Dawlish in the crowd, amongst some of his followers, and a rush of ice floods her veins. He must've felt the need to come after those initial verdicts. Must've assumed his presence would somehow change something.

Hermione squares her shoulders. It won't. She decides then and there that it won't.

"Bring in the accused," Burbage orders, and Hermione bites down on the inside of her cheek, watching Pansy rise up in the cage. Her dream comes back to her, playing on repeat inside her head — an endless loop.

Pansy looks gaunt.

That's the first thing she notices. Malnourished, her birdlike arms and cheekbones even more pronounced. Somehow, though, she's managed to tie up her hair flawlessly — an elegant updo. Even on Death's door, it appears Pansy will not be seen looking rumpled.

"Miss Parkinson, you have been charged as an accomplice to the Death Eater cause. Do you understand these charges?"

Pansy's nose scrunches up, but she keeps her voice flat and steady. "I do."

"Do you have anything you wish to declare before proceedings begin?"

She leans carefully against one of the spiked walls of the cage, lifting up a hand to study her fingernails. "Only that the living quarters you provided for us are filthy and unmaintained."

Murmurs scatter throughout the hall, and Hermione grits her teeth. Catches Pansy's eye and gives her head a faint shake.

Don't make this any harder than it already is.

Pansy seems surprised to see her. One of her thin, dark brows arches up into her hairline, but she gives nothing else away in her gaze before turning back to face Burbage.

"Is that all?" she drones from the podium.

"Yes," says Pansy.

"Very well. Let's begin."

The case the Wizengamot presents against her is aggressive, to put it lightly.

Throughout the first few hours, Hermione isn't even called upon to speak because they're too busy shucking out incident after incident as evidence. Her name signed on a meeting ledger. Her picture with Greyback and Dolohov. Her words on the night of the battle.

All the while, Pansy maintains a strict poker face, appearing almost bored — but Hermione can see the faintest tremble in her hands, gripping the bars.

And then Burbage calls out, “Is there anyone here who wishes to speak on behalf of the accused?” and Hermione decides she has to be even more aggressive.

She stands, like she did the last two times, except now her arms aren’t overflowing with notes. And now she takes the liberty of stepping down and out of the witness box to stand on the courtroom floor, beside Pansy.

“I do,” she says, meeting Burbage’s gaze and funneling every ounce of strength she possesses into her voice.

“Miss Granger, is this going to become routine?” drawls Burbage, eyes narrowing behind her spectacles.

“Until I have no one left to speak for, Madam, yes,” she replies.

A heavy sigh from the podium. They both know there’s nothing Burbage can do to stop her. It’s perfectly legal to operate as a character witness for as many of the accused as she likes, provided she’s met them all in person.

Hermione double-checked this morning.

“Proceed, then,” deadpans Burbage.

“Thank you, Madam.” She turns her back on her, moving in a slow circle to address the entirety of the Wizengamot. “Ladies and gentlemen, I am not here to deny Miss Parkinson’s participation in these crimes.”

A low hiss from the cage beside her — it’s likely Pansy believes she’s about to seal her fate, rather than restore it.

And Hermione is very aware of how much she’s going to hate her after these next words.

“You have provided evidence of an impressive volume, and I am not going to dispute that. But I do think it’s very important that you are all aware of the reason why. Her reason.” She feels Pansy’s heavy gaze on the back of her neck. Finds Harry’s eyes in the crowd, fueled by his encouraging nod. “Everything Miss Parkinson did, she did in the name of someone she loved. To protect them.”

Scattered gasps.

“*Granger*,” she hears — a hard, flat warning from Pansy.

“You’d do well to remain silent, Miss Parkinson,” barks Burbage.

Pointedly avoiding Pansy’s gaze, Hermione picks a spot on the far wall and speaks to it. “Pansy Parkinson joined the Death Eaters because, in her eyes, it was the only way to ensure the safety of Theodore Nott, who she’s been in love with for —”

The wave of gasps is drowned out by Pansy’s rasped cry, “I’m going to *RIP YOUR HAIR OUT!*” She yanks at the bars like she’d lunge at her in their absence, teeth bared, but Burbage flicks her wand and an electric shock scatters across the cage, knocking Pansy back with a sickening zap.

She slumps against the other side of the cage, conscious, but barely, tendrils of smoke rising off her

skin.

Hermione's mouth hangs slightly ajar.

"What proof do you have?" asks Burbage, voice bored — as though the past ten seconds haven't happened.

It takes Hermione a second to refocus. To meet her eyes. "I...well..." She gestures limply at Pansy in the cage, "I should think that's proof in and of itself." Then she turns in another circle, searching the many eyes of the Wizengamot, imploring, pleading, "She's scared. Can't you see it? She's always been scared. For him. For herself. For what would happen to either of them if she didn't follow the Dark Lord's wishes."

A resounding silence. She finds Harry again, and he gives another, firmer nod.

"Nothing she did was done in her own self-interest," she adds. A last-ditch attempt to plant that seed of doubt. That's all she needs. Just a prickle of doubt.

Burbage leans back, a brow quirked. Hums in thought. "And if we were to give her Veritaserum —"

"That's *illegal*," Hermione snaps before she can stop herself.

"Not if she consents."

This time, the silence is deafening.

Hermione's mouth forms soundless words, gaze flitting back and forth between Pansy, unmoving, and the rest of the room.

"Well?" probes Burbage. "Does she consent?"

She has to swallow all the saliva pooling in her mouth. Clasps her hands into fists to hide their shaking. "A — a moment, please?"

Burbage gives an exaggerated sigh but waves her hand. "Very well."

Hermione rushes to the cage, casting a swift *Muffliato* around them and reaching through to take Pansy's wrist — giving her a shake. "Pansy? Pansy, are you listening?" she rasps.

Oh, Pansy is absolutely listening. Sharp, heavy eyes stare back at her behind lowered lids, completely at odds with her slumped posture. "Faithless Mudblood bitch," she breathes, barely audible, leaning back and letting her eyes fall shut.

"I don't care what you call me." She shakes her again — grips her harder. Urgently. "You and I both know it was the only way. And I know it's the truth. At this point, the Veritaserum can only help you—"

"You've just condemned me," she murmurs, eyes still closed. "You know that, don't you?"

It feels like she's just swallowed a rock.

Pansy's lids crack slowly and she leans forward, voice venomous, "You really think that's all they're going to ask me? *'Did you love the boy? Oh, sweet Pansy, were you heartsick? Was that it?'*" Her lip curls up. "No. Stupid girl. They'll ask me who I've murdered. They'll ask me who I've tortured. What information I gave up. You just got me killed."

Hermione digs her fingernails into her palms. “Not if I ask the questions.”

The expression on Pansy’s face doesn’t budge.

“Listen to me.” She shakes her again, worried a little more each second that she might lash out and bite her, of all things. “That’ll be your condition. You’re allowed to consent with conditions. I know how to word the questions.”

Pansy’s gaze flickers with something, but her jaw remains hard. Set.

“Pansy, trust me.” Hermione lets go of her wrist and forces her fingers into Pansy’s stiff hand, entangling them. “I can see you,” she says, only a desperate whisper now. “Behind all of it, I can see you. I know you aren’t this.” She squeezes hard. Until she’s sure it hurts. “Trust me. I have your back—”

A scoff. “No one ever has—”

“I do.” She yanks her hand. “I have your back.”

Pansy’s gaze is razor sharp. But Hermione can see the faintest, trembling breath escape her chest.

“Trust me.”

She can feel Pansy’s fingers shaking. Can see what just might possibly, maybe, be the the glisten of tears forming in her eyes. But she closes them before Hermione can be sure and straightens up. Goes hard and stiff, the practiced posture of a true Pureblood.

“Okay.”

Hermione lets her spell fall and whips around, meeting Burbage’s impatient gaze. “We’re ready.”

“Miss Parkinson, do you consent?”

Pansy crosses her arms and glares at Burbage like she’s picturing her burning alive. “Granger asks the questions,” she snaps. “I consent if Granger asks the questions.”

"Madam Burbage, you can't possibly allow th—" It's Dawlish, from the crowd, but she cuts him off.

"Spectators will be *silent*."

There's a long pause.

Burbage’s eye twitches. She glares from her podium, but not at Pansy. At Hermione.

“Bring in the serum,” she barks.

She knows they’ve just won.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your endless support. And I'm so glad so many of you are enjoying the playlist!

I'll link it here for anyone who wants to check it out:

https://open.spotify.com/user/0m8c7m6e6p1er78bupk0bo4r6/playlist/4ngt3C6EOJyStZ1Blq598e?si=kb--hUSaR_-cv6S1hxG26Q

XL

February 11th, 1999

When Pansy hears the word ‘probation,’ her steel wall falls.

Hermione watches her go slack against the side of the cage, all the fear she so resolutely refused to show now plain on her face. And then their eyes meet.

And she feels as though she’s seeing Pansy Parkinson for the first time.

Because the bloodshot eyes that stare back at Hermione regard her as an equal. For the first time, Hermione has a sense of what it must be like to *know* Pansy Parkinson. To stand on the inside of her walled-in life.

And her words from before suddenly ring true.

She can see her.

Pansy Parkinson is more than a cold, pretty face.

As her cage starts to lower back into the holding cells, from which she’ll soon be released, the silent members of the crowd begin to rustle for their things. Hermione’s knees are stiff — numb. Her face is blank.

Luck. Pure luck — that’s what this was.

Had one wrong word come out of her mouth, one poorly phrased question, the atmosphere of the room would’ve been entirely different right now.

Faith Burbage deals her a withering look from the podium before disappearing behind it. No doubt to recollect herself before the next retrial.

And as Harry appears at her side, walking Hermione from the room — still too stunned and speechless to feel relief — John Dawlish stares holes into her back.

It will only get harder from here.

“Twenty minutes was all I could secure for you,” says McGonagall once they reach the atrium, handing Hermione another visitor badge. “I’m sorry, Miss Granger.”

And she suddenly remembers her day isn’t over.

She has to speak to Millicent Bulstrode.

“Thank you, Headmaster,” Hermione deadpans. “Twenty minutes should be more than enough.”

She clips on the badge with clammy hands and steps into the lift.

February 12, 1999

THE STAR-CROSSED LOVERS OF A DARK REGIME

How Love Forced Pansy Parkinson Into You Know Who's Midst

Skeeter's article is bursting with flowery, decidedly less-than-accurate details. Of Pansy wiping away "*glistening tracks of tragic tears*" and "*lamenting the consequences of this brutal love.*" Of Hermione handing her handkerchiefs and urging the Wizengamot to "*find their humanity*" — a completely fabricated quote.

There are, however, a few truths stitched into the mess.

"And when our Golden Girl inquired as to the nature of this relationship, Parkinson — sighing wistfully — described it as '*purely one-sided.*'"

"Pausing here to remind my lovely readers once more that Miss Parkinson was under the influence of Veritaserum at this time."

"*'What do you think about when you think of Theodore Nott?'* our War Heroine pressed her, to which Parkinson replied, starry-eyed, '*Many things. His voice, mostly. It's the most comforting sound I know. The only thing that calms me down. Makes me feel safe.*'"

"*'Did [(You Know Who) — our Golden Girl neglected to use this reader-friendly term] make you do things?'* Miss Parkinson could only nod. '*Bad things?'* asked Miss Granger. '*Terrible things,*' said Parkinson. '*And why did you do these things?'* To which Parkinson replied, '*For Theo.*'"

"In her closing statement, the Brightest Witch of Our Age posed one final question to Miss Parkinson. '*What would you do for Theodore Nott?'* An audible gasp fanned out across the courtroom — several heartbroken cries of outrage — as Parkinson revealed, '*Anything.*'"

For better or worse, the press has taken their side.

There's only a small footnote regarding Millicent's trial. It'd been quick and rather painless, especially when compared to the others. Millicent had broken down almost immediately and done most of Hermione's work for her — weeping, apologizing, opting for the Veritaserum and then spending the next half hour drenching the courtroom in just how "utterly useless" she always felt. Ridiculed and ostracized until she was accepted by Voldemort and his followers. She just wanted to feel included.

And lucky for Millicent, she'd never used an Unforgiveable. She was fined. Not even a probation.

But Hermione has a sinking feeling it's the best outcome she's going to see from here on out. Nothing's going to get easier.

Today is Tracey Davis and Daphne Greengrass.

Tracey's cell is somewhere along the middle of the corridor, but she's stopped before she can reach it.

"Granger."

Her shoes scuff on the stone floor. Nott's bruises are slowly healing, but the majority of his face is still a mottled shade of purple. He's standing at the bars like he's been waiting for her, a copy of the Daily Prophet in one hand.

"How did you get that?" she blurts without thinking. Surely, there are more important questions to

ask.

“Bribed the guard,” he says plainly, but before she can ask what he could’ve possibly offered, he flattens the paper against the bars so that she can see the headline. “The fuck is this?”

“Today’s paper,” she deadpans.

Nott’s eyes tighten. “*Granger.*” He pulls it back and slams it against the bars again. “What *is* this?”

She tries not to think about what Pansy would want her to say in this moment. Tries not to consider what she’ll do to her if she doesn’t. But Pansy is already back at Hogwarts. At Hogwarts, with Blaise and Millicent and Adrian — the best place she could possibly be. Only, now she’s got a trace on her.

Still, she’s safe.

She can forgive Hermione for this.

“The truth,” she answers at last, doing her best to hold his gaze without faltering. She feels she’s intruding on something. A very private aspect of two very private lives. Lives she has no business being involved in, even when she’s trying to save them.

“This isn’t some typical Skeeter shite?” Nott’s eyes are more wide and desperate than she realized. “This is what happened?”

“For the most part,” she hedges, blinking and dropping her eyes. “Without all the tears and the handkerchiefs.”

There’s a loud bang.

Her eyes fly back up — Nott has yanked on his bars so hard he’s activated their protective Wards. He staggers backward, stung by the resulting jinx, the Daily Prophet floating to the floor at his feet. “*Bleeding fucking hell,*” he hisses, pacing a small line back and forth.

“I’m sorry you found out this way,” is all Hermione can manage. She has no idea what’s going through his head. “Pansy didn’t want anyone to know. But it was all we could do.”

His bruise-bracketed gaze finds her again, sharp and yet somehow all at once soft. “She’s a fool,” he says in a quiet voice.

Hermione can’t help but step back. Something stings in her chest. She’s not sure what.

“She’s a fucking fool,” he says again, huffing and shaking his head.

“How can you say that?” she breathes. “After everything she’s done for you?”

“For me? *I didn’t fucking ask her to!*” He’s at the bars again, rattling them, teasing another stinging jinx out of the Wards. He shakes his hands out as he yells, “I never fucking asked! Who told her she had to kill for me? Almost *die*, for me?”

“No one told her,” says Hermione. It’s automatic. “She did what she felt was right.”

There’s a strained pause. When she manages to meet his eyes again, they’re full of a very familiar rage. Rage she’s used to seeing in lighter, colder eyes. “You’d know all about that, wouldn’t you? That’s what you think you’re doing for him — isn’t it?” He juts his head down the hall, but she

doesn't need to look.

"I'm trying to," she whispers.

He whispers, too. Only his tone is deadly. "No wonder he *fucking hates* you."

Hermione blinks slowly. Glances down again.

She has to force herself to move to Tracey's cell.

February 22nd, 1999

It's been Hell on Earth.

But at least the Howlers have stopped coming. Either the Ministry's finally stripped Malfoy of his rights to a quill and parchment, or he's finally exhausted himself. He had to've been using wandless magic, after all. His wand is locked up in a Ministry vault.

Whatever the reason, she's grateful. Today, of all days, that's not something she'd be able to handle.

It's by design. She's sure of it.

Furious at her dumb luck — her somehow baffling ability to keep each and every name on that list of McGonagall's away from a Dementor's kiss — the Ministry has saved their best for last.

The two most difficult trials, scheduled back to back on the same day.

Malfoy and Nott.

The morning of, from the instant she opens her eyes, she feels sick to her stomach. Like she's swallowed a leech that's slowly consuming her insides.

She's somehow both more prepared than she's been for any of the other trials, and simultaneously significantly less all at once.

Because she *knows* Malfoy — or, at the very least, she likes to think she does. She's got a good handful of useful information in her back pocket.

But he's also refused to see her. Flat out.

His last Howler was dated over a week ago.

So they have no strategy. No plan. No understanding of how they mean to spare his soul — him. The one with the most evidence mounted against him. By far the most hated.

Hermione has always loved a challenge, but this is not a challenge. This is a rigged game.

And add to that, Theo to follow. Only an hour later.

If she fails, she won't even be able to hold herself up — let alone defend another, almost equally hated boy from almost equally damning evidence.

She's been set up to fail.

Harry seems to know this as well, because when she exits her dormitory, compulsively flattening out her skirt, he hands her a flask.

She tries to conjure an ounce of humor. "Liquid luck?" Her smile is painted on.

Harry tucks his lips in — a sad echoing smile as he shakes his head. "Whiskey."

Her nose wrinkles. "Firewhiskey?"

"No, the Muggle kind. For your nerves."

She doesn't need more encouragement than that. She downs what must be about two shots worth. Hands it back empty. "Thank you."

And she marches out of Gryffindor.

There's a rumor going around that tickets are actually being sold for today's trials. Malfoy's specifically.

People are emptying their pockets to see Draco Malfoy earn a death sentence.

And Hermione has to skirt off to the lavatory five minutes before the trial starts to vomit, that precious whiskey coming right back up.

Harry's eyebrows are at his hairline when she comes out, eyes questioning behind his glasses. "Alright?"

She wipes her mouth. Pinches her cheeks to work color into them. "Fine. Just fine."

But she's unprepared for the crowd in the courtroom. There's barely enough space for the actual members of the Wizengamot.

Bulbs flash at every angle, questions shouted from dozens of voices as she moves to take her usual — now all too familiar — place in the ever-empty character witness box. A glance to the side shows Harry taking a seat next to McGonagall. But her eyes catch two rows above them, on Blaise and Pansy, seated together.

She didn't think they'd come. It's both an encouragement and an additional shot of nerves.

Because while it's two more in the room not out to see her fail, it's also two more who might watch it happen.

Hermione picks at her cuticles, hands folded in her lap, as the questions ricochet, every reporter in the room trying to get in one last juicy detail before Faith Burbage takes her place at the podium.

And then it's so quiet, Hermione swears she can hear her own blood rushing through her veins.

"I see we have a full house, today," says Burbage, eyes sliding to Hermione to deal her usual dose of cold disdain. Then they flit back to the crowd. "I hope you're all aware I expect silence in my courtroom at all times."

Murmured assent.

“Let’s make this quick and painless, then. Bring in the accused.”

By now, Hermione’s heard the way that cage rattles as it rises at least two dozen times. And yet it’s like hearing it for the first time. She thought she was prepared for the sight of him inside it.

But when that colorless, white-blond hair catches the light of the courtroom, it’s like an industrial grade needle gets plunged through her stomach. She’s not ready for this.

What if she can’t do this?

She’s — she’s not—

“Mr. Malfoy,” barks Burbage, as though she’s more than aware the words carry a heavy weight. “You stand accused as an accomplice and a weaponized agent of the Death Eater cause. Do you understand these charges?”

His face is wan. Eyes wreathed in bruises either brought on by exhaustion or violence. It’s only been a week since she’s last seen him, and yet so much has changed. More weight lost, more strength depleted.

Even less light in those gray eyes.

But he stands up straight. Rigid. Emotionless. His already split, bloody lips seem to bleed fresh as he parts them to speak.

“Yes.” His tone is clipped. Gives nothing away.

“Do you have anything you wish to declare before proceedings begin?”

“Yes.” He steps forward in his cage, and Hermione’s breath hitches as he wraps his hands around the bars. Says in a flat, perfectly serious tone, “A thumb war.”

There’s a long, confused, somewhat baffled silence.

One, two, three, four... whispers a voice in Hermione’s head.

Burbage’s face darkens, eyes tightening. “I suppose you think that’s funny.”

“Oh, I think it’s hilarious.” Draco pulls his bloody lips back over his teeth, smiling up at her, face against the bars. “One, two, three, four...” he murmurs in a voice that’s got nothing left to lose.

One, two, three, four...

Burbage practically snarls. “Let’s begin.”

I declare a thumb war.

XLI

Chapter Notes

I am so, so, so, so, so, so sorry. Thank you to anyone who's managed to stick around.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

February 22nd, 1999

Draco Malfoy is rather determined to die.

That much is clear not even five minutes into the proceedings. He shifts around in his cage as the extensive list of charges is read, snorting and scoffing at times and drawing shrewd eyes. The way his body sways each time he pushes off one side of the bars in favor of the other leads Hermione to believe he's somehow managed to get drunk. Which seems both impossibly stupid and impossibly *Malfoy*.

And if Theo could bribe a guard for the Prophet, then it's hardly unthinkable.

Hermione only realizes she's digging her fingernails into her palms when Harry's hand falls into her lap, covering her gathered fists.

"Breathe," he says, lips barely moving. "And remember you have eyes on you."

She goes stiff instantly, turning another fraction away from the swarms of press and trying to focus solely on one bar of the cage. Trying not to look past it.

Very quickly, it becomes clear that this trial is going to go a lot like Pansy's. It's *hours*. Hours and hours of charges against him. Evidence. Witness accounts — all against, nothing for.

They bring out the necklace he cursed in Sixth Year — not destroyed, apparently — and Hermione has to disguise her sharp intake of breath as a cough.

They remind him that his father is in Azkaban, and that his mother might as well be, and that *'the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, you know.'*

They wheel in that bloody *Vanishing Cabinet*, and Hermione feels sick to her stomach.

All the while, Malfoy stares at his accusers dully. Eyes glazed. Almost like he might fall asleep, which is the last thing she needs from him right now.

Without Harry's hand twisted into hers, she doesn't think she'd still be upright — and as they make their massive case against him, she just keeps reminding herself that this is manageable. This is debatable. Defensible. She can bring them around. She can take the reins and steer them away from all this damning rhetoric.

She repeats it like a mantra in her head, until the moment everything gets turned upside down.

"As I understand it, this year has also been quite turbulent for you, Mr. Malfoy," says Burbage.

Hermione makes the mistake of looking at him. She keeps doing it — doesn't think she'll be able to *stop* doing it.

Malfoy's expression remains flat.

"We've received a rather compelling piece of evidence from a peer of yours — one they would like to share with us all now." And Burbage tips her head sideways to look upon the newcomer, taking their place in the witness stand.

Hermione feels like the floor drops out from under her. Squeezes Harry's hand until he grunts at the pain.

"Please state your name for the record."

"Zacharias Smith."

"*Fuck*," she whispers under breath. Because she knew. She *knew*. She was so sure this would come back to haunt her, and then she'd had the absolutely *moronic* nerve to forget about it. To think it'd all blown over, as nothing ever does.

And now here he is. Ready to do more damage than she can possibly imagine.

"And what evidence do you have for us today?"

"A diary," says Zacharias, and she can literally feel the blood drain out of her face. "One that belonged to Malfoy." He holds up that unmistakably purple journal for the whole of the courtroom to see.

How did he get it?

How did he get it?

I had it last. How did he fucking get it?

No, no, *no*. This is unimaginably bad.

She'd had to make a choice whether or not to include the diary as part of her defense, and she'd decided there was far too much inner violence spilled across those pages — too much for those small slivers of his humanity to shine through.

And that's exactly what Zacharias is going to play up.

She shoots a desperate glance at Malfoy, turning Harry's hand to mush inside her fist — and Malfoy's just...

He's still not reacting. Like he's not even there behind his eyes. Like a dazed statue.

Zacharias clears his throat, and she whips her gaze back to him.

"It contains several concerning entries that I believe suggest the fragility of his mental state."

"He's been coached," she hisses, feeling Harry glance her way. He has to've been. She seeks out Dawlish in the crowd — doesn't have the chance to find him before Zacharias continues.

"Should I...read them now?"

There he is. That timid fool of a boy. Oh, she wants to watch him choke on poison. Wants to throw him from eighty stories. Wants him a million ways beyond *dead*.

““Mione, please,” Harry all but whimpers. “I’m sorry, I can’t feel my fingers.”

Releasing him is like prying an industrial clamp loose, but she manages, never taking her eyes off Zacharias’s treacherous face.

“Yes, if you please,” says Burbage primly.

He clears his throat again. Opens the diary to where it looks like it’s been bookmarked. “I — erm — apologize for the, uh...*language*,” he mutters.

Malfoy wakes from his daze enough to huff a laugh. He’s — he must be delirious, or something, at this point.

“Right. I’m — erm — I’m just going to skip to the highlighted bits.”

Hermione has to swallow back a growl. Of course. Of *course* they’re going to take his words out of context.

“*September 8th, 1998...Fucking Granger...you don’t know her but you’d be sorry if you did...erm, skipping ahead a little, uh — I’d been so hoping I’d be ordered to kill her during the war. So hoping—*”

The crowd openly gasps, and Hermione just squeezes her eyes shut because she knows they’re looking at her.

“Uh...*You’d kill her too, if you had the chance. You’d wring that ridiculous, avian little neck before she got a full sentence out.* Um. Right. Next entry. Ahem, uh — *September 18th, 1998...and wouldn’t it be rather lovely if that mudblood Granger didn’t exist? One less know-it-all in the world to deal with...uh...*” He flips some pages.

Of course — of course he’s going to make sure they’re all the worst entires about her, because she’s the one who’s about to fucking *defend* him.

“*October 2nd, 1998...I take back what I said. Nothing’s working. I just want to be gone. Let me be gone. I’d love to be gone...*and then, let’s see — right, I think it’s important to mention that this is around the time he physically assaulted Miss Granger on school grounds—”

Hermione jerks to a half-stand, but Harry’s so quick to yank her back down almost no one notices it.

“So this is, yeah — this is him, erm, commenting about it. *October 6th, 1998...I fucking attacked her...uh...she makes me fucking insane...I called her a—*” Zacharias visibly squirms, “*cunt. A fucking mudblood cunt.*”

And the crowd — bloody hell, they just keep *gasping*. So desperate to be offended. So out for blood.

“*I want to fucking kill her...uh, right, and then moving o—*”

“Finish that line,” she blurts out. Can’t stop herself.

All eyes fly to her like hungry wolves to bait.

“Miss Granger, you will do well to remain quiet during testimo—”

“Make him finish that line,” she says again, louder now, jerking against Harry’s arm and standing up. “You can’t accept testimony of something so abridged. You can’t let him alter the facts. I’ve read that entry, and *he*—” She points roughly at Zacharias, “— needs to finish that line.”

Burbage narrows her eyes at her. Her lip twitches, pursed to the point it looks painful. But she does glance down at Zacharias and quirk a brow. “Is there more to that sentence?”

Zacharias shifts uncomfortably. Turns back to the page and clears his throat for what must be the fortieth time. “*I want to fucking kill her almost as much as I want to kiss her.*”

She’s expecting more from the crowd. A softening of some sort — anything. The way they softened for Pansy.

But the looks tossed around are wary. Unconvinced.

And Burbage is practically grinning as she turns back to Hermione. “Satisfied, Miss Granger?”

Hermione blows a hot breath out through her mouth.

“Take your seat.”

Harry tugs her back down.

And Zacharias just blinks around stupidly until he’s given the nod to continue.

“So, um, yeah — *November 1st, 1998...I want to rip her fucking hair out...I feel like my blood’s boiling...I’m thinking of doing something stupid.* Then there’s *November 12th, 1998...uh, every time I close my eyes I see her screaming. Writhing on the floor. I can see the whites of her eyes and the unnatural curve of her spine and I cannot, for the life of me, stop dreaming about i—*”

She launches herself back to her feet, and she’s — she’s shouting now. She doesn’t even care. “No. *NO*. You do *not* get to take that out of context!”

“Miss Granger, you are *out of line*.”

“This is enough!” She cries. “Enough! The law is not one-sided. This is not a just representation of that boy —” And now she jabs her finger towards the cage, simultaneously aware and in denial of the wetness she feels on her cheeks. “*I won’t stand here and let you do this.*”

“*Sit. Down.*”

Bulbs flash frantically. She glares at Burbage until her eyes sting.

“‘Mione...” a pleading whisper from Harry as he yanks at her. “‘Mione, please. This won’t help.”

She practically crumples back into her seat, and Burbage lets the silence fester for a moment. Then, with a sigh,

“Mr. Smith, let’s speed this up a bit. Any final entries you’d consider particularly concerning?”

Zacharias looks like a deer in headlights for a moment, then flips urgently ahead — back a few times, mouthing words to himself as though trying to pluck out the single most damning sentence he can find.

And he finds it. Oh, by god, he finds it.

She's gritting her teeth so hard her jaw aches.

"December 7th, 1998...Prompt: If you could change one choice you made in the past year, what would it be? ... And then he writes, erm — Almost too easy. My appeal. Mother insisted on it, but if I could go back, I'd plead guilty and accept all of those initial charges." Zacharias pauses to look up and around the courtroom, punching in the last line with all the emphasis he can muster. *"Azkaban sounds like a lonely paradise."*

Hermione's eyes fall shut.

"Right then," announces Burbage. "Thank you, Mr. Smith. You may step down. We will submit the journal into evidence. The defense may take over after a short recess."

The bang of the gavel is impossibly loud in her ears.

When Harry shoves the cup of tea between her shaking hands, it sloshes over and burns her fingers. She barely feels it.

"Just...try to relax," he says feebly, taking a seat beside her near the atrium fountain. "It's not over. Now's your chance."

"What chance?" she asks flatly, staring straight ahead.

"There's absolutely a chance. Don't giv—"

"Zacharias dug him a grave, Harry. I'm not a fool."

"Miss Granger!"

"Miss Granger!"

"Are you willing to comment, Miss Granger?"

Bulbs flash in her face, momentarily blinding, and she spills more scalding tea into her lap. Vaguely, she registers Harry stepping in front of her. Saying politely, "Not now, please. Thank you. Thank you all, but not now..."

And oh, the way they bow down before their hero, scurrying away with his name on their lips like a reverent prayer.

"Wish I could do that," she mutters down at her teacup.

"Do what?"

"Ask to breathe and then be given the space to do so."

"Mione—"

There's a sharp pop and then another frantic, *"Miss Granger!"*

Harry sighs. Turns again. "Please, I said not — oh." He hesitates. "Erm. Hermione?"

She forces her gaze up from the murky tea and finds a house elf, of all things, standing before them and looking particularly small. Her first thought is of Dobby, but this elf's not nearly as filthy. Or bruised. She's got a nice little set of black robes on, big glistening eyes, and a letter clutched in her tiny hand.

"Hello," Hermione manages.

"Miss Granger, Miss — Topsy has an urgent message for you, Miss."

She forces a small, polite smile onto her face. "Hello, Topsy. From who, if you don't mind?"

"From my Mistress, Miss Granger. She is not supposed to be sending it, Miss. She is not supposed to, but she tells Topsy she *must*." Topsy pushes the letter eagerly into her hand.

The envelope is thicker and heavier than expected. Like there's something more inside than parchment. A dark wax seal is melted onto the back, but no address.

"Who is your Mistress, Topsy?"

Topsy rocks back and forth on her heels, looking nervous. "Mrs. Narcissa Malfoy, Miss."

Chapter End Notes

Please accept this second trailer as an apology: <https://youtu.be/df8lmpf6GKo>

XLII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

February 22nd, 1999

Topsy is gone before she can get another word out, leaving this thing in her hands.

This thing which feels suddenly a great deal heavier.

“From his mother?” Harry echoes quietly. “But she’s on — ”

“House arrest.” Hermione nods, staring down at the letter. She’s hardly conscious of her thumb already breaking through the seal.

“That’s...*risky*. Must be important.”

She nods again, but she’s not really listening to him. Because what’s rolled out of the opening into her palm is distinct and unmistakable. A vial — bearing one small, cloudy wisp. It glows faintly blue against her skin.

A memory.

“Is that—”

She doesn’t bother to nod this time, scrambling to yank the letter that came with it free of the envelope. Nearly tears it as she spreads it open on her lap.

Miss Granger,

I’ve been following the news as closely as I can, though my access is limited. But if what I’ve read is true, then you are the one defending my son.

We both know the odds are against him. And I know my son. He is against himself. He will not help you.

Even this, which I give you now, may amount to nothing — but I believe they need to see it. You need to see it.

The memory is mine. Please submit it as evidence. Submit it so, at the very least, he knows his mother tried to save him.

Narcissa

Hermione blinks and reads it over again. Wets her dry lips, hand closing around the vial like a final lifeline.

“We have to see what it is,” she blurts.

Harry's been trying to read the letter upside down. "We don't have a Pensieve."

"We have to find a way. We've got to—"

"Ladies and gentlemen, please make your way back into the courtroom," calls a member of the Wizengamot. "The trial will resume momentarily."

"Bollocks," mutters Harry, meeting her gaze.

She feels abruptly helpless, and he must see it in her eyes. Some pleading look that begs him to make the decision for her.

"You have to use it."

She swallows thickly. "But I don't know wh—"

"You don't have a choice. You're right, Hermione. Smith dug him a grave in there. And no matter what brilliant defense you lay out, you're in danger. This might tip the scales."

"*Please* make your way back into the courtroom," says the same man, looking pointedly at the two of them. "The trial will recommence *immediately*."

She yanks her eyes back to Harry, panicking now. "But — what if...what if it makes it worse?"

"It's his mother, Hermione. Would she risk that?"

"I...I don't..."

"You have to." He takes her hand. Pulls her up to her feet and squeezes once. "You *have* to."

The vial rests in her blazer pocket as she takes the floor to lay out her defense, a weight as sure and heavy as an anvil.

It's her last resort, she's decided. She'll do what she can to read the room. If she feels they're leaning in his favor, then they'll walk out of this trial together, and she'll lock it away somewhere and never think of it again.

If she feels otherwise, then...so be it.

She does her best to skirt around Malfoy's cage without looking at him. She needs her focus now more than ever. But instead, her eyes catch on Dawlish, and a flush of rage fans out across her face. Bubbles and broils in her gut.

She looks away. Looks to Burbage. And it begins.

Her strongest defense — the one she'd felt such confidence in before — now feels somehow insignificant. Even so, she imprints it into the minds of the Wizengamot. Over and over again, as many times as she thinks it takes to stick.

"...and we would never've made it that far had Mr. Malfoy identified Harry to his aunt..."

"...looked Harry plain in the face — a boy he'd attended school with for nearly *seven* years —

accompanied by two of his closest friends, no less — and refused to confirm. He knew. Let me be perfectly clear. He knew.”

“...at which point I’ll remind you, Mr. Malfoy — at great personal risk — neglected to identify Harry, despite what safety and reward it may’ve procured for himself and his family.”

But as that line of defense grows cold — as her palms start to sweat and Burbage’s eyes start to twitch from all the repetition — she abruptly switches tactics. It’s not something she originally intended to utilize, but Smith has forced her hand.

She’d thought to bring up Dumbledore. Perhaps yesterday — before this morning — the fact that Malfoy stayed his hand would’ve counted for something. But now she feels that path could prove far too treacherous. Chooses to avoid it entirely.

No, instead she requests his journal be handed over to her. She’s going to read the *right* sections, in the *right* context — damn them all.

That violent purple is far too familiar in her hands now. She thinks she’s read every entry more than once. Knows it back to front. And yet her thoughts feel more disorganized than ever, and she’s not sure where to start — where to finish.

As the Wizengamot looks on, impatient, she tries to remember the most damning entries Zacharias read.

She pieces together her narrative slowly.

“I believe Mr. Smith’s intentions were to portray Mr. Malfoy as unhinged. Am I correct?” She twists and finds him in the crowd — stares flatly for as long as she dares to pause — long enough for his eyes to drop away and his face to flush pink. She turns back and holds the journal aloft. “I invite you all, then, to consider why. Mr. Smith was very careful, after all, to gloss over the entries outlining what Mr. Malfoy truly experienced this past term. And it is my firm belief he was set up to fail.” She flips to an entry she knows very well. “This is from September 11th. In this particular section, Mr. Malfoy is referencing his Dark Mark — more specifically, the pain it’s causing.” And she clears her throat. “*‘What was it you said, again? The situation doesn’t “qualify” for more powerful treatment?’* — this you, of course, referring to the Healers at St. Mungo’s monitoring these entries. He writes, *‘I only want drugs. Something different. Anything. Take it away. I’m not against begging — as you’ve seen before.’*” She looks up — stares Burbage directly in the eyes, reciting what’s only too easy to recite from memory. “*‘Give me drugs, give me drugs, give me drugs, give me fucking drugs.’*” Burbage flinches, if only just.

“This is, in fact, one of no less than twenty entries requesting pain relieving medication. Requests which were denied without explanation, which can only lead me to assume that Mr. Malfoy’s well-being was not of great concern. There is no representative here from St. Mungo’s to speak to this, so I’ll leave that where it lies. But I’m curious.” She lets her gaze slide across as many members of the Wizengamot as she can manage. Feels powerful suddenly. Knows her direction. “Have any of you studied the Dark Mark? In detail? You know of it, I’m sure — but do any of you have the faintest idea what it *does*?”

“You’ll do well to watch your tone, Miss Granger,” Burbage warns from the podium. “You are in no position to play Professor.”

“Not Professor,” she says. “No, in fact this is not a part of any regular school curriculum. It’s not spoken of.” She risks a glance behind her — at Malfoy. His eyes are hooded. Cloudy. But they’re fixed on her, none the less. “I just have a reputation for wanting to know everything.” She forces

herself to face forward again. “And this was something I wanted to know.”

She starts to pace, doing her best to remember everything she’s ever read about it.

“The Dark Mark is a very intuitive piece of magic. It behaves as though it has a mind of its own. A symbiote. Some believe it’s even aware of the intentions of its host. And I have no argument with this after seeing what it did to Mr. Malfoy. His Mark was attacking him. Physically. Burning him from the inside out. His entries make it plain. Endless, daily, *excruciating* pain. Tell me — why would a dark thing attack fellow darkness?”

She lets that thought simmer for a moment. Allows her eyes to find Harry, and his nod floods her with courage.

“It is my conclusion that the Dark Mark sensed Malfoy’s shift in stance. It sensed light in him, and it attacked it like a virus.”

A member of the Wizengamot raises a hand. An older witch with octagon-shaped spectacles perched above her nose. “Is it not true that Death Eaters consider taking the Mark a great honor? A source of pride?”

Hermione almost wants to thank her. It leads her seamlessly into a point she wasn’t sure how to make.

“They do. Absolutely, they do. So — you have to wonder. Why would a *proud* Death Eater try to physically cut it off?”

The rustle of whispers is enough to tell her most of them don’t know. Invigorated, she whips around and approaches Malfoy’s cage.

“Mr. Malfoy, please show the ladies and gentlemen of the Wizengamot your arm.”

Now, his eyes tighten — and she’s reminded of Narcissa’s words.

He is against himself. He will not help you.

She glares back at him.

You’ll help me. God damn you, you’ll help me.

“Do it,” she growls low. Too low for others to hear. “Or I’ll do it for you.”

He hisses something under his breath. Something she can’t catch. Then he yanks his arm out, wrenching up his wrinkled sleeve. She steps aside so they can see.

The clean white scar lining his forearm from wrist to elbow.

A gasp or two is all the reaction she gets, but she pushes on.

“Mr. Malfoy resorted to such drastic measures, there was nothing left for it but to remove all living tissue from his arm. He can feel nothing.”

Malfoy yanks back down on his sleeve and slumps against the back of the cage.

“Please, tell me,” she says, turning around. “What *proud* Death Eater would rather lose all sensation than keep this *great honor*?”

Burbage sighs loudly. “How long do you intend to belabor this point, Miss Granger?”

She tries to hide the way it makes her grind her teeth. “I’ll move on.”

Her eyes catch again on Harry as she glances down to sift through the journal — he’s mouthing something.

Do it.

His lips form around the words over and over again.

No, she thinks. Not yet. Not unless I have to.

Instead, she delves back into the journal — reads aloud any and every entry she thinks even *slightly* humanizes him. Reads how he stepped in front of her to face the Boggart. Reveals his own Boggart, despite the hiss he blows through his teeth behind her. Details, much to her own embarrassment, how he and his House took her in when she felt unwelcome elsewhere. And she feels like she’s airing out their dirty laundry in the most public way there is.

Still, she keeps on. Even when she knows she’s beating a dead horse, she’s hoping — if anything — that there will be too much of it for the Wizengamot to remember anything Zacharias said.

That’s her goal for the following hour and a half. And Burbage looks fit to boil over.

“Is this all you have, Miss Granger?” she barks out at last, cutting Hermione off halfway through her description of Professor Havershim’s bias. “Mr. Malfoy’s behavior over the past term? Is this the sum of your defense? Because unless you have anything further to add, I’d say we’re fit to deliberate.”

She swallows back the saliva pooling on her tongue. Glances towards Harry, already certain of what she’ll see.

Do it, he mouthes, and his eyes widen with emphasis. Now.

She shuts her eyes for the briefest moment, all too aware of Malfoy’s eyes glaring daggers into her back.

And then she pulls out the vial — the clear little weapon that will either make or break her case.

“I have one more piece of evidence.” She holds it up. Out. “This is a memory from Narcissa Malfoy. His mother.”

“Granger,” Malfoy bleats suddenly. “*No.*” And her heart rate spikes.

“Silence, Mr. Malfoy,” snaps Burbage. She flicks her fingers at Hermione. “Hand it to the guard. We’ll have to test whether it’s been tampered with.”

She’s not sure why she’s so nervous to do so.

Surely, Narcissa wouldn’t risk tampering with it. No. No, she wouldn’t.

Even so, Hermione’s hand is shaking when she passes the vial to the guard.

He performs a spell she knows very little of, and Burbage leans forward over the podium to watch as the vial glows. First white, then a pale shade of blue.

Hermione lets out a slow breath.

The disappointment on Burbage's face tells her all she needs to know.

It takes a good ten minutes to set up the Ministry-grade Pensieve at the center of the courtroom. It's the sort large enough to display the memory to everyone — the sort they use for all trials. And Hermione panics as she realizes — she's going to have to act like she's seen it before. Like she knows what that blue wisp contains. Eyes will be on her.

Whatever shock ensues, she's going to have to hide it.

And she's never been good at that.

Clutching her hands into fists at her sides, Hermione locks her knees and prepares for the worst. Burbage deals a nod to the guard, and he tips the contents into the massive pool.

For an impossibly long moment, the memory swirls around in the water — an inky black mass. Then, all at once, the image launches itself into the sky — and Narcissa's memory is displayed as though from a Muggle projector.

Not one second in, Hermione already has to stifle a gasp.

Because it's herself she's looking at. Splayed out on a marble floor she still hasn't forgotten the texture of. And it's her voice she's hearing. Her screams.

The members of the Wizengamot shift uncomfortably as they watch Bellatrix torture her.

It's a moment she never thought she'd have to relive.

Her screams echo up off the high ceiling and come ringing back, absurdly loud — but not loud enough to cover Malfoy's voice.

"Stop it!" He roars from his cage, and Hermione feels her stomach twist. "Get rid of it! *STOP IT!*"

"*Silencio*," Burbage casts without a thought, eyes fixed on the moving images in the air. Malfoy's cries cut off.

"*I didn't take anything!*" her past self continues to scream. "*I swear! Pl-please, please! I swear, I didn't take anything!*"

Narcissa's slow, methodic blinks rarely interrupt the image. And for a long while, it feels like it goes on forever. Hermione never realized how many times she said the same thing. Over and over.

"*I didn't take it! I didn't take anything!*"

But then suddenly Narcissa's voice rings out. Quiet and low, spoken under her breath — and yet louder than anything else because it's right at the forefront.

"*Draco. Stop.*"

Hermione can't help but glance sideways at him — finds him still screaming himself hoarse in silence. Yanking at the bars.

Almost at the same time, Narcissa's memory glances sideways, jerking her attention back. And there he is in the past. Wearing those same clothes burned into her brain. In that same spot in the Malfoy hall she'll always remember. Staring straight ahead, watching her scream.

Except — no. That's not all he's doing.

His low, unintelligible murmur can only just be heard over her shrill cries, but the moving of his lips is unmistakable.

"Stop," Narcissa warns again. "She'll see you."

He doesn't stop. Not even for a moment. Keeps saying the same muffled words, over and over again. Unblinking. Unmoving. Even when Narcissa reaches out and yanks at his arm. His focus is steadfast, his tongue equally so.

And Hermione knows what a counter-curse looks like.

She feels like the breath's been knocked out of her. And when the memory fades into darkness above them all, her knees buckle. She narrowly manages to grip one of the bars of his cage.

Keep your composure.

Her eyes flit upward. Find Malfoy no longer screaming.

But there are rare tears in his eyes and his face is a brilliant, furious red and he looks — he looks defeated. Defeated and betrayed and overrun by pure rage.

Burbage has the good sense to wait an extra minute before she releases the silencing charm.

Hermione clears her dry throat. Feels like she's sleepwalking as she steps away from the cage and rasps out, "Mr. Malfoy...can you explain to the Wizengamot what you were doing?"

Can you explain to me?

For a long while, he says absolutely nothing. Only huffs out furious breaths, white-knuckled fists wrapped around the bars in front of him.

"Please explain the nature of the counter-curse," she presses — and she sounds like she's pleading. There's no way to hide it. There's desperation in her voice.

Save yourself. Damn you, Malfoy. Save yourself.

She fights back tears.

The way you saved me.

Because she knows. Even before he says it — grinds it out like the words themselves are a death sentence. She knows. She never knew then, but she knows now.

"My aunt was using a knife dipped in poison. The counter-curse forbid it to spread."

Hermione digs her nails into the heels of her hands. Straightens her back and lifts her chin to the Wizengamot, even as two identical tears track wet lines down her cheeks. She clears her throat one last time.

"In other words, he saved my life."

If you would like to start following along with the podfic of this story, click here:
<https://youtu.be/GOb5Mq7GagA>

XLIII

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your god-tier patience and support. I adore you.

Also, please take heed of an important new warning tag suggested by a lovely reader. I'm sorry I didn't think to add it before, and I apologize for any pain it may have caused.

xoxo

February 22nd, 1999

They don't deliberate.

They muse and mull and *drag* their way through it, as if they know each and every second has Hermione grinding away another thin layer of her teeth. Her jaw aches. Her eyes itch and sting. She stares resolutely at the base of Burbage's podium, because glancing to her left is out of the question right now.

And all the while, the same word bounces back and forth off the walls of her head.

Why?

Why — why — why?

She's not a fool. She has no misgivings about the human heart — no silly daydreams about love at first sight. People don't fall that way. Not very often. And she's convinced the ones that do have actually just suffered some sort of synapse malfunction. An ill-timed dopamine release.

Most people — like her — like...like him — take a lot more convincing.

Malfoy didn't love her on that cold marble floor. Those eyes she stared into — through the strain, through tears, with a knife carving into her skin — they weren't the eyes of a lover. There was just fear. Hers and his. Fear and desperation and disbelief and just this silent plea of *please — please, you know me — we were classmates — please.*

And at the time, she'd thought that plea went unanswered. At the time, everything sort of fit.

Malfoy made her life a living hell in school, so why would he lift a finger now? It fit. It *fit*.

This doesn't.

Her eyes glaze over, losing focus, and the podium starts to morph into two the longer she stares at it. She doesn't even realize she's tracing the letters of her scar until the ragged edge of one of her fingernails — bitten raw over the past few weeks — snags on the rough skin and sends a jolt of pain up her arm.

She blinks her eyes back into focus and glances down at it, watching a little fresh bead of blood

trickle down over the word '*BLOOD*' itself.

Poison. How could she not have known? How could she not have felt it, seeping into her? Even amongst all that pain? How could she have missed it leeching through her skin, in and then back out again?

How could she have missed Malfoy's moving lips?

She thought she remembered everything about that day.

Instinctively, her eyes flit left — before she can stop them. He's staring back at her through the bars. Bloodshot, hoarse. Heaving. A single strand of blond dangles between his piercing eyes, sweat-soaked.

She's seen Malfoy in lots of states, she thinks, but never like this. Even half frozen to death — even in a fit of rage — he's never looked quite like this.

"Look what you've done," he says, low and breathless. Quiet enough it's only for her ears.

Hermione's barely conscious of the rest of the room. It seems to fall away when faced with the look in his eyes.

Even as Burbage calls out, "We have reached our verdict," she finds she's only half-listening. Can't tear her gaze away. The words "*probation*," and "*damages*," glide across the podium to her, but they're meaningless. Words that don't make sense.

All she can hear is him.

"Look what you've done," he murmurs again. "Now, it was all for nothing."

Harry has to talk her through what happened.

Everything after Malfoy's cage sank back below the ground is a blur in her memory. But apparently there was quite the uproar. Many witches and wizards — not just Dawlish — had crammed their way into that trial to watch Malfoy fall. As Harry explains it, some of them actually tried to throw things at the Wizengamot before being escorted out.

But that part she understands.

What she doesn't understand is why she isn't already in front of the podium again, this time for Theodore Nott.

"They postponed it," Harry says again, clutching her shoulders gently as though to keep her upright. They're still in the Ministry atrium.

"I...I don't understand," she manages.

"Unforeseen circumstances," says Harry. "It's been postponed indefinitely — probably because of all the chaos in there. They said you'll be notified when they're ready to move forward."

It takes her a moment, and then she's nodding numbly. All she can think to ask is, "How's Pansy?"

Harry offers a wry, winded smile. “She’s...erm, less than pleased. It wasn’t pretty. But I told her it’d just give you more time to prepare his defense.”

She nods again. “Thank you.”

“‘Mione.” He gives her shoulders a shake. “You’ve *won*. I know it was a lot to take in but — you did it. You *won*.”

Then why doesn’t it feel that way?

She just nods a third time. Plasters a false smile on her face.

Malfoy’s not allowed to leave with them. The Ministry claims he has to be ‘*formally discharged*,’ and it takes Harry a long while and lots of tugging to get Hermione’s feet to move.

Part of her doesn’t believe they’ll really let him go.

When they make it back to the Great Hall, Harry insists she come back with him to Gryffindor for a nap. But he hasn’t even finished his sentence, and she’s already turning in the direction of the Dungeons — leaves him with a squeeze of his shoulder.

Her feet take her to the false wall instinctively, her infamous knock echoing down the corridor. They all know it by now.

But this time it’s...different.

This time, when Blaise finds her at the door, there’s no air of disinterest. No mocking smile. No sense of unwelcome as she steps past him into the Slytherin common room.

She recognizes most of the students spread out across the room, now. Ones she never knew the names of before. Probably because she’s defended more than half of them.

And this time, as their eyes follow her to the corner of the leather sofa she always takes, she doesn’t feel like a target. Her eyes stumble on Adrian Pucey as she takes her seat. At first she thinks it’s a trick of the light.

But no. That’s a nod she saw. A nod from him.

She blinks back at him for too many seconds, stunned. Finally forces herself to tip her head in return. Adrian looks back down at his book like nothing happened — but her world is tipping on its axis. Keeps tipping as Blaise appears in front of her again, holding out a glass of Firewhiskey.

“T-Thank you,” she says, a little dazed as she takes it.

“*Acta non verba*,” is his response.

Her brows bunch together. For a moment, she thinks he’s offering a sort of cryptic comment on the situation. *Deeds, not words*, the Latin means. She knows that much.

But then he says, “It’s the password.”

And when she blinks stupidly up at him, he juts his head at the door she just came through.

“We had it changed this morning.” His lip curves up, just barely on one side. A half-smile. “Don’t need to knock anymore.”

He leaves her open-mouthed in his wake as he heads up the stairs to the dormitories. And she literally has to sit back — stares at her lap and takes a moment to fully grasp it.

Trust, she finally realizes. *It's trust.*

The same trust she now has for them. All of them. A trust that allows her to nearly drift off half an hour later — on *their* couch, in *their* territory. But her eyes have barely slipped shut when the false wall gives way again.

She jerks up, head whipping to the entryway. And there he is.

Hermione jumps to her feet. The noises of the common room cut off abruptly, all eyes lifting to the two of them.

His clothes are dirty. Torn. Somehow more noticeable now than they were in the cage. His black eye still hasn't fully healed. But he's here. He's *here*.

She's barely formed a smile when she puts together the expression on his face.

He's furious.

She can see it — not just in his eyes or in the set of his jaw, but in the way his chest heaves up and down with every breath.

A few unwitting Slytherins actually stand up to greet him, only backing off when they see his face. And all the while, he doesn't take his piercing eyes off her.

She doesn't dare move. Doesn't speak.

Not until he grits out, "Can I have a word?" and juts his chin over his shoulder, voice tight.

It's probably unwise to go anywhere with him right now. But she hasn't seen him in weeks without the separation of bars between them, and the concept of being face to face again eventually wins her over.

She follows him out, the silence of the common room dull and hollow in their wake.

Malfoy doesn't look back even once as he leads her through the corridors. A few students still milling about in the late afternoon actually jump upon seeing him, either because of his state or because they never expected him back.

She realizes she should be nervous — perhaps even afraid — as he stalks out into the courtyard, shadow long and thin in the dying light. There are only a handful of reasons they'd need so much seclusion. She doesn't stop though. Not as he continues down the hill and further still to the steps that lead to the boathouse. The memories that flood through her at the sight of it make her breath hitch, but she doesn't say a word. Only follows in silence the whole way down the steep, stone stairs.

This will be their reckoning. She can tell as much from the angle of his shoulders as he walks. From the fists he keeps gathered at his sides, flexing them once as they cross the threshold into the small enclosure.

But even when he stops walking, standing statuesque at the far end of the boathouse, there's still at least a full minute of silence — every second of it spent with his back to her.

Then, at last —

“Are you happy?”

It’s a snarl. Low and quiet.

Hermione’s surprised how quickly the cold laugh tumbles off her lips. “Am I *what*?”

“Happy?” he repeats, slowly turning to face her. “Satisfied? Proud of yourself?”

She had a sense he’d try to take this road — even in her daze as she left the Ministry, she’d considered it. Malfoy doesn’t take to being helped. Even his mother acknowledges it.

“Yes,” she says, taking a few calculated steps toward. The intensity of his breathing seems to kick up a notch with each one. “I’d say so. Actually, I’d say I’m *very* proud,” another few steps, leaving only a meter or so between them, “especially considering I managed it without so much as an *ounce* of help from you.”

And even as she says it — even as his nostrils flare — she feels that it’s wrong. It wasn’t supposed to go this way. She didn’t want it to go this way.

Because no matter how absurd he is, no matter how selfish and pigheaded and *stubborn*, she can’t erase what she saw in that courtroom.

He saved her.

She forces her face to soften, taking another more timid step toward him. Makes herself say it out loud. “You saved me—”

“*And what good is it now?*” he hisses, so sharply and so abruptly she’s tempted to take a step back. “After what you *did*? I told you — I *warned* you — I made you *swear* not to —”

“To what?” she splutters, spreading her arms wide. “Return the favor? Why can you save me, but I can’t save you?” Two more steps, and they’re nearly chest to chest. Again, she tries to soften, “Malfoy...it’s — it’s *over*, now. Once I go back for Theo, it’s ov—”

“If you’re stupid enough to think this is over, then I guess you’re not the brightest witch of your age.”

She blinks at him for a moment, at a loss.

“They’re killing anyone who defends us. And you’ve made yourself a prime target. You —you’ve gone and fucked everything.” He huffs an unfriendly laugh in her face. “How could you be so *selfish*?”

The slap is hard and unforgiving — so fast, she barely even realizes she’s done it. But she sees the color bloom in his cheek. Feels the sting spreading across her palm. Shock and fury flashes through his gaze. She opens her mouth to defend herself—

Malfoy’s hand finds her throat in an instant, taking hold and twisting to force her back against the stone wall. Her gasp is choked, shoved out of her chest by the impact. Her hands fly up to pry at his fingers as he squeezes tight and draws in close. Puts them nose to nose. “Is this what you want from me?” It’s only a murmur, but his tone is as deadly as his grip. “You want me like this?” He flexes his fingers once, allowing a single breath to trickle in before squeezing again. “Why? *Why*? Why do you *always* make me do this?”

Hermione manages to dig her nails in enough to slip a few fingers under his, sucking down gulps of air. But she can't bring herself to surrender. Can't bring herself to back down, even as the blood in her head starts to rush.

"You're the selfish one," she wheezes, almost enjoying the way his eyes spark and narrow. Whatever the reason, though, he lets his hand drop lower on her throat — no longer crushing her windpipe, just holding her in place. Almost like he's daring her to continue.

Her head is spinning. But she will. Damn him, she *will*.

"Spoiled, little rich boy," she pants, sneering at him. She bares her teeth, even as alarm bells blare in her head. *This isn't you. This isn't you*, they cry, but it feels so good — *too* good — going for the kill. "Can't stand to be disobeyed. Can't stand the thought of someone other than *Daddy* coming to his rescue."

Malfoy's searing eyes flash, and he yanks her head away from the wall enough to fist his free hand in her hair — yanks hard, dragging on her scalp.

She just feels encouraged. "Doesn't know how to behave," she hisses, eyes watering. "Doesn't know how to say thank you."

"*Thank you?*" he seethes, pulling harder until she can't help a little, pained squeak. "Oh, I'm not going to *thank* you."

He's so close, his nose is slotted against hers. So close her eyes have the treacherous urge to flutter shut — because normally when he's this close she gets to taste him. And she shouldn't *want* to taste him.

"Make no mistake," he growls, and he has the nerve to nuzzle her cheek as he says it — a threat wrapped in affection. "If you get yourself taken away from me, I will *kill* you. Do you understand?"

She swallows a heaving breath by mistake.

"I will bring you back from the brink of death if I have to, and then I will fucking *kill* you. Just so I can do it myself."

There's a gap of rigid silence, with only their ragged breaths to fill the space.

And she has no explanation. No excuse.

But it's her head that tilts back. Her lips that seek out his — slot against and seize them like a lost possession. It forces a strangled sound out of his throat, and it sends a chill through her as his grip on her neck goes slack.

His mouth parts against hers like it doesn't want to. Like the very concept of a kiss infuriates him in this moment. But then his teeth sink into her lower lip, dragging it out and releasing it with a wet, filthy sort of sound that makes her thighs quiver. And for a moment he just lets his forehead rest against hers. Pants into her face as his hand slides down to her collarbone, hesitating over her thudding pulse.

The scent of peppermint clouds around them.

"You're going to ruin my fucking life," Malfoy breathes, finger tracing absent circles on the skin of her chest. The other hand, still buried in her curls, spreads its fingers to scrape its nails along her

scalp. She hisses through her teeth, eyes falling shut. Gooseflesh spreads across her like a wildfire.

“You — you’re—” she stutters, tongue tripping over itself as his hand drags a slow path down between her breasts, over her stomach, landing low — too low — on her hip. “You’re the one doing the ruining. It’s like — *ah*—” She gasps as his head dips suddenly, teeth grazing the spot just below her jaw. “It’s like you want it ruined.”

He mouths at the spot for a moment. Huffs a laugh, then puts his lips at her ear. “Maybe,” he whispers, breath hot against the too-sensitive skin. She clenches her thighs together. “But only by you.”

She squirms as his hand glides past her hip and down her leg, fingers curling under the hem of her Ministry-approved pencil skirt. And then she starts to shake as he traces the bare skin of her inner thigh, walking those fingers up the last few inches towards the apex.

“Going to let me in?” he murmurs, tongue lashing at her earlobe.

She spreads her legs instantly, head falling back into his hand. And Malfoy just laughs, low and dark into her ear, even as his hand slides home between her thighs. “Look at you. You don’t even fight back anymore.”

Her breaths are coming in desperate little puffs, a tremor riding up her spine as he applies just the faintest pressure over her underwear — but she still feels the pulse of indignation. With the hand not hopelessly tangled into his hair, she reaches out and gropes him *hard*. Harder than she knows she should, earning a cut grunt out of him. “Want me to?” she sneers.

“Bitch,” he hisses, but she can feel him growing harder against her palm.

She lets loose a breathy sigh as he adds more pressure to the lace between her legs, dropping her head forward onto his shoulder. Losing focus. “You smell like prison,” she mumbles against his shirt collar.

He responds by yanking her underwear to the side, rough pads of his fingers finding her clit like they’re magnetized. She jerks violently against him.

“And you smell *wet*,” he says. It’s meant to be snide, but it’s more a groan than anything as he gathers up the moisture and uses it to push two fingers inside.

“Yes,” she gasps, forgetting it’s not a question. She shifts to loop both her arms around the back of his neck, not even shy as she starts to grind her hips into his hand, rising and falling with each slow pump of his fingers.

He groans again as she does it, picking up the pace and licking a stripe up her neck. “God, I hate you.”

It just slips out. Forever, she’ll blame it on the way his fingers curl up — find that spot that makes her eyes roll back into her head. But she knows that’s not why she says it.

“And I love you.”

She thinks she has for a while.

His reaction’s not what she’s expecting. To his credit, Malfoy — *Draco. He’s inside of you. Draco* — always manages to surprise her.

He tears his fingers out, and the loss is unbelievably painful for a moment. Leaves her wanton and desolate until he takes her jaw in his hand — wet with her essence and pressing hard into her skin — and forces her to meet his suddenly burning gaze. “Look at me — *look at me.*”

She stares, wide-eyed. Doesn’t dare blink.

“Don’t you fucking say it unless you mean it.”

The urge to correct him is surprisingly immediate. She has to stop the words halfway up her throat, just to get the chance to think. And it’s admittedly hard to think right now, throbbing the way she is.

But he’s giving her an out. Not even hiding it. The one-time-only opportunity to take it back, which is more than she can say she did for him.

No, she backed down. Backed away. *Ran.* Like a coward.

But here he is, pressing bruises into her skin and daring her to step on his heart. Throwing himself on the grenade.

And they probably both know she should take the offer. It’d be best for everyone. Might even save some lives.

She shuts her eyes. Breathes deeply, channeling every last drop of fearlessness she possesses before she opens them again. His gaze hasn’t moved an inch — unwavering — but she meets it head on.

She’s done saving lives.

“I mean it.”

And *god*, the way he bares his teeth — like he plans on making her regret it.

“Then say it again,” he demands. A threat.

“I mean it.”

“*No.*” Abruptly, he shoves her skirt up over her hips, rough enough to punish — to hurt. She can hear the fabric tear. “Don’t play games with me.”

She only notices his hands are shaking when he goes for the fasten on his trousers, and her pulse starts to hammer in anticipation. Her mouth runs dry.

“Say it again,” he growls, just before he performs a rather impressive bit of wandless magic. One moment her stomach glows pink, and the next she’s up in his arms, legs spread. Hitched up over his hips as he lines her up, hands carving into her backside as he presses her back against the wall. The friction is *unbearable*. She tries so hard — it’s humiliating how hard she tries to grind against him, wanting him inside. Wanting to fill the void.

But he’s got her pinned too tightly to allow it.

“Hermione.” His voice has dropped to a whisper. Full of malice. Full of hatred that doesn’t match, doesn’t coexist with the way her heart swells at the sound of her name on his lips. She’s realizing it doesn’t matter how he says it. As long as it’s him. “*Say it. Again.*”

Swallowing her fear — swallowing her pride — she meets his eyes again the way one meets an enemy on the battlefield. “I love you.”

Draco lets the words hang in the air for a fraction of a second. Enough time for her to smirk in his face. A challenge.

Something feral rips out of his throat, and the next instant he's inside of her.

She chokes on something halfway between a moan and a shriek. Her body's forgotten him — has to familiarize itself with the way they interlock all over again. Stretches. Accommodates. But she hasn't forgotten the way he presses himself in close, nestling into the crook of her neck. Blasting hot breaths against her flesh as he pulls out and drives back in — slow, so torturously slow — the first time.

"I thought you were smart," he groans. It's muffled by her skin, and he follows it up with an impossibly delicious, desperate kind of sound. Like he's wounded. Like he's losing control. He bites and sucks at her neck as he starts to thrust in hard. The type of hard that sees their hipbones colliding — bruising.

"*Ah!* So did — *god*, there, right there — so did I."

The need to kiss him is suddenly overwhelming. She struggles to unlock her wrists from around his neck, gasping as the shift invites him in deeper. Her hands scramble for purchase, skating across his chest and up along the smooth cords of muscle lining his throat, finally finding the cool planes of his face and dragging him away from her neck.

"Please — *please*, I—" She cuts herself off when her mouth finds his, and she doesn't care that their teeth clash, too eager. Doesn't care that she tastes the blood of his split lip. She only cares about the warmth of his tongue as it curls around hers. The exquisite pressure as he sucks and licks and *bites*.

It makes the muscles in her lower abdomen clench around him, and he rewards her with another strangled groan, this one into her mouth. "*Fuck.*" The rhythm of his hips stutters, then picks back up again faster — harder — sending little shockwaves down her legs and up her spine.

And she must short-circuit somehow, because the oddest thought pops into her head. "Draco, I — *oh* — I just realiz — *oh, god*—"

He doesn't cut the rhythm. Not even a fraction, even as he grinds out, "What?" in a breathless, irritated tone.

"I — we've — we've never done it in a bed."

This does make him pause, halfway sheathed inside her. And it's both a breather and a unique sensation all its own, making her swirl her hips a bit to get a feel for it.

He hisses and grips her waist hard to make her stop, panting against her mouth. Then, quietly, "Do you want me to fuck you in a bed?"

The thought floods her with a gelatinous wave of pleasure. "*Yes.*"

"Fine," he says. But panic rips through her when he starts to pull out.

"No. *No!*" She probably scratches him, grabbing at him the way she does, hands fisting in his shirt. Any other day, she'd hate herself for begging. But right now she can't bring herself to care. "Don't stop. *Please*. Don't stop — don't stop." And she's actually rather impressed with herself when she manages to shift her hips upward, even at the strange angle, taking him in hungrily — as deep as she can. "Not now," she pants, one hand freeing his shirt to card through his sweat-damp hair.

“Later. *Later*. Please.”

He punishes her by hesitating. Waits until she actually *whimpers* before starting up the rhythm again and then buries his face in her curls. “Make up your fucking mind,” he huffs. But she can hear the smirk in his voice.

“*Ah* — there! Right there. Harder. Please. *Please*. Harder.” She’s been reduced to single-word sentences.

He starts to drive into her at a pace that aches, and she lets her nails scrape down from his scalp to his lower back. The hitch in his breath is enough to tell her to do it again.

And that throb starts to build. Reaching, crawling, trying to crest that hill.

“I’m close. I’m close. *Draco*. Please — I’m so close.” She’s a broken record, now.

His lips find her ear, and between hushed whispers of, “*Come. Come for me,*” he sucks and bites at her earlobe. It undoes her.

With a sharp cry, she tenses up against him — feels the pressure explode, hips gyrating out of control. Spasming. Pulsing as she shakes and clutches at him to keep from falling.

He doesn’t let her fall.

Not even when she feels his muscles coil and lock — when he suddenly drives in deeper than she thought he could, coming with a pained sort of yelp that’s so vulnerable it’s almost heartbreaking.

Her heart slams in her chest as they sink down from the high together, her cheeks flushed, sweat dripping down the back of her neck.

For a moment it’s just the silence. The silence and their staggered breathing and the quiet laps of waves against the boathouse dock.

Then Draco pulls his face from the crook of her neck, eyes closed as he drags his nose gently against hers. Again, he says words that don’t match up. Quietly. Lovingly.

“I don’t forgive you.”

She releases a shuddering breath against his lips.

“I didn’t apologize.”

February 22nd, 1999

The sheets clinging to the damp, naked flesh of her side are Slytherin green — and she's thinking that should feel stranger than it does.

She's always had bad timing. Always had bizarre epiphanies and aimless trains of thought strike at the wrong moments. And this feels like the absolute *worst* moment to be wondering what her fifteen-year-old self would be thinking — this moment, with Draco Malfoy's strong, pale hand splayed across her bare hip, holding her in place; with her knee hitched up high to accommodate and her hair clinging to the pillow with sweat; with those Slytherin green sheets gathered into her fist as her breath catches around a moan; with him pressed against her back, quiet gasps sweeping across the nape of her neck as he slides in and out *slowly* — slower than he ever has — because she asked him to.

And yet she's wondering all the same. Figures her fifteen and sixteen and even seventeen-year-old selves would all be horrified to find that their future held a moment like this. Because surely, the universe can't have tilted so far on its axis that she's staring at serpent-adorned bed curtains as those warm, electric pulses surge up from between her thighs. Surely, it can't be Malfoy — *Draco* — she's letting do this. Surely, it can't feel the way it feels.

But it *is*. And it *does*. And it's sunken in before, but never quite this deep. Because before, every time always felt so spur-of-the-moment. Unexpected collisions in even less expected places.

This, however — this is deliberate. Letting him tow her along the deserted corridors and down the all too familiar Dungeon steps. Letting him lead her wordlessly through the common room, a few Slytherins still awake — none of them even looked up. Watching him cast silencing charms around his four-poster, with the sleeping form of Blaise Zabini not two meters to the left.

And a part of her is realizing why she blurted out those ridiculous words in the boathouse.

To her, the bed is a symbol, and Hermione has never shared a bed — a real bed — with anyone. Not with Viktor. Not with Ron. Not even just to sleep. There's something too personal about it. Too vulnerable. It's incredibly different from those pillows on the floor of the Divination classroom. It's as if—

Draco's lips glide from the pulse point on her throat to the shell of her ear, grip tightening on her hip ever so slightly as he rocks in a little deeper. Still so torturously slow.

"If you're going to solve puzzles in your head while I'm inside of you," he murmurs, voice a little ragged, "the least you could do is include me."

Hermione tilts her head, nose brushing his unexpectedly. She speaks against the corner of his mouth, each slow thrust moving her lips across his cheek. "You want to help me solve a puzzle?"

His hand frees her hip, palm splaying out across her thigh — sliding up along the tendons to the crease behind her knee. The delicacy of it mixed in with the way he rolls his hips makes her shiver and buck against him.

"Well yes, if it's so much more *interesting*..." He slides in to the hilt, jolting the breath out of her. "— than this."

She's left panting for several seconds, eyes falling shut as she fists the sheets tighter in hand. The word, "*Faster*," falls from her lips in a hiss.

Draco hums into her shoulder. "Odd. I seem to remember you begging me to go slow."

She scoffs instinctively, the jerk of it proving interesting with the way they're connected. He tenses. She groans.

"I did not *beg* you for anything."

His lips part against her pulse, teeth grazing skin as he speaks in a breathy croon meant to be her own. "Please. Oh, please *please*, Draco — fuck me slow."

She grinds herself back against him in a way that's supposed to be indignant but earns a moan from both of them instead.

"I never said that," she gasps out.

"*Please*," he mocks in a whine. "Please, please, *please*."

And she would be pulling away — swatting at his arm and giving him a dirty look — if he weren't punctuating each word with a languid, angled thrust. Instead, her eyes roll back into her head, and she pushes herself tighter against him, tucking her nose into the crook of his neck to press a kiss to his throat. She tastes salt and finds herself tracing her tongue over the spot in search of more.

"Oh, now I have your attention?" he murmurs — deep vibrations against her lips.

"You never lost it."

He goes still inside of her. Just hovers there for a long moment, his dark shadow draped over her side. And she has a feeling he's talking about something else entirely when he says, "I don't believe you."

His tone makes her shift away, even as every muscle and every nerve ending in her body begs her not to. That strange, throbbing emptiness takes his place when he slides out, and she feels abruptly cold as she twists in the emerald green sheets to face him.

The only light by which to see him comes from the thin sliver of sea-glow seeping through a crack in the bed curtains. It paints a quarter of his face blue, the rest left in shadow, but she can see his right eye. Can see the bruises — part of the reason she wanted to face away in the first place.

"What don't you believe?" she whispers, resting her head on the pillow.

He stays propped on one elbow, staring at her. For a moment, he doesn't answer, letting the rougher-than-usual pads of his fingers trace the hollow beside her hipbone. He glances down, watching the movements as he speaks. "You say one thing, and you do another."

"I—"

"You tell me we're the same, but you spend all your time trying to remind yourself why we're different."

"That's not—"

His palm flattens out across her bare stomach, the soft caress surprising her into silence.

“You say you’d pick me out of a room of hundreds,” he continues, still watching his hand slide back and forth, “and then you run.”

A lump forms in her throat, and he lets that hand drift downward, disappearing beneath the sheets. His eyes flit back to hers when one finger slides between her legs — still warm, still wet from moments ago — and she can’t help but twitch as she holds her breath.

“You fuck me in a hospital bed,” he says softly — always speaking in tones that don’t match — and his forefinger starts to draw torturous circles around her clit. “You let me have you first — I couldn’t even believe it when I saw you bleed. I thought you were lying.”

She gasps sharply when his thumb slips inside of her.

“You let me have you first,” he says again, “but you can’t bear the thought of anyone knowing it.”

Her mind wants to turn to static, ripples of pleasure shooting up her spine, but she wakes up enough to defend herself. “I changed my—”

“Yes, you changed your mind, I know.” Draco lets the back of his thumb press hard against her inner walls, and her back arches, hands coming to rest on his chest without knowing it. “I’m only making a point.”

“What — *god* — what is your point?” She’s hardly focused now, all efforts diverted to angling her hips so she can press harder against his hand.

“You say you love me,” he whispers, going still.

She freezes too. Holds her breath.

“But all you ever do is cause me pain.” He stares at her out from beneath those blond lashes, unapologetic. Blinking slowly as he watches her process his words.

After a moment, she releases that breath, and it tousles the damp hair hanging across his forehead.

“Pain,” she echoes at first, because it’s all she can think to say.

His eyes flit back and forth between each of hers. As though he’s reading her like a chapter in a book. A chapter he doesn’t understand. “Yes,” he says. “Pain.”

But when his jaw grazes hers and he leans in to kiss her, she finds herself pulling away. Because there’s something she’s been wanting to do — to try — and if it can somehow simultaneously prove him wrong, then that’s two birds with one stone.

But *god above*, what a thing it is to watch all his defenses fly up at just that slight movement. Fear and fury and doubt cloud up in his eyes as they break away from hers, like he suddenly can’t stand to have her look at him. And it’s simply too sharp and painful to witness for even half a second longer.

With twice his enthusiasm, she surges forward and captures those lips. His small gasp makes way for her tongue to slip inside, caressing the sharp edges of his teeth — the soft warmth of the roof of his mouth. It’s a more filthy kiss than she thinks she would’ve ever dared before, but after a day like today she feels very little still exists in the way of limits.

She slips one hand across his forehead between them, being careful not to press too hard on the bruises as she smooths out each crease of worry.

“So quick to doubt me,” she murmurs around the lash of his tongue.

His arms have curled around her now, and he’s giving back as good as he gets — starting to press her down into the mattress.

“Wait,” she says, breaking away from his lips once more, because if she lets him settle between her thighs she’ll never get the chance to try what she wants to. And before the doubt can creep back across his face, she strokes a hand down the sharp plane of his cheek and tells him, “Trust me.”

He does.

Enough to allow her to slide out from under him. Enough to turn and sit back against his headboard, raising a curious brow as she sets about finding her wand in the messy pile of their clothes.

“I never see you like this.” His voice is quiet and low — contemplative — as he watches her conjure a hair tie and set about gathering her chaotic mane into something manageable.

“With my hair up?” she asks, trying not to get distracted by the angled slopes of his shoulders, now more visible in that sliver of light.

He shakes his head and she realizes where his gaze is trained. Flushes red as she glances down at her bare torso, the sheets gathered around her waist.

“You see me naked all the time,” she says, resisting the powerful urge to cover herself. Draco may have said he loves her, but he has never explicitly called her beautiful — and she’s wondering now if he notices the slightly larger swell of one breast as opposed to the other. The clumsy smattering of freckles in the valley between them. She wonders if it bothers him that she doesn’t have more to offer in this department.

“But I never get to *look*,” he says, and again it’s like he’s reading, eyes sweeping back and forth across every available inch of skin. She starts to itch with it, growing nervous. And she *can’t* be nervous if she plans to follow through on this.

So she swallows and wets her suddenly dry lips and makes herself ask, “And what do you think?”

The last thing she expects is a scoff. “You know what I think,” he drawls, shaking his head. Sharp. Dismissive.

She swallows again, infinitely more nervous now. “No. You’ve never told me.”

Something passes through his gaze at that. There’s a slight quiver in his brows. He readjusts his posture where he sits, silent for a long moment.

Then, “I’ve *shown* you what I think.”

Her pulse settles a little in her chest, but she’s still far from satisfied. She urges herself to sit tall and push him to his limits. “I’d like to hear what you think, if you don’t mind.”

His lip curls up at the snark in her tone, eyes narrowing just a fraction, and for the briefest moment it feels like they’re back in First Year. Testing and riling one another. “Oh, if I don’t mind?”

“Yes, if you don’t mind.” She sits up even straighter, internally hyper-conscious that she’s on full display for him.

Draco crosses his arms, letting his head fall back against the headboard and surveying her through lowered lids. His expression exudes superiority and arrogance, and for just a moment she well and truly panics.

Because what if this is one of those moments he chooses to air out the ugliness between them?

“Well, Granger, if you *must* know —” he all but hisses, and it takes everything in her not to squeeze her eyes shut. Not to yank that sheet up and over herself and *hide*. “— I used to imagine you.”

Her expectations fly out the window. “What?”

Draco shifts with discomfort, glancing down at the sheets in favor of looking at her and tugging on a stray thread. “In Third Year,” he continues, tone still sharp and somewhat indignant. “Father was suddenly around less. Busy with meetings — I’m sure you know what sort. I suddenly didn’t have to spend nearly as much time trying to best Saint Potter, because I knew I wouldn’t get a scathing letter every time his marks were half a point better than mine.”

She feels a stab of something. Guilt? She thinks he’d murder her if he knew it was sympathy, judging by the way he shoves past the subject.

“I had time on my hands that I’d never had before, and lots of space in my head he wasn’t taking up any longer.” A quick glance her way, then back at the seam of the sheet he’s unraveling. “I was thirteen,” he says with a shrug. “I didn’t know what was wrong with me. I just knew I constantly felt like I had to sneak off to broom cupboards and shove a hand down my trousers.”

She feels herself blush. And that’s where he sort of loses it.

His tone comes out bitter and biting and increasingly furious, and it in no way aligns with anything he’s saying.

“I felt like I lost all self control. I was so ashamed of it, but it was also the only thing I ever wanted to do. And Merlin fucking knows I’d never seen anything as pretty as you.”

Her breath catches. He hardly seems to notice.

“You in those fucking ridiculous Muggle jeans, with your monstrous hair and your gorgeous little mouth. Fuck, I hated how it always used to be you. I’d lie right fucking here —” He slaps the mattress, and her pulse jumps. “— and do my level best to picture Pansy in one of her absurdly short skirts, or Johnson that time I saw her changing after Quidditch practice, and I would just...” He trails off, squaring his jaw and gritting his teeth as he makes the lewd up-and-down motion with his hand in favor of saying it. Then his eyes jump to hers, quick and unexpected. Like the crack of a whip. “But *every fucking time* my mind would just — just fucking implode, and one second it’d be Pansy up against the wall and the next it’d be those fucking eyes.” He points at her. An accusation. “That fucking hair. These hands.” He reaches out and yanks on one, making her gasp before he lets it drop. “One second it’s Pansy, and the next it’s you I’m on my knees for, and it’s your cunt I can taste — though I swear I never imagined you’d taste quite like you do, *fucking hell* — and you just fucking blindsided me.”

It’s like one of his diary entries. Incessant, furious rambling he can’t seem to stop.

“I was supposed to find you repulsive. I was supposed to think of you like vermin, and yet there I fucking am, pumping myself fucking dry night after night, wishing I knew what you felt like on the inside. Wondering if Weasley fucking knew and wanting to be fucking sick. And to make

matters worse, I still *fucking hated* you. I thought I was losing my mind, because every time I looked at you — with that superior little tilt of those fucking hips, and those ridiculous fucking eyebrows — I could somehow simultaneously picture making you writhe under me and kicking your fucking teeth in. Because I didn't know you. I knew absolutely fuck-all about you except that your blood was supposed to be filthy and that your eyes made my mouth water."

Her cheeks are wet. She hardly knows.

"And now look at me." He spreads his arms wide and gives a defeated, incredulous sort of huff. "Now, I *do* know you, and now I'm fucking hopeless. Now I don't lose sleep over missions, or Marks, or my fucking father — I lose sleep over *you*. Wondering what happens to *you* if I ever fuck up again. If I'm already fucking things up just by being involved. You — you sit there after barging your way into my head, into my fucking bloodstream — *trespassing* — and you want to hear what I *think*? You want me to tell you you're pretty? So bloody beautiful I want to gouge my fucking eyes out? You want to hear that? After you took this stupid fucking organ out of my chest with your little fist and you just —" He gathers his own hand into a fist. "— just fucking *squeezed* until it looked fit to burst? After I begged you not to stand between me and whatever consequences I fucking earned? After I told you I couldn't stand to have one more fucking thing weighing on my conscience? After all this fucking pain you put me through, you want to hear what I *think*?"

He's panting when he finishes, hand still pulled tight in a bloodless fist between them. And she slaps the tears off her cheeks as quickly as she can, even as she knows he's already seen.

For a moment, they do absolutely nothing. For a moment, it feels like nothing can be done.

But nothing is not an option.

"Pain?" she asks again, stupidly, into the raw silence.

"Yes," he breathes. "Pain."

She has to do it now — before she allows herself to process what she's just heard and utterly break down.

So she sniffs back the residual tears and screws up her courage, walking forward on her palms until they bracket his thighs beneath the sheets. "Alright," she says and starts to tug them down from around his waist.

"What are you doing?" Gone is the furious vitriol of moments ago, and now he's the one who sounds nervous.

"Tell me if this is pain."

His hand shackles her wrist before she can slide the sheet down those last critical inches past his hipbones, the smack of it loud in her ears. When she glances up at him, a question in her eyes, he looks suddenly young. Boyish. Frightened and unsure.

She quirks a gentle brow, leaving the question unspoken.

And he puffs out a breath he must've been holding for a while. "Can you — can you blame me for expecting you to bite?"

That stabbing pain in her chest swells, and her hand shakes a little as she places it on top of his.

"No," she says, slipping her fingers beneath his until they loosen and free her wrist. "But I won't."

His fingertips linger on her skin. It takes him a long time to fully let go, and when he does she's quick to pull the sheet down the rest of the way. Before either of them can change their minds.

And even though at times it feels like she's been intimate with him in every possible way there is, this is different. She's never been in control like this, and it's so brutally obvious how much that scares him.

He's still hard. Skin still as silky as it ever was when she dared to touch him before, but from the way he sucks the air in through his teeth as she wraps her fingers around him, it's clear they're both in new territory.

He must be able to feel her trembling. She can certainly feel his. And she figures she may as well say it out loud, even though she's sure he already knows.

"I've never done this before." Glancing up at him as she manages a gentle stroke, up and down, she clears her throat and says the words she's always hated to say. "But I'll try my best."

In her mind, if the best isn't the end result, then she never really tried at all. But she's not sure that really applies in this situation. It doesn't matter, though. Before she can properly overthink it, he responds in a quiet voice and changes everything.

"I wouldn't know the difference."

She can't stop the way her eyes pop wide. The way she blinks vacantly up at him for too many seconds. "You've never...?"

"No." And she can tell by his guarded eyes, he thinks she's going to judge. Make assumptions.

There's no way for him to know how that ripple of selfish pleasure rides up her spine. Not until the small, coy smile splits her face — and even then, perhaps he thinks she's mocking him.

So she says exactly what she's thinking, and then forbids herself to stall any longer.

"Something of yours for me to take, then. I think that's more than fair." She dips her head, her lips only a hair's breadth away. "Don't you?"

"I—"

She tastes him. Lets her tongue glide up his smooth, thick length. Slow. Experimental. But from the way his spine lurches up off the bed — the way he gasps — it's like she's burned him. Hermione waits with the flat of her tongue against the head, allowing him a moment to ball the sheets beneath him into fists. Then she decides she was too distracted on the first go to get a true sense of how he tastes, so she does it again.

He groans — loud enough to give her a real appreciation for his silencing charms — and she closes her eyes to focus. There's salt and musk and a faint sweetness she never expected. It has her licking a third, long stripe upward before she even realizes, opening her mouth wider this time.

And when she reaches the head, spurred on by the shifting of his hips, she gathers a deep breath and takes him into her mouth.

It's abruptly and abundantly clear that nothing the girls ever said on those late nights in the dormitory was accurate.

Oral sex is a *privilege*.

She knows that in the instant he lets loose a guttural, “*Fuck*,” and tangles lazy fingers into her hair. And she commits herself to the intimidating task of making his first time unforgettable. Goes into it with the unmasked intent to ruin him for anyone else, ever.

And then it’s just a fever of sound. His labored, disbelieving breaths and profane, pleading whimpers — the wet, almost grotesque slurps of her mouth and tongue as she bobs her head up and down his length until her jaw aches — the quiet rustle of her hair as he tugs it free of the conjured tie, so he can gather it into his fist instead — the desperate choke in the back of her throat as she gags when he loses control, thrusting his hips against her face — the silent drip of sweat down her temples — those soft, little encouragements he gives that she’ll remember for the rest of her life.

Because she’s willing to bet Draco Malfoy has never uttered the word ‘*sweetheart*’ in his life. And yet —

“*Fuck* — like that, sweetheart — *yes* — *fuck* — just like that. Don’t — don’t stop.”

God, the way he *stutters*. It’s side of him she’s never seen.

“Pl-please — please, I’m — *fuck* — *fuck*, I’m begging you. I h-have — I have to. Please — please. Let me. *Please*.”

And for some reason it doesn’t occur to her what he’s asking for until she feels the warmth as he comes down the back of her throat, bitter salt splashing onto the edges of her tongue. She wills herself not to choke — to wait to breathe. Inhales through the nose and focuses instead on how beautiful he sounds, committing each of those desperate gasps and ragged groans to memory.

And when at last he pulls free of her mouth, panting, she makes good on a promise to herself and meets his gaze head-on as she swallows. Allows one stray drop to leak out between her lips before swiping it up with her thumb and licking it away. His eyes flash at the sight of it.

“Was that pain?” she asks, voice more calm than she could’ve hoped for.

A heavy breath blasts from his throat.

“Of a sort you can’t even imagine.”

February 23rd, 1999

The soot-stained letter Draco finds on his sill the next morning is from Theo, and it’s addressed to her.

Granger,

Maybe you’re all out of favors, but I thought I’d try for one more. I need to see her, and her probation doesn’t allow for it without an escort.

Bring Pansy to me. Please.

Theo

February 23rd, 1999

“Stay.”

She’s got her back to him, blouse halfway buttoned, wondering if anyone at the Ministry will notice she’s wearing the same clothes as yesterday — and it’s so quiet she’s not even sure he really said it.

“What?” she asks in a casual voice, hoping he didn’t and glancing halfway over her shoulder.

“Stay,” he says again, a little louder — a little more sure of it. He’s leaning back against the headboard, green sheets still tangled up beneath him, lazily swaying his propped knee back and forth.

She abandons the buttons and turns fully to face him. “I don’t understand.”

Draco huffs and swings his legs sideways to sit at the edge of the mattress. She’s shocked how natural a movement it is to step between his knees when he reaches for her — to let his hands slide up the backs of her thighs.

“You should stay,” he murmurs, resting his forehead against her ribs. It’s a simple, subtle thing, and yet the blossom of heat it sends through her is anything but.

“Pansy and Theo,” she says, more a reminder to herself. Already, her fingers are carding through his hair — still so surprising in its softness — and she wants nothing more than to let his mouth trail lower and lower on the path it’s already started.

But Theo’s letter still sits on the nightstand in her periphery.

“They can wait,” says Draco, nuzzling at the space above her navel as he starts to untuck her blouse from her skirt. He’s not often like this. And she wants to close her eyes and let her head drop back, but she stills his hands instead.

“I get the feeling he wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

Draco sighs, warming her skin with it briefly before he leans back. “That’s what you get when you hang other people’s clothes in public, or whatever the Muggles say.”

“Is that what you call saving someone’s life? Because that’s what I did. And it’s dirty laundry, by the way, not—“

He reaches up and covers her mouth almost like it’s an instinct. She raises an eyebrow at him, but when he drags the pad of his forefinger down along her bottom lip, she doesn’t think. Just opens her mouth and sucks on it gently.

Draco hisses out a breath and tugs her into his lap in one fluid movement. “You have to stay,” he growls, mouth sweeping forward to trace the column of her throat — teeth grazing her pulse point and biting down.

Hermione allows herself a small moment of weakness. Figures she’s earned it. She lets her head loll forward onto the smooth, warm curve of his shoulder, small gasp breaking on a moan when he

flattens his tongue and laves it slowly across the expanse between her collarbone and her ear.

“I don’t trust it when you’re anywhere else,” he whispers, nibbling on the lobe and making her shiver. “As it is, you’re the one who asked to be taken to my bed. And I think I like the look of you in it.”

She’s helpless — can’t *not* taste him, buried in the crook of his neck as she is, smelling his clean sweat; his sweet, smoky scent, like damp morning earth. She finds herself kissing along the cords of muscle of his throat — can almost feel the blood rush through his veins when his breath hitches and his grip tightens on her waist.

“Stay,” he demands again against the shell of her ear. His fingers slide beneath the hem of her skirt, stretched tight where she straddles him. “Stay, and I can make you come. I’ll make you come so hard, Granger, I promise.” His teeth drag on her earlobe just as the warmth of his palm settles between her legs. “I want to taste you again. I want to eat you.”

She huffs out another gasp against his skin, feeling the blush bleed out across her face. She’ll never know how he says things like that with such confidence — so unabashed. How he makes her throb so easily.

“You’re being selfish,” she says, practically a squeak as he starts to trace the damp seam of her underwear, rocking his fingers back and forth. Smiling into her skin when she bucks against him.

“What, you think this isn’t what he wants to do to Pansy?” He tugs her underwear to the side, guiding wet fingers back and forth over her center. Tracing her entrance. “Fucking hell, it’s so obvious. Maybe not on Pansy’s end, until now. But Nott was always done for when it came to her.”

Hermione almost swallows her words when he slides two fingers inside of her. “So you think he loves her too?”

Draco scoffs, pulling away from her neck and taking her chin in his free hand to line their gazes up. “Are you *blind*?” he asks, incredulous, as he runs the tip of his nose against hers. “Haven’t you seen the way he looks at her?” He nips at her bottom lip. “Fuck, Granger — you should know that look by now.”

Something flutters in her chest — something bright and heady and all-consuming — and then she’s kissing him. Sloppily. Drunkenly. Uncontrolled. But he must enjoy it from the rough sound he makes when she presses an insistent tongue into his mouth. His fingers start to pump faster, his hips raising with every thrust like he wishes it wasn’t his fingers at all.

And she has more than half a mind to reach for the fasten on his trousers

“We have to stop.” Hermione drags herself away from him the way adhesive peels from skin — a process painful and slow. Pulls his hand from between her legs, glistening in such a way she can’t help but flush a deeper red. “We...have to stop,” she repeats, breathless.

“Says who?” he hisses, nipping at her bottom lip again.

A loudly cleared throat makes them freeze.

“Well, I’d certainly appreciate it,” comes the groggy, muffled voice of Zabini from behind his bed curtains. “Unless one of you can fucking remember how to cast a silencing charm. Otherwise I’ll have to blind *and* deafen myself to get to breakfast.”

Mortified, Hermione starts to right her clothes, trying to pull away, but Draco keeps her steady in his lap, response as casual as ever.

“I thought voyeurism was one of your things, Blaise. You know. Like that time in Fifth Year, after the quidditch game—“

“Oh, fucking hell, not this again.”

“I, for one, remember *vividly*.”

“Shove off, Malfoy — fine! Do whatever you want with Granger ten inches from my face. Go for it. I’ll just —“ His voice becomes severely muffled by something else, but the rest of the sentence sounds vaguely like *“lie here and suffocate.”*

Draco grins against Hermione’s lips, kissing her once more, slowly, before pulling back. Her cheeks are still burning, and he reaches up to take her face in hand, tisking. “Shy as ever, Granger. When are you going to learn you have no reason to be ashamed?”

She’s not sure why she says what she does — it’s clear from his eyes, he’s only teasing — but maybe she’s bitter about being caught yet again with her knickers down, literally. Or maybe she just has no self control.

“For years, you gave me every reason to be ashamed. Don’t you remember? About my teeth, and my hair and my dirty blood.”

His face falls slowly, and she wonders whether she’s ever going to stop ruining things. Watches anxiously as a muscle works in his jaw, shifting in his lap all the while.

There’s too long of a silence. The dormitory’s too quiet. And it’s so uncomfortable, she’s halfway considering taking it back by the time he speaks.

“I regret that.”

She blinks at him — has no hope of masking her surprise.

“I don’t regret a lot of things, but I regret that.” His hands have fallen to her waist, toying absently with the buttons on her blouse. “I’m almost as mad at myself as I am at you for believing any of it.”

She huffs, but he continues before she can argue.

“You don’t have an excuse. You don’t.” He shakes his head and shrugs, then dips forward to place another open-mouthed kiss on her throat, setting her even further off balance. “How could you let such a stupid, scared, *spineless* little boy make you feel inferior? You? *You*. There’s no excuse.”

She breathes out slowly into the silence that follows, staring over his shoulder at the bedsheets. But before she’s even halfway constructed an adequate response, she’s beaten to it.

“Rubbish apology, mate.”

“Fuck you,” Draco tosses offhandedly at Zabini’s bunk.

“It’s an awful apology,” she echoes, even as the corner of her lip quirks up. “You should work on it.”

“He won’t.”

“Fuck you *and* your mother.” But just as he turns, likely to lob something at Blaise’s bed curtains, Hermione slides off his lap. It steals back his focus, and she can’t deny the way her throat closes up a bit when she sees him grapple for her hand.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

She allows herself to smile at him — to steal one more kiss before she sets about fixing all the damage he’s just done. “I’ll be an hour. Two, at the most.”

Draco makes a show of rolling his eyes, sliding back into his languid position against the headboard. But she’s just started retucking her blouse when the shock of purple makes her go still.

She’s not sure how he got it back.

He props the journal on his kneecap and sets about his lazy scrawl, pretending not to notice the way she’s staring at him.

“How did you—“

“Apparently it’s no longer evidence.” He looks up at her, face deceptively blank. Threads his fingers through the mussed hair she’s responsible for and drags it back out of his face. “In their eyes, I have no more excuses not to send in entries. They gave it back.”

“Oh.” She turns away. Finishes with the blouse and then starts to hunt around for her stockings, all the while trying to fill the silence. “You know, I still have no idea how it got entered into evidence in the first place. I had it last, and I *certainly* wasn’t planning on using it.”

“Mm,” he hums casually. “Suppose Smith is less of a tit than I thought after all.”

She stops again and glances up at him, halfway crouched by the foot of the bed where her stockings lay tangled up. “What?”

“Well, to be honest, I thought he’d fuck it up. Thought even an intelligent person would have trouble nicking something off you.” Draco jolts a brow at her over the journal’s corner. “You should keep a better eye on your things, Granger.”

She can’t help the way she blinks vacantly for a moment. The slowness of her spine as she straightens up. And when her voice does come out, it’s softer than she’d like.

“You...had him take it?” She clears her throat. “Had — had *Zacharias* take it?”

He just shrugs, still writing. “Figured it was a safe bet. Someone who already hated you.”

It takes her a few seconds to realize she’s drawn her wand. She thinks she might notice in the same instant he does, the look in his eyes shifting just a fraction as he finds the tip of it aimed at his nose.

And there’s something in his manner that’s infuriating to her. In the calm that radiates from him, the steadiness in his breathing. Even she’s not sure she could actually hex him in this moment, but a part of her wants him to be afraid of her. Just a little.

“Any idea what you plan to do with that?” he asks in that unbearably dull tone.

“I could swell your eyes shut,” she offers quietly. “Or I could turn your muscles to lead. I could do any number of things to you. I could unravel every memory in your brain if I wanted to.”

He slides the journal further down his knee so he can see her fully, and still his face doesn’t

change. She can feel her teeth grinding.

“Seems a bit excessive.”

She extends her wand until it’s half an inch closer to him.

“After all of that? After everything you saw me putting into it, you were going to sabotage me? Sabotage yourself?” Her wrist is trembling.

Malfoy’s expression darkens just a fraction. “I told you to leave it alone. But you wouldn’t listen.”

“If I hadn’t, you’d be *dead*.”

“Better me than you,” he says simply. Like it’s a matter of fact, as basic as the meaning of a rune or the ingredient in a potion.

Her wand arm falters for just a moment before she can stabilize it. “You...I — nothing *happened* to me. I’m — I’m here now, I’m standing right in front of you—“

“Why do you think I want you to stay? I can protect you when you’re right in front of me.”

The sudden prick of tears behind her eyes is sharp and painful. She resolutely ignores it. Has a point to make.

“*Malfoy—*”

“Granger.”

She huffs and presses her wand another inch closer, the tip of it not far from his skin. “Let’s make something clear, yes?”

His brow raises slowly in challenge as he folds both hands on top of his knee.

“I am in your life, now. You said I had to earn you, and I think I finally have. I am more than happy to be pulled into your tide.”

He smirks the way he always does when he’s uncomfortable. “Poetic.”

“Be quiet.” She waves her wand in his face. “Listen for once in your life. If you want me to stay, you will never undermine me again. You don’t get to gamble with your life, or mine, or anyone else’s ever again.”

He scoffs, of all things, so she takes that last step forward and presses the tip of her wand into the soft flesh beneath his chin. The way she did what seems like a lifetime ago, in that destroyed lavatory.

Malfoy goes silent.

“You told me once that you saw me as a threat,” she murmurs, searching his guarded eyes. “I hope that’s still true.”

He blinks once, slowly. And his tone is much changed when he answers, “It will always be true.”

A rush of strength and pride floods through her at the words. She steps back — lowers her wand and says, “Good,” before turning away. “I’ll be back soon.”

It will never be easy to interpret Pansy, but if the way she keeps tugging on strands of her hair and the way her hands keep twisting in the hem of her skirt are anything to go by, she's nervous about the way she looks.

"You—" Hermione clears her throat. "You look good."

Pansy scoffs loudly, immediately making her hands still and glaring at the gold bars of the Ministry lift. "Fuck off, Granger. I don't need your approval."

"You realize he'll probably be covered in dirt—"

"I said *fuck off*."

Hermione tucks her lips in and nods. "Right then." Adds a moment later, under her breath, "It's a nice skirt, though."

"I know it is."

"Right."

The remaining thirty seconds in the lift pass in awkward silence, leaving Hermione to think only on that same feeling she's had since she knocked on the door to Pansy's dormitory. The feeling that she's intruding — on something private and personal. Something uncertain. Intruding, even when she has to be here.

She won't go into the cells with her. She's decided that already. She'll wait at the doors, with the guard, for as long as she has to wait. And then she'll escort Pansy back out. That'll be the way of it.

It doesn't matter how curious she is.

The guard is that same greasy man she's encountered almost every time she visited the holding cells in the past, and he doesn't seem a bit surprised to see her.

"Good morning," she says, though they are far from friendly.

The guard flashes his blackened teeth.

"Pansy Parkinson here to see Theodore Nott."

His dull eyes shift to look Pansy up and down, and Hermione can feel her go tense beside her.

She clears her throat. "Quickly, if you please."

He doesn't take his eyes away. "Isn't this one on probation?"

"Yes," Hermione snaps, unable to hide the twinge of irritation. "Which is why I am escorting her. Will you let her pass?"

Slowly — like he's got all the time in the world — the guard slides his gaze back to her. "Who's it she's meant to see again?"

She gathers a calming breath and clears her throat again. "Theodore Nott."

And the first sign that something's wrong is in the practiced furrow of the guard's brows. The rehearsed confusion that passes over his face.

Pansy senses it, too, before he says a word. Goes downright rigid at Hermione's side as the guard reaches up to scratch the side of his greasy head.

"Nott..." he echoes languidly. "Nott. Mm...no. Can't say we have anyone by that name."

Her nails dig into her palms. "Excuse me?"

"I said we don't have anyone by that name. Not anymore."

XLVI

February 23rd, 1999

If she knows anything about war, it's the way it peels back skin. Exposes nerve endings. Those months she spent running, fighting — they've had a measured affect on her instincts. She's seen it, taking her reaction time from ten, maybe fifteen seconds to nearly zero. Which is why she should've already drawn her wand.

But she forgets that Pansy has seen war too.

And in that millisecond it takes Hermione to assess the situation, Pansy pins the guard to the bars behind him, dark rowan of her wand jabbing into the fleshy wrinkles of his throat.

"Where is he?" she hisses, voice like a knife's edge.

Hermione doesn't move to stop her. Not yet.

The bars are still rattling from the impact, and the guard's beady eyes have popped wide. But an uneasy, nervous smile splits his face as his eyes shift between Pansy's. "You think you can threaten me, girly? I know all about you. I know you're not allowed to use that wand."

Pansy digs the wand so deeply into his throat, it looks like a new eye socket, and his gagging noise is loud — foul.

"I will bleed and gut you right here, you filthy Squib. Try me."

Still, Hermione has no thoughts of intervening. It's only when the guard gives a wheezing chuckle and Pansy rears back, all manner of curses on her lips, that she steps forward and stays her hand.

"Don't. Don't. We may need him."

"Granger — " she growls, furious gaze still trained on the guard, but Hermione speaks quickly.

"Let me. I can — I know what to do, let me."

Pansy's look of doubt is vastly overshadowed by the stark fear in her eyes. It's a look that says she doesn't have time to second guess. Doesn't have time to revert back to old ways, old prejudices. Gryffindor this or Gryffindor that. And when she steps away from the guard, leaving him spluttering, Hermione feels that she's trusting her not to be gentle.

She won't be.

"Legilimens," she snaps the moment her wand is out, and the dizzying rush of being pulled into memory reminds her how long it's been since she practiced.

The world passes by in faded wisps of grey for long, drowsy moments as the magic settles, faint figures racing across her vision until time slows around the moment in question. The one she's searching for.

The guard is still at his post, only in different clothes — and he's not alone. Hermione grows tight and tense at the sight of Dawlish in his Auror robes, hunched as he passes a folded scrap of parchment to the guard.

“Tonight,” he says, voice an echo. “You know where to leave him. When the trial suspension expires, you’ll alert the Wizengamot that the Nott boy has escaped.”

The guard strokes his dirty chin. *“I’m supposed to send reports of prisoner status upstairs every morning. You would be asking me to lie on official forms—”*

“For which you will be compensated,” grunts Dawlish.

The pause that follows is excruciating. The guard’s lip curls slowly into a grin. *“Say I do, then. What about the girl?”*

Dawlish’s hooded eyes narrow a fraction, the way they did when he met her gaze during the trials. *“What about her?”*

“Well, what if she comes poking about? Barely gone a day without having to open one cell or another for that bint.” The guard picks his teeth. *“What do I do with her?”*

Dawlish seems to consider it for a moment. Then, *“Tell her the truth.”*

Not seconds later, Dawlish is turning on his heel, and her spell collapses on itself. Those grey wisps fly past and force her back into her own form. She stumbles forward, dizzy, not realizing at first that it’s Pansy’s hand that steadies her.

“What is it? What did you see?” Pansy demands instantly, but as soon as Hermione finds her footing, she’s lurching forward and seizing the guard by the neck of his robes.

“Tell me,” she snaps, jabbing her wand into the hollow of his throat. *“The truth. Tell me what Dawlish wanted you to say.”*

The guard mutters to himself and shifts in her grip, face drawn in tight with disdain. She gives him a rough shake, digging the wand tip in.

“Do you know I once kept a woman in a jar for a year?” she hisses, doing her best to channel all of her fury into her eyes. *“Trapped as a cockroach. I could do worse to you.”*

His expression cracks — fumbles.

“Tell me!”

“He’s gone!” he hisses, baring his stained teeth. *“Taken. Soon they all will be.”*

“All?” Hermione echoes hoarsely, just as Pansy cuts in.

“Taken where?”

And now the guard’s grimace warps into a smile. *“Famous ones like you,”* he says, gasping against the press of her wand, *“you all think you’re invincible. Think just by opening your mouth you’ll get whatever you want ‘cause you’re so much better than the rest of us. But the world doesn’t work like that. Not even for Harry Potter’s little friends. Everything you did, you did for nothing.”*

Hermione shakes him again, forcing him to finish.

He wheezes a laugh. *“By now, I expect they’re all gone, and by tomorrow they’ll be dead. Every one you thought you saved with your simpering tales, your silly lies.”*

“What is he talking about?” Pansy bleats, and all the hard edges of her tone have melted away,

replaced by panic. By fear.

Hermione's own fear manifests itself differently. It closes up her lungs like a vise, and for a long moment she's not sure she can speak at all. But she tightens her grip on the guard and grinds out, "*Where?*"

And she's never been more tempted to use an Unforgivable in her life than when he laughs again. Cackles, more like.

"They didn't tell me. I only know they took the rest straight from the castle. Figured out a way." His grin is vicious. "All I had to do was knock the Nott boy unconscious."

What happens next happens so fast she barely registers it, too caught up in his words. One moment, the guard is in her hold and the next he's on the ground. Crumpled like a wilted weed on the stone floor, writhing and curling into himself.

"*Crucio*," Pansy hisses again, voice once more cold and detached as another scarlet flash explodes from her wand. The guard's scream is loud and mangled, and Hermione can only gape down at him — and then to her side, at Pansy.

There is true hatred in her eyes, in that moment. Hermione thought she'd seen it before, but she's never seen Pansy hate like this. No hesitation. No remorse. No intention whatsoever to stop.

And Hermione knows without a shadow of a doubt, if she hadn't pulled her away — "*Now — now! We have to go, now!*" — Pansy would've gladly tortured the man to death.

Somewhere along the streets of Hogsmeade that morning, an elderly wizard gripes about, telling everyone who crosses his path that he was knocked to the ground and stepped on by "*Hermione Bloody Granger, can you believe it? Not even a 'beg your pardon!'*"

In the end, it's only half true. Hermione knocked him down, but it was Pansy who stepped on him — and not a soul in that village could've known why they were running. At best, they might've seen the desperate panic on their faces, but they couldn't have known what it is to run like lives depend on it.

And they do. Right now, they do.

Hermione can taste blood in the back of throat from sprinting at this rate, and they've only just reached the archway past the greenhouses. Nothing but their staggered breathing and uneven footfalls disturb the otherwise quiet Hogwarts morning. Classes won't start for an hour.

Classes couldn't matter less.

"What's the quickest way to the Dungeons?" Hermione gasps out. Pansy would know better.

"Through here!"

They cut across a side corridor and down a curved flight of stairs, shadows darting through the torchlight. These may be the first words they've exchanged since Disapparating from the Ministry — nothing needed discussing. She's never felt more certain she and Pansy are on the same page.

“In a hurry this morning, are we?” muses someone near the start of the Dungeons corridor, and Hermione vaguely puts together that it’s Slughorn, a mild humor in his voice. How could he know? How could he see that her hands are shaking? That her heart is in her throat?

When they reach Slytherin’s disguised entrance and Hermione blurts out, “*Acta non verba*,” Pansy barely bats an eyelash. There’s no side glance. No question in her eyes. And the two of them seem to collectively hold their breath in the moment before they pass through the wall.

Hermione almost trips — her foot catches on the crumpled form of a First Year. She’s curled into a ball right beside the entrance, crying and threading her fingers into her hair.

And just beyond her lies the Slytherin common room, in shambles.

The walls are stained with black splotches from hexes gone astray. Side tables and chairs have been upended, lamps shattered. Papers are scattered about, and lost wands litter the floor. The tears in the dark curtains have the glow of the Black Lake casting eerie, jagged shadows over everything.

“They made me,” the girl on the floor whimpers.

Pansy, to her credit, is much quicker to drop to the girl’s side than Hermione.

“They made me,” she sniffles again, frightened eyes flashing between the two of them. “They forced me to give them the password.”

“Are you hurt?” Hermione manages at last.

“Where did they take them?” asks Pansy in the same moment.

The girl blinks tears at them for a few long seconds, then hiccups, “Out the — out the way they came.”

“All of them?”

The girl shakes her head and weeps some more. “I don’t know. I don’t know.”

Hermione’s on her feet in an instant, racing across the common room, glass crunching under her feet. She finds more First and Second Years scattered about, huddled together in corners or hidden behind sofas. They glance at her with too much hope in their faces, but she has no eyes for them. Only for the winding stairs to the boys’ dormitory.

She calls out his name more than once, voice echoing back in the emptiness, because she refuses to acknowledge what she knows.

The dormitory is worse than the common room.

Feathers have exploded across the floor, pillows shredded. Most of the ebony four-posters are cracked or lopsided in some way.

And the one she runs to — the one that matters most — is torn and disheveled and empty, so empty.

Her knees want to give out. She wants to fall to the floor at the foot of the bed — curl into herself and weep uselessly. Nothing would feel better in this moment. But it’s the flash of purple that stops her.

His journal remains, half hidden by tattered sheets and the goose down of a pillow. She slips it free

of the mess with a trembling hand, and it falls open to a dog-eared page. This morning's entry.

February 23rd, 1999

Diary,

Let's just say there are certain things I never expected for myself in life. Strange, inconsequential little things — at least I thought — that just weren't in the cards.

Mother and Father set the precedent for what I thought would be my future. Their marriage was the sort I was most likely to have. Very little by way of affection. Hardly a touch, only when necessary. Never in my life have I seen my father kiss my mother. Never on the lips. Always just a cold kiss on the cheek, if anything at all. There's a permanent boundary between them. It's more of a contract than a marriage, really.

I can't fathom a moment in which my father would watch my mother the way I watch Granger now. I see every detail, every twitch, every curl out of place. I watch her eyes give her away — you can see right through them. See her thoughts racing. I know those eyes. I know those hands. Those lips. Those ankles and feet.

I never expected to know someone.

More than that, I never expected anyone to know me — and certainly not to know me better.

She's infuriating in her perception. The way she peels me back and finds what she's looking for.

And fuck if I wouldn't let her threaten me to the ends of the Earth.

I —

Hermione's next breath lodges in her throat, trapped like the tears in her eyes at the splotch of ink on the page where he stopped writing.

The scribble below it is so unlike him. Such a departure from his sloping, lazy script. Thin and threadbare and written so fast it's nearly illegible.

If you love me don't come for me.

An involuntary noise forces its way out of her — not unlike a hurt animal. It takes what feels like an age to notice Pansy, hovering just behind her.

"Are we going?" she asks, voice tense.

Hermione allows herself one more moment of stillness, then lets the journal slide out of her fingers.

"Yes," she says. A croak that makes her clear her throat. "We're going."

“Please tell me you have some idea where.”

She nods mutely, turning to face Pansy. “I’m sure of it.”

Just as it was when they left the Ministry, they don’t stop to consider. Don’t stop to sort out details, even when perhaps they should. They don’t stop to assist the traumatized younger students. Don’t stop to ask for help or grab supplies. Hermione doesn’t go near Gryffindor.

She borrows a pair of jeans from Pansy, altering them to fit so she can run, and that’s the end of it.

They leave the castle, out through the side corridor that leads towards the Quidditch pitch. She paced that spot where she saw the fissure in the wards so many times that her feet find it instinctively.

Pansy sounds confused, but not quite doubtful. “Here?”

“I’m sure of it,” she says again. Speaks even if Pansy doesn’t fully understand, just to get the words out. “They prepared for this. Long in advance. If the trials didn’t go how they planned, they’d take matters into their own hands. And they have.” She swallows thickly, then swipes her wand through the air just past the ward’s border. “*Revelio.*”

The portkey makes itself known instantly, hidden in such a way she’s certain they wanted it found. A stone lawn ornament in the shape of a gargoyle.

The impatience in Pansy’s eyes is wild and panicked. She reaches for it instantly, no hesitation — the same way she tortured the guard — but Hermione grabs her wrist.

“Just one last thing.”

She doesn’t do Pansy the dishonor of asking whether she’ll stay behind. She’s safer here and they both know it.

But the gargoyle leads her to Theo, and she reached for it like something lost and precious. Hermione knows that feeling too well.

No, she only murmurs, “*Expecto Patronum,*” waiting a moment for the wispy blue otter to take full form.

Pansy’s brows have drawn together.

“Deliver this message,” Hermione tells it. “Harry — Dawlish has taken them all. If I don’t go now, they’ll be killed. I am not asking you to fight — I could never ask that of you again — but please alert the Order. If they’re willing to send aid, follow my Patronus to the portkey.” She stops. Chokes on the word ‘*goodbye*’ and never gets it out. “Go,” she says instead, and the otter swims off obediently.

Pansy is staring at her.

“Are you ready?” Hermione asks, aggressively wiping away a few tears.

“I saw what he wrote,” says Pansy, voice quiet and inscrutable. “Draco. I read it over your shoulder.”

Hermione's tone comes out more cold than she intended. "So?"

"He doesn't want you to go."

She bites down on the back of her tongue. Says again, "So?"

Only Pansy could ask it so bluntly. "So you don't love him?"

A bitter, incredulous laugh bursts from her chest. She sniffs angrily and slaps away one more tear, then tightens her grip on her wand and takes Pansy's wrist.

"If loving him means letting him die, then no. No — I guess I hate him."

She touches her foot to the gargoyle, and they're gone.

XLVII

Chapter Notes

Be advised: this chapter has a trigger warning. To avoid spoilers, I've put it in the author's note at the end. Please check below if need be.

xoxo

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

February 23rd, 1999

The portkey's magic is unrefined and haphazard, yanking them through too violently to plant their feet. She hits cold stone fast and hard.

"Fucking hell," spits Pansy from somewhere off to the side. Hermione gathers up her limbs, clutching at the rib she might've bruised and trying to hold her wand steady.

The hallway is dark.

"Lumos."

Light unfolds across marble walls and arched ceilings, portraits in obsidian frames lining the expanse.

Oh god, she thinks, breath catching painfully in her chest. *Not here.*

"Why are we at the Manor?" Pansy asks under her breath, adding to the light with her own wand. She must've spent time here as a child.

"I don't know."

They get to their feet at the same time, almost instinctively standing back to back and turning in a circle. The corridor is empty. Empty save a small, dark trail of what looks like blood, glinting in their wand light.

Hermione glances over her shoulder at Pansy. She's bleeding where she hit her head upon arrival — a slow trickle down from her temple.

"This isn't yours, is it?" Hermione gestures to the trail.

It's the sort of obvious question Pansy might've snarked at not so long ago, but now the shake of her head is sober.

"Let's go."

They follow the blood. Slow, careful, deathly silent steps. Neither of them make a sound, but Pansy's movements are so dexterous — so like a cat — that Hermione wonders how many times she's had to do this.

When they reach the end of the corridor, it proves hard to turn the corner. Hermione knows next to

nothing about the layout of Malfoy Manor, but every step could be a step closer to the dining room. To that expanse of floor she's not sure she could handle seeing again. Bile rises up in her throat, and she nearly stumbles before Pansy grabs hold of her — a sharp grip on her elbow.

“Steady on, Granger.”

“I'm fine,” she breathes, but she can feel the way the color's drained out of her face.

Pansy takes her word for it either way. They move on. Past several more corridors and a winding staircase, not grand enough to be the entrance hall but still incredibly lavish.

All the shutters have been closed, blocking out the daylight. The gleam of their wands will reveal them long before they reach anyone.

Hermione tries to settle her stomach by running through her best hexes in her head. Silently rolling the shapes of them across her tongue. She tells herself she'll cast at the slightest movement, the faintest sound — no hesitation.

The trail of blood begins to taper off as it rounds another corner. She and Pansy exchange a look. Her grip tightens on her wand, rib throbbing with each breath.

And they turn the corner, flanking one another, wands out.

“Well that took ages,” says a voice.

Her eyes have to adjust. There's light in this room, bright from the fire at the hearth.

But the moment she can properly take it in, she's swallowing back a gag, joints locking in place. Somehow she knew it would be the dining room.

And yet it's not that. It's several things at once.

It's Dawlish, leaning casually against the mantle, surrounded by fellow corrupt Aurors — other *Crusaders*, as he calls them.

It's Narcissa Malfoy, bound to the chair beside him, too close to the fire, expression wan and hair disheveled, sweat dripping down the sides of her face.

It's Theo, undoubtedly the source of the blood, lying on his side on the floor, nowhere near conscious.

It's Draco, standing stiff on his own two feet, held in place by immobilizing charms and dressed head to toe in black — traditional Death Eater robes.

His eyes find her fast. The only movement he can make. And where she thought she'd see fire — fury and frustration — she sees a stone wall.

And perhaps that's worse.

Pansy finds her words first. “*What is this?*”

Dawlish turns from the hearth, facing them fully. “Did we get it wrong?” he asks, tone intentionally light. “These two, wasn't it?” He gestures from Theo to Pansy. “Him for you.” Now he points at Draco, then at Hermione. “And him for you.” A humorless smile cracks his face. “Or perhaps it's the other way around.”

Hermione bites down on the white hot rage she feels lash at the back of her throat — directs the tip of her wand at Dawlish instead.

When her voice comes at last, she can only be grateful it's not ragged. "Whatever this is, it's over."

"Soon," agrees Dawlish, unfazed.

"Release them," she demands. It's difficult to hide the way her wrist is shaking. Something is wrong about this. "All of them. Now."

Dawlish assesses them for a moment, eyes swooping back and forth between herself and Pansy like a lazy pendulum.

His Aurors are arranged strangely. Not in convenient positions to put up a good defense. Sort of clustered together — no perimeter, no vantage points. The only ones even remotely spread out have their wands trained on Draco, keeping him motionless.

Hermione doesn't dare let her eyes flit to him again. She'll lose all focus.

"Now," she snaps into the silence.

"Do as she says," orders Dawlish, relaxing back against the mantle once more.

What?

Pansy's already looking at her when she glances sideways. The same expression passes between them.

This can't be right.

But sure enough, an Auror begins casting severing charms on Narcissa Malfoy's bonds. Two others take an arm of Theo's each, dragging him forward despite Pansy's sharp intake of breath. They leave him at her feet, and Pansy drops to his side instantly.

Hermione doesn't blame her. But now she's alone on the offensive.

"Finite," another Auror calls loudly, and Draco's posture slackens, immobilizing charm falling away.

Hermione risks a glance, finding his expression a mask — tightly guarded. He shoots a look at Dawlish.

"Go on. Go to her," he says.

This is all wrong.

Draco doesn't put his back to them as he steps toward her, movements slow and careful. She hooks her finger in the fabric of his sleeve as soon as he's close enough — a movement so instinctive and desperate, she hopes Dawlish doesn't see.

"Are you hurt?" she asks him under her breath.

His voice is stiff. Without emotion. "No."

Hermione swallows the knot in her throat. Her wand arm is still trained on Dawlish, but now with Draco at her side it doesn't shake quite as much.

Dawlish hasn't moved. Hasn't given any order to attack. He's letting Narcissa Malfoy rub out her sore wrists and step away from the chair by the hearth.

At Hermione's feet, Pansy is murmuring softly to Theo, face buried in his neck. The extent of his injuries is unclear.

"Where are the others?" she forces out after a long while, cold suspicion sliding around in her gut.

"Downstairs," says Dawlish. "We'll have them sent up."

With a snap of his fingers, an Auror strides out a side door. Hermione momentarily jerks her wand in his direction, but he's gone too quickly. She shifts aim back to Dawlish.

"I wish you understood," he sighs.

"There's nothing to understand."

"How could you know if you never stop to listen?" Dawlish must expect there's a silencing charm on the tip of her tongue, but he continues none the less. "The lot of us," he says, gesturing around at his Aurors, "we were shamed after the fall of the Ministry. Even more so after the war. Endless accusations. 'Why didn't we stop it?' Why didn't we see it coming?'"

He takes a step forward, only pausing when Hermione brandishes her wand in warning.

"I have that answer now," he says. "Our lenience is our downfall. We failed once before to cut the head off the snake. Failed to do away with every semblance of the Dark Lord's following the first time he fell from power. Miss Granger...don't let us make the same mistake again. You have the power. Right now, you can decide."

"Decide?" she snaps. "Decide *what*? That my former classmates deserve a death sentence? That no one can change?"

"No one does," says Dawlish, taking another step forward.

"Stop moving."

He holds up his hands in surrender and goes still again, but he doesn't stop speaking. "Does it mean anything to you that you were their only character witness?" he asks. "Did you even stop to think why it was so easy to take them from the castle?"

Hermione's hand has begun to sweat around the base of her wand.

"No one noticed. A Glamour here, a Glamour there — no one stopped to give it a second look. We led them out right under their noses. Because no one cares, Miss Granger. Don't you see?" He sweeps his hands out, encompassing Draco, Theo and Pansy in one. "They aren't even worth it."

Hermione hisses out a breath through her teeth, eyes tightening. "We're done talking."

"No," he says casually. "We're not. I just want to be sure you understand first. I'd feel terribly guilty otherwise, you see."

Her heart rate spikes in her chest, eyes flitting around, seeking out threats. But she holds all the cards. She has the advantage. It doesn't make any sense.

"I need the Ministry — the whole of the Wizarding World, for that matter — to recognize the danger they pose. They have to see the cost of such blind forgiveness." Dawlish takes one more

step. “This will prove that they aren’t worth saving. That they’re beyond our help. And I’m sorry, my dear Hermione Granger, but it’s you — darling of the Wizarding World, champion of the downtrodden and the unworthy, our *golden girl* — it’s you who’ll tip the scales.”

Her brows draw in tight, wand faltering, and in the same instant Dawlish tilts his gaze towards Draco.

“Do it.”

She can only process the next few moments in pieces. The swish of Draco’s black robes as he steps in front of her. The sweat on his brow — the only aspect of him that isn’t stiff and emotionless. The black tip of his wand as he points it between her eyes.

“Crucio.”

The world whites out and the agony floods in. She barely registers the crack of her skull against the marble floor as she falls. All she can comprehend is pain.

Her bones fracture — heal themselves, then fracture again. Her skin is peeled away, layer by layer. A fist squeezes her stomach, her lungs, her heart, until they burst. And she can’t help but scream, even when each sound she makes feels like shards of glass slicing open her throat.

Though none of it hurts quite so much as the sight of his face, angled over her — gazing down without feeling. She wishes to die, then and there, if only to never see his eyes like that again.

Time disintegrates. She has no idea how long he tortures her.

Later, she learns it was no more than twenty seconds.

The onslaught of pain cuts off with the sound of a heavy thud. Hermione gasps up at the ceiling, blurry to her eyes, her nerves crackling like she’s been electrocuted.

It looks the same as it did before, she thinks, drunk with pain. It takes a good while to get her muscles to work enough to turn her head.

Pansy has knocked Draco clean off his feet, the two of them struggling — him to push her away and her to pin his wand arm down.

“—the *fuck* are you doing? What the *fuck*?” Pansy’s screaming, and when she manages to kneel on his elbow, she lands an unforgiving punch with her free hand.

Hermione watches as though through a screen. Distant. Not all there. She can feel the drool slipping out the corner of her mouth.

Dawlish orders two of his Aurors to pull Pansy off of him, but Pansy’s reflexes are sharp, and she stuns them both with Draco’s wand in a millisecond. It’s as this happens that Hermione feels the faintest tug at her arm, and it frees her momentarily from her daze.

She tilts her head the other way.

Theo is dragging himself towards her, pale and bloody, eyes half-lidded. He gathers her sleeve in his fist and pulls her limp body closer, voice in shreds, “G-Granger...Granger, he’s — Draco, he’s —”

The next grip that finds her isn’t gentle, as Theo’s was. The cold clamp of a hand on her ankle,

yanking her back. She screams, her bones still freshly broken in her mind, and when her head lolls forward she finds Draco on all fours, dragging her to him with that same blank stare.

Pansy has his wand, busy warding off the next wave of Aurors. Their spells crackle through the room around them, rebounding off of walls. Draco hardly seems to notice.

“Draco! Listen to me!” Theo is shouting, loud and hoarse. “Hear my voice! *Listen to me!*”

He doesn’t stop. Doesn’t falter. Only lurches forward to seize her throat in a vise, those beautiful grey eyes empty. There’s not a fragment of him left in them.

“Please...” she gasps out, clutching at his wrist with both hands, legs kicking out helplessly.

“*Draco!*” Theo shouts again. “Stop!”

White spots cloud her vision, the thin stream of oxygen dwindling as she sucks it down greedily — waning with each ounce of pressure he adds.

“He won’t,” says a calm voice, almost inaudible amidst the chaos. “He can’t.” Dawlish is looming over them, expression that of a man conducting an experiment. “He knows nothing of anything except what *I* want. The rest is a blank slate.”

“Granger — Granger, it’s the Imperius — it’s not him, it’s—”

“*Quiet.*”

He’s kicked Theo, from the sound of it — but Hermione can’t pry her eyes away from the cold face above her, even as hard lines grow soft and lights grow dim.

“*Please,*” she whispers again, raw and ragged. All the blood is trapped in her head.

“It’s pointless,” says Dawlish. “He won’t stop. You of all people should know, Miss Granger. Aren’t you the brightest witch of your age?” He huffs a laugh. “Only the incredibly strong-willed can resist the Imperius Curse. Immensely powerful wizards, like your friend Potter perhaps. Ones as weak as this don’t stand a chance.”

She has less than a minute to live. There’s no air in her lungs — no strength in her veins.

“By the time your Order arrives, you’ll be cold and stiff. Along with all the others. We will be gone, and do you know who they’ll find standing in the middle of it all? Covered in your blood?”

Whatever Dawlish says next fades away, drowned out by the ringing in her ears. Tears pool in her eyes, washing out what little vision she has left until she can’t see his face. But it isn’t his face she’d be seeing. It hardly matters.

Theo’s shouts seem faint and far away.

“*Hear my voice! Come back! Open your eyes and look at her! Look at who she is — see her! That’s Hermione! That’s Hermione!*”

Not long after, he fades away too, and then it’s only the unforgiving pressure on her throat and the blurry outline above her. Mercifully, the pain starts to dissipate. She can feel very little now. Woozy and lightheaded, barely clinging to consciousness, her mind starts to drift.

Weak, she thinks. Such an ugly word. It’s not the word she sees when she thinks of his face. His true face. His eyes. The ones she knows.

The war is in his face. Regret and pain and uncertainty in the set of his jaw. Imperfection is woven into the grey of his eyes and fear is in the lines of his brow. All of it she's seen and known. All of it and more.

But there is no weakness in his face. None whatsoever — she's almost certain of it.

And the last part of her alive wants to see it one more time, just to be sure.

She lifts a limp, bloodless hand from its grip on his wrist and lifts it blindly above her. Uses the last of her strength to blink away those tears so she can meet his gaze. Numb fingers find the cold, smooth plane of his cheek, resting there. Memorizing the way it fits against the curve of her palm.

She parts her dry lips, and there's no tone to her words. Only a whisper.

“You are *not* weak.”

She knows it without a shadow of a doubt.

Her vision goes dark and her hand falls away. The cool of the marble against her back becomes a distant memory. But in the moment she's ready to let go — of air, of life, of everything — his stone grip on her throat vanishes.

“...Hermione?”

Give in, the darkness urges her. *Let go*.

“No. *No* — no, no, Hermione! *No!*”

She knows that voice.

Let go.

“No! *No!* Hermione, look at me! *Look at me!*”

She knows it.

“*Please!*”

Forever, she'll wonder if she really had the choice to take that breath. To suck the air down into her throat and chase away the dark. In the moment, it doesn't feel like a choice. It feels like he chooses for her.

And her lungs take to it like dry sand to water.

Her chest jerks and her eyes snap wide and she nearly collides with him in her effort to sit up. To chase air. To *breathe*.

The sound he makes is unlike him. Wounded and animal, completely uncontrolled. She doesn't have the chance to see his face. One moment it's buried against her heaving chest and the next it's turned away, his hand grappling for something — skimming desperately across the marble floor.

He finds her wand just as Dawlish puts together what's happened. His growl of frustration is cut short.

“*Avada Kedavra.*”

It's only when Dawlish falls down lifeless in front of them — only as he's slowly lowering his arm, her wand clutched in his shaking fingers, that she recognizes the voice as Draco's.

Chapter End Notes

TW: graphic depictions of torture and physical abuse

XLVIII

Chapter Notes

This was harder to write than I ever thought it could be. Please check the end notes for trigger warnings.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

February 23rd, 1999

Their eyes barely have the chance to meet before the world catches up with them — a flash, fleeting and wrought with hopelessness — and then hands clasp his shoulders and his gaze jerks aside, quick and gun-shy. The hands are pale, fingers long and elegant. Gentle.

Narcissa.

Hermione's still clutched in his grasp, half-dangling from his shaking arms as she speaks to him.

"Draco. *Draco*." Her voice is firm, and yet Hermione can somehow find the tenderness in it. "She'll be in shock. Get her to her feet. Give her air. We have very little time."

Hermione's eyes sway back to Draco, and her body gives an instinctive, involuntary jerk in his hold. She has seen him cry before. And yet, this —

"*Mother...*" he bleats, a stutter of breath through trembling lips, desperate and helpless. "I — h-help. Help — help me." His fingers flex against Hermione's arms, releasing and then gripping again every few seconds. Like he's not so certain she's there. Solid. In his grasp.

"Do as I say," Narcissa commands in a low voice. "Help her up."

A brief choking sound is his only response before he's nodding, tears carving wet tracks down his cheeks. His face doesn't wrinkle, she realizes. He cries flatly. Openly. As though he couldn't stop it if he wanted to.

"Draco," his mother whispers.

He grips firmly, and the backs of her legs lift from the marble, blood rushing down from her head as the soles of her shoes find pressure against the floor. She sways, and both sets of hands are there to steady her.

She manages one full, even blink. Her foot knocks against something stiff. Heavy.

Dawlish.

"Now step back," says Narcissa. "Step back. Let her breathe. Here — here." Hermione sees her stretch her arm out insistently. "Give me that. Go and see to Theo."

In the next moment, familiar, textured wood is pressed against Hermione's limp fingers. Vine. Ten and three-quarter inches. Dragon heartstring.

“Miss Granger,” Narcissa says, swimming into focus in front of her. Her gaze is calm and unwavering. “Take your wand.”

“I...w-what?” she stutters, tongue like lead in her mouth. Her legs are far from stable.

Narcissa just says it again. “Take your wand. This is not over.” She takes Hermione’s hand in her cold fingers and forces it to close around the base. “You have been through this before, yes?” No pity in her voice. Only urgency. Certainty. “You know it will pass. You know how to move forward.”

The image of Shell Cottage swims behind Hermione’s eyelids when she blinks next.

“Force it,” Narcissa demands, and she opens her eyes again. “Recover. *Now*. Make yourself. Dawlish has at least two dozen more men downstairs. They are coming — they’ll be here in moments — and even *with* you, we’re outnumbered.”

Hermione’s thumb slides along the wooden grooves she knows like her own skin.

“Are you ready?”

She swallows, flexing her toes — ensuring her grip on the floor. With her next blink, the fog in her vision clears.

“Are you ready?” Narcissa repeats, taking her other wrist in hand and giving her a jolt.

Hermione clutches her wand tight. Nods once.

“Good.”

Narcissa steps back, and she finds she can take in the state of the room for the first time, even with the blood still singing in her veins.

The Aurors that went after Pansy are scattered across the dark marble floor, stunned or dead — Hermione isn’t sure. Their bodies are sprawled every which way, and Theo, on his feet despite what looks to be immense pain, is struggling to navigate the many tangled arms and legs. He crouches down twice, stealing wands.

“Draco,” he calls out, tossing one of them across the room. Hermione’s eyes follow it like a fired shot, finding Draco just as he pulls it from the air. His eyes are straight down, locked on the floor a few meters in front of his feet. Unfocused, and yet not like before.

“Draco,” she manages in a hoarse voice.

His whole body tenses up at the sound. He doesn’t look.

An itch starts, centered in her chest — a low thrum of panic that builds fast and sure.

“*Draco*,” she forces out, louder now.

But there’s a shout from the hall leading up to the dining room, and his gaze shifts there instead as he sinks into a defensive position, stolen wand out.

Hermione is slow to echo the movement, trying to look away and clear her head. Trying to catch up. *Focus*.

Countless footsteps grow closer, voices growing louder, and the last thing she comprehends before

all hell breaks loose is Pansy.

Disheveled and blood-spattered, she's placed herself in front of Theo — far forward enough that perhaps he won't see it as such. But Hermione sees her for what she is. A wall. A divide. A promise to be the final word in keeping him from harm.

Seeing it triples the ache in her chest, and just before Dawlish's Aurors storm the room, Hermione's eyes flit back to Draco. She should do the same. She — she wants nothing more, not one thing more in this world than to spare him. From any of it. All of it.

She takes one shaking step in his direction, and spells start to fly.

Narcissa was right.

Her wand — somehow it's what she needed to yank herself from the haze of mind-numbing pain. Fight or flight. Her instincts have a clear favorite, and as she raises her wand everything else falls away.

It's just color and light.

She stuns the first Auror who crosses her line of sight without uttering a word, somehow both satisfied and urged on by the sound of his body hitting the floor.

The next two fall just as easily, but the fourth catches her in the elbow with a stinging jinx, and she wastes precious moments switching her wand to her left arm.

She expects to be stunned, at the very least, in that stretch of seconds. But upon next glance, wand out firmly once more, she finds the Auror undeniably dead — crumpled into himself.

Her eyes snap to Draco, a blur as he skims past her, not stopping. Every spell he casts is green.

Hermione has to force herself to remain in the moment, twisting to help Narcissa fight free of a full-body bind. But even as she disarms and stuns an Auror who tries to attack from the side, she wonders at it.

At what it takes. What it must feel like to reach a level where there are no holds barred. No hesitations. Where all that's left is to kill.

She's never killed anyone. Never cast the curse, no matter how many times its awkward syllables have whispered curiously across her tongue.

And for all of two seconds, as she rights herself at Narcissa's side and turns to assess the battle, she thinks perhaps she may never reach that level.

But then she sees a spark of red strike Draco in the back.

A cut cry leaps from his mouth as he falls, the torture curse rippling across his limbs as the Auror draws nearer. Pansy is locked in a stunning duel to his left, Theo reduced to physical combat on his right. Narcissa is still working at the remnants of her binds.

There is no one but her to help him.

And seeing his face, torn and twisted in agony, his shaking fingers grasping desperately at nothing — she suddenly knows a great deal more than she did moments ago.

"*Crucio*," she casts and does not blink, watching the Auror go stiff before he collapses and starts

to writhe. She feels the power of it radiating from her wand. A pull like a magnet, captivating, indescribable.

She takes a few steps, closing their distance and standing over him, all the while allowing the curse to linger. He screams and bucks and begs for death, and the words are at her lips — moments, *milliseconds* from fighting free—

“No!”

A hand shackles her wrist, so familiar in texture and weight, and Draco drags her arm to the side, throwing off her aim as he pulls himself up from the floor.

“No,” he snaps again, meeting her eyes for once — and *there*, there’s that fury she was waiting for. Livid and electric.

He doesn’t look at the Auror behind him on the ground. Doesn’t break from her gaze as he casts the killing curse in her stead. The man’s screaming dies off sharply.

“Don’t you *dare*,” Draco says, pinning her with his eyes — refusing to free her wrist. His tears from minutes before aren’t quite dry on his face, and yet there’s more anger in his expression than she thinks she’s ever seen. “Don’t *ever*.”

Hermione opens and shuts her mouth once — twice — at a loss, staring wide-eyed up into his ragged face. And then a moment later he’s gone. Back into the fray.

She can still feel the pressure of his grip fading from her wrist.

Less than five of Dawlish’s Aurors remain, and when at last she can make herself move again, she makes quick work of the one trying to scale the mantle for higher ground. He falls hard on his back, frozen.

Narcissa fells another with a powerful *Incarcerous*, and as Hermione watches the Auror struggle against the ropes, she’s thinking they might actually manage this. Against all odds.

She diverts her attention to the remaining few, rushing forth to help Theo, busy sparring with an Auror who’s quite quick with his hexes. When it’s two against one, he’s easier to contain — but there’s a reason he’s one of the last standing. His skills are beyond theirs. Years of training under his belt, evident in his stance, his spellwork, the way he holds his wand.

All too soon, Hermione overcompensates — steps awkwardly as she deflects a knockback jinx — and the Auror’s *Levicorpus* hits her square in the chest. She’s catapulted back at least a dozen feet, landing hard on unforgiving marble. The breath gets forced from her lungs, and it takes her too many seconds just to manage to sit up.

From there, gasping and clutching at her chest, she watches it happen.

Theo falters under the full force of the Auror’s skill, staggering back as he blocks, blocks again — dodges. He’s losing. Failing fast. And Hermione witnesses the exact moment that should equal his end — the fraction of a second in which he can’t manage to block in time.

But Pansy comes out of nowhere.

The killing curse explodes from the tip of her wand as she throws herself between them — and in that same instant, the spell that’s meant for Theo strikes her instead. A flash of furious violet.

Hermione has never read about it. Never heard the syllables uttered until now. But she knows enough of Latin to feel her stomach drop.

“Respirae sanguinae!” the man had shouted. His last words before she took his life.

Breathe blood.

Pansy staggers and sways, looking almost confused in the dull silence that follows. Hermione scrambles to her feet. Theo calls out her name. Her black hair flutters out as she tilts her head in his direction — and a moment later a spurt of dark crimson explodes from her lips.

She buckles. Her wand clatters to the floor, and shortly after she follows it down.

By the time Hermione reaches them — no concept of the battlefield around them, no knowing if they’ve won or lost, if it’s even over — Theo already has her in his arms. She sinks to her knees beside them, wordless, watching the even-keeled boy she’s known these many years completely fall apart.

“Pans — *Pans*, you’re okay. Y-You’re...you’re okay. Come on.” He cradles her to him, eyes wet and disbelieving as he strokes bloody fingers through her dark hair. “I’ve got you. I’ve got you. No. No, no. You’re okay. You’ll see. You’re okay.”

The curse is merciless. She coughs up seemingly infinite quantities of blood, gasping for breath in between — blood from internal organs, from burst veins. There’s no way of knowing. Theo’s shirt is soaked with it in an instant, the way he holds her to his chest. Hermione sees her shaking fingers clutching at his sleeves, desperate.

Theo looks to Hermione, then, and she’s not ready. “This — she’s — you can fix this. You can fix this. She’s alright.”

Helpless — *useless* — Hermione feels her lip tremble as she stares back at him. Tears blur her vision, flying off her cheeks as she shakes her head. She knows the look of a fatal curse. It’s going to take her. And quickly. “I...I can’t. There’s — Theo, there’s nothing—”

“*No*. No,” he snaps, looking away. He’s stroking her face now, numb to the blood she drools onto his hand. “She’s alright. She’s okay. Pansy, sweetheart — look at me.”

He doesn’t need to say it. Her dark eyes, lovely even now, never leave his face. Not when Hermione reaches out, unable to swallow back a whimper as she takes one of her hands. Not when Draco’s shadow falls over them. He’s panting, exhausted from battle. “Fuck...Pansy, *no*,” he breathes as he realizes the gravity of it, voice low — barely a whisper.

Theo still hears him.

“*Don’t*,” he growls, furious. “She’s *fine*! She’s — she’s fine. You’re fine. Pans — Pans, tell them. Tell them you’re fine. You’ll be alright.”

Pansy’s soft chokes have become staggered. Few and far between as her chest shudders, eyes wide and unblinking. She’s pale as death. There’s hardly any blood left in her.

“Pansy. *Pansy*, no.” The defiant hope in Theo’s voice is dying. “*Please*. I’m here. Stay with me. I’m right here.”

Draco takes one of Theo’s shoulders in hand, even as Theo tries to shake it off. He meets Hermione’s eyes — just once — over the hunched form of his friend, and the wall between them

momentarily breaks to make way for a shared grief.

Pansy coughs once more. Manages to close her bloodstained lips, throat bobbing compulsively as she swallows.

“You...” she whispers to Theo, voice in shreds. “You l-look nice...in blue.”

His broken expression fractures further, confused and scattered. He’s not wearing blue. “...What, sweetheart?”

People become delirious, near the end. Hermione hates that she knows that.

“S-So...so handsome in blue...”

Theo chokes back a sob, tears falling from his lashes to the crown of her head. “Thank you.”

She’s slipping away fast. Has moments left, maybe. Hermione can see it.

And in a moment of weakness — of desperation — she leans forward, putting her lips at Pansy’s ear. Speaking to her and and only her.

“You saved him,” she whispers. “You kept your promise.” And she gives Pansy’s hand a squeeze before leaning back, blinking away tears.

But it is truly something to see Pansy smile through it all — a sudden, gentle smile, unlike any expression Hermione’s seen on her face before. She tilts her head with the last of her strength to meet her eyes. And her bloody teeth, her gaunt face — they seem to fade to background noise in the midst of it. In that moment, she is beautiful and nothing else.

She looks once more to Theo, then — her chosen last sight. Peace floods through her features. Her smile lingers a moment longer. And then she sags in his arms, chest sinking, eyes falling shut. A final breath leaves her lips. Soft. Unfettered.

And she’s gone.

Hermione looks away. Has to. Anywhere else.

But the sound Theo makes will stay with her for the rest of her days.

Chapter End Notes

TW: character death, blood.

XLIX

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

February 26th, 1999

Dappled light across her eyelids — hazy and gray. It's the first thing she's aware of, and the rest comes slowly.

There's pain. An old sort of pain, though. Lingering aches and throbs, some possibly already half-healed. It's forgettable and easy to push aside. The exhaustion is much more pressing. It feels like it takes ages just to muster the strength to lift her lids.

She knows a hospital ceiling when she sees one.

Not Hogwarts. She'd recognize that weathered flagstone immediately. No, this is much more clinical. White and sterile.

St. Mungo's.

Swallowing around a dry throat, she shifts as much as her lead-like limbs can manage, frantically trying to chase memories — even fragments of memories of how she got here. But there's nothing after—

“Hermione?”

A warm, callused hand clasps around hers, and color spreads out over the whiteness as a figure leans over her. She blinks slowly up at him, forcing him to come into focus.

“...Ron?”

The creases all over his face flatten out at the ragged tone of her voice, and he speaks with a winded smile and a gasp. “Bloody hell, we've been so worried!” The hand not holding hers starts to stroke the hair away from her face. “How are you? How are you feeling? Is there pain? I can get the—”

“Ron.” It's less of a croak now. More substance to it. She blinks again to fully clear the fog from the borders of her vision. “Please. What happened?”

“Erm — yeah, uh — one thing at a time, Hermione — okay? I think you should talk to a Healer first. Get some food in you, or—”

She grips his hand tight and speaks over him. “Ron, how did I get here?”

The way the smile falls from his face makes her stomach ache. She swallows again, gathering a steady breath.

“What do you remember?” he asks. Even at the best of times, Ron isn't usually so gentle. It's almost terrifying in a way.

She tries to keep the fear out of her voice. “Pansy...” she murmurs.

Ron's brows meet in the middle, and Hermione watches him search for the right words. A good

moment or so.

“I’m...so sorry. I know she was — well, sort of your friend.”

Hermione’s chest throbs, and her gaze drops away from his as it floods back to her; Pansy and her bloody lips, her pale face and searching eyes.

“She *was* my friend,” she echoes quietly, both a correction and a confirmation.

Ron is right to move off of the subject as quickly as he does. “That’s the last thing? Nothing after that?”

She shakes her head, working to keep the fear out of her eyes too. “What day is it?”

The oddest memory surfaces at the question. Of Theo, so many months ago — mocking her for asking something similar. Calling her dramatic.

Christ, *Theo*...

Ron takes a deep breath. “It’s the 26th. You’ve been out for three days.”

She sucks back a gasp. “Three...three days?”

He nods gravely and clears his throat. “Harry — he got your Patronus,” he says, shifting in his chair at the bedside. “It sort of exploded in front of all of us at breakfast. Gave him a right scare. Me, as well.” His fingers flex and then scramble to squeeze her hand again, a movement sort of desperate and unexpected. “Hermione, you have to believe me. Harry — he’s going to beat himself up about it for ages if you don’t, and I swear to you — I swear it, he didn’t waste any time.”

She squints at him, turning a little to face him better despite the pain. “What do you mean?”

“He sent for the Order, like you asked — and then we tried to follow you. No hesitation, I swear. We didn’t wait. Me, Harry, Ginny, Neville, Luna — the lot of us. We followed your Patronus to the Grounds.”

Her surprise she can’t mask. “*You*...tried to come?”

He gives a sort of nervous scoff. “Yeah, ‘Mione. Of course. Can be a git sometimes, but not about things like your *life*.”

She squeezes his hand again, instinctively, but doesn’t say more. Needs him to keep going. Needs to line the pieces up.

“I think we would’ve made it too. Soon enough, anyway, to save...your friend. To stop what happened to you.” A shadow crosses his face. A brief, but blinding fury lighting in his eyes before he can stomp it out. Then, “It was the portkey. My guess is Dawlish jinxed it. Stupefied the lot of us and dropped us Merlin knows where.” He rubs the back of his neck. “Harry says he thinks it was like the one from Fourth Year. From the Tournament. Jinxed to work every other time. But it took us ages just to get our bearings. By the time we got to you, Parkinson was...” he trails off.

She clutches hard at his fingers, somehow certain he has worse news. Part of her doesn’t want to ask, but she can’t stop herself.

“The others...” she says, waiting until Ron’s eyes meet hers. “Where’s Draco? Theo? What happened with—”

“They’re alive, Hermione,” he says quickly, before she can work herself up. “It’s just that—”

“*What?*”

He winces.

“Ron, *tell me.*”

Twisting, he reaches behind his shoulder for something on the side table. “You need to eat, alright?” There’s a plastic cup of tapioca and a spoon in his hand when he turns back around. Somehow the least appealing thing in the world right now. “Let me help you eat this, and then I’ll tell you.”

“Ron—”

“Please.”

She bites her tongue. Thinks about him risking his own life after everything she’s put him through this year.

Reluctantly, she lets him feed it to her, finally catching a glimpse of the potion she’s being treated with as she sits up to help him with the angle. It looks like Calming Draught, seeping into the veins of her forearm from a charmed drip on her left.

It’s probably the only reason she hasn’t flown into a blind panic.

She gets the rest of the story around bland spoonfuls of pudding, hanging on Ron’s every word.

“The Healers think it was the adrenaline that kept you conscious. When we got to you — swallow the whole bite, Hermione, come on...good. When we got to you, you weren’t really...all there, if you know what I mean. Parkinson was there on the floor, and a bunch of the Slytherins you went looking for were kind of scattered around the room. There was no one left to fight — you did a right fine job. I mean it. Those were trained Aurors. Open up, you’re going to eat the whole thing.”

He feeds her another spoonful, two-thirds of the cup gone. She doesn’t have the strength to resist.

“But for a minute there, I thought we might’ve lost you too. Malfoy and Zabini were trying to keep Nott calm — I didn’t really know about the whole situation at the time. I knew he and Parkinson were friends, but — well, now I know. Anyhow, you were there too. But you were sort of staring off at nothing. Sitting on the floor. When Malfoy tried to stand you up, I guess it all caught up with you.”

“...All?” she manages.

“You broke three ribs, Hermione. *Merlin*. That, added to the *Cruciatius*...” He struggles to get the word out, glancing away for a fraction of a second, then back again. “You burst a lot of blood vessels — suffered at least two seizures in under ten minutes. And one of your ribs punctured your lung. The Healers said you should’ve been long dead by the time we got you here. And the *bruises* all over you...bloody hell.”

She follows the angle of his gaze, limp arm lifting from her side so she can trace her fingers across the expanse of her throat. Sensitive. It explains the soreness. The difficulty she’s having just trying to speak.

Ron’s voice cracks around his next words. “I...I can’t believe he did that to you.”

It's almost a relief — the quick spike of anger she feels at that. "*He* didn't."

"Hermione, don't defend—"

"What else?" she cuts him off sharply. "I know you're holding something back. What is it? What's the worst of it?"

Ron swallows whatever he planned to say, expression unreadable.

"They...they don't believe them, do they?" she stammers. "The Death Eater robes — the bodies. They think Dawlish's set-up is true." The words come faster and faster. "They're going to arrest them again. God, they already have, haven't th—"

"*Hermione.*" Ron slides his chair forward with a loud, metallic squeak, standing to press her back against the pillows when she tries to sit up and spilling what's left of the tapioca on the sheets. "Breathe. Just breathe." He takes her hand in both of his, then, thumb massaging soothing circles. "They know everything. They used a Pensieve. No one's getting arrested."

"She's awake?"

Hermione's panicked eyes flit to the doorway, and there's Harry. He looks unwashed and sleep-deprived — and from what she can see of Ginny, hidden halfway behind his broad shoulder, she's much the same.

She wants to say their names. Say 'thank you.' But all that comes out is, "*Please.*"

Harry's eyes flood with concern, just as Ron rushes to fill them in.

"She doesn't remember much. I've told her about the portkey. Gotten her all the way up to—"

"*Please,*" she interrupts again. "Where are they?"

Harry steps into the room, and she doesn't like the slump of his shoulders. The uncomfortable way he holds himself. He pulls up a chair to her other side, Ginny moving to stand behind him and resting her hand on his shoulder.

"Most of them are back at Hogwarts," he says. "The ones they put in the Malfoy dungeons were unharmed. Just shaken up. From the looks of it, Dawlish was waiting for...well, for you, mostly. Looks like he wanted you there before he staged anything more drastic."

She opens her mouth, but he sets his palm on her knee through the sheets to stop her. Continues on.

"Narcissa Malfoy was beaten badly. She's down the hall, recovering. I checked on her this morning. Zabini's here. Nothing worse than a black eye — he's not a patient. He's here for Nott."

"How is he?" she blurts, shifting. Still trying to sit up, despite Ron's efforts. "How's Theo?"

"He's..." Harry searches for the right word, adjusting his glasses, "...stable. They have a Grief Healer watching over him in the psychiatric ward." His eyes are soft — cautious. "I won't lie and say he's well."

Hermione manages at last to fight free of Ron's grip and sit up. She ignores the way her body throbs at the movement. "I should go see him. I will, after —"

There's a collective wince amongst the three of them, so syncopated it's almost timed. Jarring and obvious.

Her pulse starts to thud in her temples.

“Draco,” she prompts, barely a whisper. “Where is he?”

Ginny moves, then — steps out from behind Harry and comes to sit on the cot by her hip, speaking for the first time. “We...don’t know,” she murmurs, voice so soft and gentle it barely breaks the silence. “I’m sorry, Hermione — but no one does.”

It takes a good five or six seconds for the words to sink in, and then she’s trying to yank free of the sheets. Trying to thrust her legs aside and stand.

Three sets of hands have to wrestle her back down onto the cot, and all the while she’s spluttering, “What — what do you mean no one knows? What are — what you *saying*? Where is he? What happened?”

“Hermione — *Hermione*, stop. Listen.” Ginny presses a cold hand flat against her collarbone, practically forcing her heaving breaths to slow. “*Listen to me*. I know. I know you’re upset. But we don’t know anything more than you.” She presses harder, aggressively soothing, even as Hermione’s pulse starts to skip every other beat. “Breathe. Breathe. You need to calm down first. Calm down, and we can take you to see Narcissa.”

Confusion momentarily blocks out the panic.

“...Narcissa?” She echoes, still weakly struggling to free her wrists as her gaze flits between the three of them. “N— why Narcissa? Does she know where he—”

“No,” Harry says, curt and yet gentle. “No, she doesn’t know where he is. I already tried. But she was the last person he spoke to.” His hand on her arm stops restraining. Just holds her, trying to soothe what can’t be soothed.

Hermione shakes her head mutely at him, eyes wide and confused. “I don’t unders—”

“She doesn’t know where — I just...I think she knows why.”

The Healers try to insist on levitation charms, to protect her ribs and lung from further aggravation. But she wants to walk on her own two feet — even if she looks pathetic, the way she hobbles across the threshold of Narcissa Malfoy’s room. Harry and Ron hover in the doorway, and part of her wonders if they somehow still think Narcissa poses a threat.

The sight of her is jarring.

She didn’t look so worse for wear at the Manor — but then again, maybe that was adrenaline holding her up, too. Or maybe Hermione just wasn’t seeing straight.

Narcissa watches her from her cot, eyes like a hawk — completely lucid, despite the paleness of her skin. The black and blue bruises all over her face. And yet even so frail, she looks elegant. Well-bred.

Only someone who knew her well would know she’d been crying.

Hermione’s so preoccupied staring at her that she almost doesn’t notice the Auror standing guard in

the corner.

“Is that completely necessary?” she snaps at him without thinking.

The Auror is one of Shacklebolt’s. Not part of Dawlish’s inner crowd. She’d recognize him otherwise. Still, though, he says, “She remains under house arrest.”

“Even in her condition?”

He adjusts his stance, awkward and yet steadfast. “Even then.”

Hermione can’t hold in a scoff of distaste, shuffling the last few steps until she reaches the side of the bed. She winces as she takes a seat in the chair next to it.

“Miss Granger,” Narcissa appraises her calmly.

Hermione gives a curt nod. “Mrs. Malfoy.”

A polite girl might ask how she’s faring. If she’s in any pain. Might make small talk or try to take her mind off things. But she is not a polite girl. Not anymore. She cuts through the excess like she’s got a sharp knife.

“Where is he?”

To her credit, Narcissa doesn’t play any games. Doesn’t feign confusion or ignorance. Instead, she twists delicately against the pillows propped behind her back, thin fingers plucking a folded sheet off parchment off the bedside table.

Hermione’s stomach lurches, mind racing at the possibilities — a letter? A legal document? Something — something *worse*?

But Narcissa hesitates before handing it over.

“You should know,” she says, tone unreadable. “It’s what’s best.”

Hermione feels her limbs lock up, heart thudding. “*What* is?”

She almost rips the parchment taking it out of Narcissa’s hand, and then again just trying to unfold it. Draco’s handwriting — so unmistakeable at this point — makes the breath catch in her throat.

She doesn’t want to read it. Risks a glance up at Narcissa before allowing herself to start, and the look she finds in her eyes is the first she can truly riddle out.

Pity.

And oh, how she *hates* pity.

Squaring her jaw, she jerks her eyes down again and yanks the parchment flat.

Hermione,

I didn’t want this to be the first thing you saw when you woke up. I hope Weasley made you eat something. Hope you’re taking your medicine like you’re supposed to be. But, then again, it’s you.

If I know you as well as I think I do, you're probably reading this earlier than you should be. There's nothing for it.

So before you know anything else, know that you can't change my mind. I've made my decision. This is what I need to do. It's already worked out, and it's for the best. For both of us.

I've spoken with the Minister, and with McGonagall, and as of this morning I've surrendered my wand to the Ministry. I've signed a binding contract that states I'll never engage in wandless magic, brew potions or attempt to apparate. In exchange, I won't have to return to Hogwarts, and I won't stand trial for my actions yesterday.

From this moment on, I am no longer a Malfoy. And I am no longer a wizard.

I am a Muggle.

I hope to Merlin — well, to God, now — that you of all people will understand. You reach a point where you know the therapy won't work anymore. Certain wounds don't heal. You, Hermione — you're not going to heal.

If I don't do this, I'm never going to spend another second of my life at peace. There's never going to be a moment I don't see you lying there — fucking bloodless — with my hands around your neck. With that look in your eyes. I can't live like that. Please, don't ask me to live like that.

The terms of this — well, I guess it's a bit like a plea deal. If I let this part of my life go, I have to let everything else go too. Shackbolt says Muggles call it Witness Protection.

To sum it up, I am leaving my name and my identity behind. I forfeit my inheritance, save a small portion that will be converted to Muggle currency — for a fresh start. I am to leave the country. I will never see my mother or my father again.

And I will never see you again.

I know — somewhere — a part of you can understand. I know you can. You will. Because it means I can wake up without wanting to kill myself. And it means you'll never be at risk again — not from me.

I don't know what's left to say. You already know I love you. I promise not to say it again.

But I can say thank you.

For a little while there, I had you. I had something to look forward to. To want. To chase. I had those curls wrapped around my fingers and those lips between my teeth. I had someone to worry about, other than myself. I had someone that gave as good as she got. That withstood me. Wanted me regardless. And Merlin, that felt fucking good.

Thank you. I'm glad to have had that, for a little while.

But I have things to look forward to now too, I suppose. I have to learn how to drive. How to cook and boil water. I get to ride in an airplane. Please don't tell anyone, but I've always secretly wanted to do that. And there's that flimsy hot chocolate, as well. I have that to look forward to.

And you, Hermione — you have the whole world at your feet.

This life is yours for the taking. Find what you want and take it for the both of us.

I'll be rooting for you.

Draco

The letter slips from her numb fingers and floats to the hospital floor.

Chapter End Notes

Jesus, only one chapter left. As a thank you to all of you for sticking with this for so long, and also as a bribe to stick around a little longer for the last chapter, I'm thinking of posting the commissioned art in the next day or so. I'll have a chat with the artist and we'll work it out, but keep your eye on Tumblr if you follow me, and if not it'll be posted with the last chapter. I'm so excited for you all to see it!

xoxo

L

Chapter Notes

A part of me literally can't believe I'm posting the final chapter, and I cannot thank you all enough for bearing with me through every rant, double-post and ridiculously long hiatus. Writing this fic has meant more to me than I can say, and because of you all I can't wait to write another.

I normally don't post song recommendations on the chapters themselves, but these were critical to the writing process and I think they're worth a listen.

"CARONTE" - Apparat

"Use Me" (feat. 070 Shake) - PVRIS

Thank you for everything -

xoxo

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

April 4th, 2001

She has poisoned herself at least a hundred times, and by now she knows what to expect.

If it's wrong — and it's *always* wrong — then within the first minute or so, the walls of her stomach will start to burn, sharp stabbing pains following shortly after. Her hands will start to shake and the blood will rush to her head, and if she's not quick about it, she'll pass out.

She's gone through more bezoars than she can count. Certain attempts have been so disastrous she's needed more than one just to soak up the toxins.

But today —

She exhales slowly, glancing down at her hands. No shaking, no visible tremors whatsoever. She presses one softly against her stomach, waiting for that inevitable shock of pain. To cramp or double over. It should've happened by now.

And when her hands do start to shake, a good five minutes later, she knows it's not from poison.

The effect is gradual. A fade of shadows and colors before her eyes — wisps not unlike the smoke of a Patronus charm casting themselves about the room. Shapes take form soon after. A familiar leather armchair she knows well. Drapes drawn across a window. And Theodore Nott, asleep on his sofa.

The cup she drank from slips out of her hand and shatters on the floor, remnants of the potion leaking across the tile.

He's clear as day — only slightly transparent. She can see his chest rise and fall, slow and even.

Can see the clean line of the arm he's got thrown over his eyes. The journal left open on his chest.

Her heart starts to pound, and for a long moment she just stands there. Frozen. Staring.

At a certain point, it had started to feel impossible. A damned endeavor, a futile habit. So futile, she almost doesn't want to test it. The part that matters most. She has to work herself up to it.

Fingers trembling, she blows out one more nervous breath and reaches toward the wisps. Toward the apparition of Theo, still peaceful and undisturbed. If she's somehow miraculously gotten this right, he won't be for long.

The conjured smoke is cold to the touch — a teasing whisper against her skin — and when she curls her fingers and makes a fist, the world around her evaporates. With a small shriek and a rush of air, she's lying face first on the carpet of Theo's study.

He's up in an instant with a gasp, journal falling to the floor. He clutches his chest and stares at her, eyes wide and bleary.

"T-Theo..." she splutters, lifting herself onto her hands and knees.

"Hermione — what...what *happened?*"

"Theo." She's almost panting now, bewildered excitement catching up with her. "Theo, it works. It *works.*"

There's a gap — a confused pause as he fully wakes up, fully comprehends, their eyes locked. And then he's off the sofa, scrambling to pull her the rest of the way up from the floor. He gathers her against him, warm and familiar and smelling like he always does. His chin drops to the crown of her head, and she feels his chest deflate as he lets out the breath they've been collectively holding for the past two years.

"*Thank fuck.*"

They apparate back to her flat in London.

The mess has been piling up for a long while now, discarded bottles and shriveled herbs strewn about, books dogeared and stacked on every surface. Only the cauldron sits in relative cleanliness, away from the clutter. She couldn't risk contaminating it.

"What was it?" Theo asks, staring down into the milky potion, still bubbling away. He hasn't bothered to dress or comb his hair, and he's still barefoot.

Hermione tucks her curls back into a bun, circling the cauldron. "The flowers. All of the base ingredients were correct. The Angel's Trumpet and Baneberry for trace detection. The Knotgrass from Polyjuice and the Thaumatorgia from the Potion of All Potential. But the rose and white orchid were too impersonal."

Theo's eyes flash at that. Adding the flowers had been his idea — and he'd been right, save a small detail.

“I think the brewer has to manifest what they want out of it. I had to make it personal.”

He approaches the dining room table she’s turned into an overlarge cutting board. “What did you use?”

She moves to his side, gesturing to them in turn. “Valerian, for forgetfulness. Cyclamen, for separation. Dogwood, for constancy and...undiminished love,” she says the last in a quiet voice. “I’d been using those three for weeks. But they seemed too straightforward. Too simple.” She moves her hand to rest on the soft white petals of the fourth flower in the line of ingredients. “So I added snowdrop, for hope. And Tansy, for—”

“Hate,” Theo finishes for her, tone unreadable. “A declaration of war.” She nods in silence, chewing her bottom lip.

“I would’ve worried the effect would be too strong.”

She nods again, “I did. But then I thought about it and I realized I...” she trails off, pinching the flower’s soft yellow cluster of petals and grinding them to dust. “Well, I hate him half the time. When I think of him, part of me is always furious.”

Theo hums in the back of his throat. “It’s brilliant.”

He’s possibly the only one who thinks so.

From those first weeks, and every moment since, he’s been at her side. From the moment she took his hand on that cliffside, shaking so violently he couldn’t seem to let go of the ashes clutched in his palm.

“Look at the wind,” she’d said, keeping her eyes low to spare him. No one likes to be watched as they cry. “Fierce and headstrong, just like her.” Most people would’ve called it bad weather, especially for a funeral. Violent gusts whipping up against them, chasing away black umbrellas. Angry clouds looming above. In the moment, it felt perfect. “She’d want it like this.”

Theo had choked on a sob at that, shoulders jerking with it — but he let her fingers work over his, relaxing his grip until Pansy’s ashes started to fall between the gaps, whisked away by that invisible current in an instant.

The two of them stayed on that cliffside until well after dark, the Parkinson family and the small gathering that accompanied them — some friends, some less than friends — long gone. She held his hand until it was numb, and he cried until his eyes swelled practically shut.

From then on, they were nearly inseparable. No one else understood, not in the way he did. Not in the way she did.

Everyone else tried to talk her out of it.

In the weeks and months that came after that letter, she tried to cope the way most people do. She broke a lot of things. Drank herself into stupors. Failed two of her N.E.W.T.S. and received an Incomplete in Muggle Studies. Theo was always there with the Firewhiskey, holding her hair as she got sick on the Slytherin common room floor and then tucking her into his own four-poster. She became something pathetic and revolting in that final term, the days crippled and dragging, strung together by hangovers and little else.

She felt guilty when it came to Theo. He, with the greater loss. Theo had more of an excuse than anyone to turn to drink, and yet instead he curled into himself. Fell into fugue states and bouts of

forgetfulness. More than once, she found him standing in an empty corridor, staring at his feet. Lost. She's told he would've failed all his courses, if not for McGonagall's good word.

Harry, Ron and Ginny did what they could. She will always respect them for the space they gave her in that time. She knew she was a sinking ship — Theo a wreck upon the rocks. What good was it to drag anyone down with them?

But it was untenable. An impossible lifestyle to maintain. Hardly a life at all. Something had to break, and by god it did.

On the last night of term, dodging the Feast and blissfully alone, Hermione convinced Theo to split a bottle with her.

Three quarters to the bottom and all talked out about loss and pain and the fucking stupid, unbearable world they lived in, Theo had turned and looked at her. She'll never forget that look — a bleak and shattered amalgam of trust and hope and terror, an unspoken plea hiding behind it all.

He'd blinked and she'd blinked, clearing away the fog of Firewhiskey, and then his mouth was on hers.

A better person might lie. Might say it felt immediately wrong and out of place. Like kissing a brother or a best friend. The way kissing Ron had always felt.

She tries not to lie anymore, even if the truth guts her.

And for a moment there, it felt fucking incredible — and she refused to compare it to anything. Theo kissed gently and with great care, unfettered by the alcohol. Tender where others might be sloppy. His hands, the way they cupped her jaw as he nipped at her lips — they made her feel like something precious. Breakable.

It would also be a lie to say she stopped it first.

She let him tilt her head back and mouth a steady path along the column of her throat, moaning as he did it and weaving her fingers through hair that was thicker and more coarse than she expected. She let him carry her all the way up to the dormitory, drunk on something other than Firewhiskey. Let him strip her to almost nothing and lay her down. Let him cast the fucking contraceptive charm and line himself up — they were that fucking close.

It was only in the exact moment he broke that she realized she was waiting for it.

His elbows gave out and he collapsed on top of her, suddenly wracked by uncontrollable sobs. Wide-eyed and relieved and terrified, she'd wrapped her arms around him and cradled him to her as he shook and cried into the crook of her neck, gasping out over and over, "I'm not him. I'm not him. *I'm not him.*"

Hermione tilted her head sideways, letting her own tears roll off her cheeks and kissing his temple, suddenly certain of something, though not certain what.

In his ear, she murmured, "And I'm not her."

At this, Theo whimpered and let his muscles go slack.

It never happened again.

They slept that way — naked and tangled up, damp with tears — and by the next morning she

knew what she needed to do. He helped her dress, timid and ashamed until she took his face in her hands, gave him a small shake and whispered, “Thank you.” For kisses she desperately needed. For someone to sleep next to — to hold — just once.

And then she mucked up the courage to ask for his help.

“Hermione, I think that’s illegal.”

“Don’t do this to yourself.”

“It’s a dead end.”

“You have to let him go.”

It’s what they all told her — so many times over the past two years, she’s lost track — but not Theo. Never him.

That morning as they boarded the Hogwarts Express for the last time, she told him what she intended to do, and he told her the cauldron she wanted to use would be too small. Theo — brilliant and tenacious. Second in their class all those years before for a reason.

She thought for a long time that he put in all the time and energy as a favor.

One day, a year and many failures in, he told her he needed a purpose. Something worth doing.

Every book they read told them a potion like that didn’t and couldn’t exist, but Theo just said, “Everything can’t and doesn’t exist until it does.”

So they agreed to force it into existence. Their own secret, forbidden creation, cautiously dubbed *Seek and Find*. A potion, when drunk, that allows the brewer to locate and furthermore apparate to whatever they wish to find. Or in this case, whomever.

She wasted so many weeks, fresh out of St. Mungo’s, searching for him blindly on foot. Knowing all the while she would never find him. Everyone told her so. Just as they told her this potion would never work.

And yet here she is, staring at it. Complete. Functional. *Real*.

They designed it to use something the sought-after had made. For nearly two years now, Theo has been making her charmed paper cranes and swans and stars for every test run. A fresh box of them sits on the floor of her kitchen even now. Once used, the object is destroyed. A kink they could never work out.

Which is why Theo asks, “Are you sure?” later that afternoon, watching as she unhooks the broken chandelier pendant from around her neck. He’s sitting at the foot of her bed, scribbling in his journal again — not the green one from so long ago. Something personal. Just for him. She asked once what he wrote — “*Just nonsense*,” — and then she never asked again.

She’s nearly ready now. She struggled a little in front of her mirror, feeling foolish getting all ‘dolloped up,’ as Theo called it. There’s still the chance it won’t work. But she’s gone two years not giving half a damn whether her hair is tangled or her clothes are clean.

And the thought of his eyes on her — in that state, pathetic and beaten-down — is unbearable.

Part of her admits that she also needed an excuse. Something to kill time. Now that the moment’s

upon her — two years and one month in the making — she feels somehow unprepared.

“Yes,” she says despite it all, staring at the crystal shard in her palm. She’ll never see it again, once it sinks into the cauldron. If this goes wrong, she loses one of the only pieces of him she has left.

“Are you scared?” Theo asks several minutes later in a quiet voice, standing beside her as she watches her reflection bubble in the potion’s white froth. She holds the pendant above it, dangling like a final lifeline.

“Terrified,” she murmurs.

Theo must see her hand shaking. He steps forward and wraps his hand around hers, holding her fist tight around the chain for a moment as he says, “I think he’d want it like this.”

Just as she did, on that cliffside.

It’s an important validation — unspoken until this point. But ever since the first failed brew, a part of her has wondered if what she’s doing is wrong. Cruel. If, by some miracle she finds him, he’ll turn her away.

It’s what’s best.

She blinks furiously, fighting the tears as they well up in her eyes.

But Theo just says, “Come on, Gryffindor.” And he peels her fingers back. That fractured crystal gleams one last time as it strikes the potion surface, and the milky white tints blue as it sinks away.

She wants to mourn for it.

She doesn’t have the time.

Theo finds a teacup balanced haphazardly on the corner of a stack of books. He dumps the long cold tea into the pot of one of her fake plants, then returns to her side and tucks it into her hand.

“Do you...want me to go with you?” he asks.

She shakes her head mutely, still blinking the tears back. But she squeezes his hand as she takes the cup.

“Bottoms up, then.”

It’s as bitter as it’s ever been — she’s always thought it tastes like poison. And for a moment she tricks herself into thinking something’s gone wrong, clutching at her stomach when it flutters dangerously.

It turns out it’s only butterflies. She doesn’t think she’s felt those in years.

But they spread their wings and wreak havoc and vengeance upon her at the sight of those wisps gathering into shapes around the cluttered room.

Hermione reaches for Theo immediately, shackling his wrist and holding her breath, unable to tear her eyes away as the smoke starts to settle. She makes a sound she can’t quite define, because she’s been wondering something else from that first day too. Something that’s threatened to cripple her more than once over the years. The chance that he might be gone. Really gone.

That he might've done something unforgivable. Unfixable.

And yet — there he is.

Her knees wobble beneath her, and only Theo prevents her from meeting the hard tile floor.

His shadowy form — so raw, so familiar, so permanently imprinted on her eyes — kneels over something not quite in focus, hands working over it. She can't see his face at the angle. Not until he stands and wipes his palms on the sides of what might be jeans — she isn't sure.

The mottled smoke grows clearer then, just before he turns where she can see him. Turns away from — a garden, yes it's a garden. She huffs out a strangled, disbelieving breath, losing all control of her lungs a moment later when his face comes into view.

It all comes rushing to the forefront. Every repressed, buried thing. It narrowly knocks the wind out of her.

And she can't manage a single breath — not a movement, not a sound. Can only watch as he tosses a spade carelessly aside and starts to walk away. The mirage follows him, trailing after as he pulls open a door to what must be his home. He massages the back of his neck and sighs, moving through rooms until he reaches a small kitchen. She's watching him fill a kettle with water when Theo finally speaks.

"Go on, then."

Ripping her gaze away, she meets his eyes — and he must see all the shock and relief and trepidation mixed across her face.

He nudges her with an elbow, and his tone is casual in a way she didn't know she needed it to be.

"I'll see you when I see you."

The words are what it takes to make her reach out and close her fist.

The crack of apparition is near deafening to her ears, and it takes everything in her not to topple over the way she did that morning — this time from wind. Salt and cool mist whip against her face, and when she manages to open her eyes she's facing the sea. Her curls fly about her face as she takes in the rolling yellow-green hills leading up from its shore, ebbing and flowing at sharp angles all the way up to the precipice that the modest cottage sits on.

She turns in a slow, bewildered circle, finding nothing beyond more hills. More grass. Completely secluded.

By the time she's gone full circle, facing the cottage again, the front door is open and he's standing there.

He must've heard her apparate.

And it's then that she realizes — two years. *Two years*, and she's never given a single thought to what she should say. It's a testament to just how large a part of her didn't believe she'd ever succeed.

He stares at her from the doorstep, and she stares back, nothing but the wind whistling between them.

He's a shock to the senses. Tall and angular as always, and yet — it's as though he's in color for the first time. Health in his cheeks and in the natural tan spread out over him. It speaks to hours in the sun, just as the subtle, corded lines peeking out from the sleeves and collar of his shirt speak to strength. His hair is longer, curling around the edges of his ears. Hanging in his eyes. A warmer blond now.

He looks alive.

And half of her wants to disappear. Disapparate. Right then and there. Before she destroys something.

But then he speaks, "...Hermione?" And his voice is rich and warm and *missing* — missing from her life for too goddamned long.

She reaches for her wand without thinking, pointing it straight between his eyes.

"I should hex you senseless."

Those. *Those* are her first words to him, fucking hell.

Draco doesn't move an inch, gray eyes slowly sliding from where they've locked on hers to the tip of her wand, then back again.

He doesn't speak.

And now she can't seem to stop.

"*You* — you made a choice that wasn't yours to make. When I didn't have a say. When I couldn't speak for myself. You took that from me and you—"

He opens his mouth.

"*Don't speak*. Don't. Let me get this out." She brandishes the wand at him, voice growing louder and higher in pitch. "I — I *waited for you*. For two years. *Two fucking years*. I stayed in London where you could find me and I waited for you to realize what a colossal fucking mistake you made. To come back and — and *face* it. Fix it."

"Hermione—"

"Theo has to face it. I have to face it. Blaise and Harry and Ginny and Neville and Ron. *Every day* we all have to face it. But you? *No*. And then I have to — I have to find you here, looking—" Her voice breaks. "Looking the way you do. Having the fucking *nerve* to look so — so healthy and alive and—"

"Hermione—"

"*Shut up*," she snaps, voice breaking again. It wasn't supposed to go this way. "I can't — I can't believe you'd—"

"Do you want to come inside?"

"*No—*"

His tone is softer than she expected, even in the sharp way he cuts her off. "Come in the house, Hermione." And he steps aside in the doorway.

“I — I don’t want to,” she stammers, even as her wand arm falters and she takes a step toward him.

He just widens the gap, holding the door open.

Her heart swells in two directions. She’s overwhelmed by the possibility that somehow, someday — all this time — she’s caused nothing but harm, and that by crossing that threshold she might shatter whatever fragile happiness he’s managed to create for himself.

But looking at him — it’s like salve on a furious burn. One that’s been festering for too long. It’s the first relief she’s felt in ages.

It’s not really a choice at all.

Cautiously, she lowers her wand and stows it away, movements timid and uncertain as she follows him into the house and shuts the door behind her.

It’s even more modest on the inside. More practical and minimal than she could’ve ever expected. A small country cottage, relatively clean — visible wear and tear in the state of the ceiling and floor in some spots.

She trails after him into the kitchen in silence.

“I was going to put a pot on,” he says with his back to her, voice flat.

“Okay.”

“If you want a—”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

She stares as he finishes filling the kettle, somehow enamored by the way he looks completing such a menial task. His hands — those fucking *hands* — are stained brown with soil, the dirt under his fingernails so out of place and human.

She tries to hide the way she sucks in a breath when he strikes a match for the stove burner, eyes drawn to his mouth as he blows it out.

He turns to face her again when it’s done, and she averts her gaze.

“You seem...” she sniffs and quickly wipes her nose, wrapping her arms around herself, “you seem absurdly calm about all this.”

Draco shifts his stance. Leans carefully back against the kitchen table and huffs quietly, almost to himself. “I’m not calm. The last thing I am is calm.”

It’s a small comfort to hear him say it. “Well you seem—”

“I’m not.”

Her eyes flit up and meet his. It’s hard to control the urge to touch him. To stride forward and slide her palms over the planes of his cheeks and feel their warmth. To run the pads of her fingers down his lips to see if they’re as soft as they used to be.

Her face darkens with blood, she can feel it.

“How did you find me?” he asks at last, expression tightly controlled.

She shakes her head. “It doesn’t matter.” In the tense silence that follows, she adds, “But you certainly didn’t make it easy for me, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I know.”

“You *don’t* know.”

He lifts an eyebrow, the only part of his face she can read. “Would you like to go back to threatening me? I know that always makes you feel better—”

“Don’t you fucking *mock* me,” she spits, going rigid and narrowing her eyes.

It devolves quickly from there.

“Language, Granger.”

“Oh, I’m back to being Granger now am I, *Malfoy*?”

“When you act that way, yeah.”

“You don’t get to tell me how to act after what you put me through—”

“Did you even *read* that letter? It wasn’t just about you—”

“No. *No*. It *is* about me! Don’t say it isn’t about me. It’s about both of us! It’s about you taking control away from me!”

Their voices rise — ricochet off the small stone walls.

“You want to talk about *control*? I have *never* had control. Not *one day* in my entire fucking life!” He takes a step toward her, expression cracking — breathing anger and life.

“So this is your way of taking it back?” She steps in to match him, shouting up into his face — reminded suddenly how he towers over her. “Punishing me?”

“It wasn’t a fucking *punishment*!”

“What would you call it then? Leaving me? *Abandoning* me for two fucking years? Letting me wake up in a hospital bed *alone*—”

“You weren’t alone!”

“I was in the way that mattered!”

They’re too close together. She blames that for it, when she gets swept up in the moment — so familiar and easy, sparring with him — so necessary. She makes that age old mistake and thrusts out both palms, shoving him backward.

It’s the first time she touches him. Her skin prickles at the contact, and she’s momentarily caught off guard — unprepared for his retaliation.

Draco’s hands whip out and shackle her wrists, yanking them up to frame either side of her face, and he gives her a startling jolt, knocking her off balance.

“We’re back to this?” he growls, hot breath gusting up against her skin. “Already? In *five fucking minutes?*”

“Go to hell,” she spits — an instinct — jutting her chin forward to get in his face.

They notice in the same instant, both breaking off into harsh silence. Their eyes flit down in tandem, taking in the hair’s breadth of space between their lips. Her lids feel abruptly heavy, breath hitching just as he blasts out a shuddering exhale.

Peppermint.

And suddenly his bruising pressure on her wrists feels like the only thing anchoring her to reality. She narrows her eyes, just a fraction further, glaring at him even as the bridge of her nose brushes against his.

“Do it or I will,” she hisses.

Anyone else might not know what she’s asking — a threat to most ears. And it is a threat. It is.

She can see in his eyes that he knows that too. In that fraction of a second before his mouth lands on hers and the rest of the world ceases to exist.

With a surprised and muffled cry, she’s knocked back by the force of it — and for a moment she can’t match his fervor. Can only think. Feel. She’s suddenly reminded how it feels to breathe. *Really* breathe. It makes her pulse stutter in her chest. And then she loses all control.

Her hands scramble for purchase, skidding across the warm slopes of his shoulders, broader now than they’ve ever felt before. She makes fists in the fabric of his shirt and yanks herself closer, gasping into his mouth when he bites down on her lip.

He groans — a groan like he’s furious and frustrated — and his hands are desperate too, blunt fingernails digging into the flesh of her hips as he drags her against him.

“*Fucking* hell,” he grinds out when her tongue flicks against his, and from there it all escalates too quickly to track.

One moment he’s kissing her — wet and shameless and desperate, her toes curling in her shoes — and then the next—

She chokes on another shocked gasp when he suddenly flips them around, reversing their positions and pushing her back against the edge of the kitchen table. He draws her bottom lip out, sucking hard and dragging his teeth against it, and a moment later he’s yanking at her hips — twisting her to face the other direction.

Her back to him now, he presses hard between her shoulder blades, forcing her down until she’s bent over the table. Her wrist skids across a plate as she tries to brace herself, knocking it off the edge. It shatters on the floor.

She can feel his hands shaking as he shoves up the hem of her dress — can hear the clink of his belt buckle as he yanks at it, one callused palm gliding up the back of her thigh towards—

The kettle starts to scream, and reality comes crashing down around them.

She hears his feet scuff on the floor as he staggers back — hears the muttered “*fuck*” he lets out under his breath.

The kettle's shrill whistle dies away as it's yanked off the burner, and she's still bent over the table. Panting. Momentarily frozen.

When she can manage it, she rises up on shaky elbows, dress fluttering against her thighs as it falls back into place. And when she turns around, she finds him staring at her.

He raises his hands like he's at gun point, eyes wide and disbelieving, an incredulous huff bursting from his lips. He shakes his head. Clenches those hands into fists and mashes them against his eyes with a groan, turning to face away from her and bracing his hands on the counter.

"I just —" he forces out. "I don't know what fucking instinct that is, I — *bleeding hell*, you make me act fucking *mad*."

What she feels she doesn't expect to feel; an abrupt and overwhelmingly grounding sense of calm. A resolve.

Smoothing out her dress, she sweeps the hair out of her face and takes a slow, steady step toward him.

"Look at me," she says in a quiet voice when she's standing right behind him, watching his shoulders tense at her voice, his knuckles going white against the counter.

"Give me a minute to—"

"No," she raises her voice just a fraction. "Look at me."

Hesitantly, he turns — jaw tight, body rigid.

But her nerve is suddenly fixed. Rooted deep, unwavering. Perhaps all she needed was a taste of him, after all this time.

"Listen to me very carefully," she says, closing the foot of distance so she can reach out and rest her hand on his chest. On the V-shaped collar of his shirt. There's a set of three buttons that won't do much besides widen the visible expanse of his chest, but she undoes them anyway — pleasantly surprised at the dexterity of her fingers as she listens to his breath hitch.

"What are you—"

"I am so sick and tired of you making decisions for the both of us," she talks over him, still not meeting his eyes. She's distracted by the view of his chest, gaze going a little unfocused as she trails her fingers down the remainder of his shirt towards his open belt buckle. "No one makes my choices for me. You should know that by now. *No one*." She drags down on the zipper, the sound as its teeth release loud in the otherwise heavy silence. "Are you listening?"

She lifts her eyes to his, quirking an eyebrow. She's in control now — and *fuck*, if it doesn't feel good.

A deep flush has spread out across his face, his lips parted as he stares at her.

"Do you really think I don't want that?" she asks, tone mild even as she snakes her hand between the waistband of his underwear and the rich heat of his skin.

His grip tightens on the counter, eyes momentarily squeezing shut and jaw twitching as she wraps her fingers around him. He's warm and smooth as velvet, just like she remembers, and he's harder than she expected. She can feel him swelling steadily in her soft grip.

“W-Want...” he manages after a moment, forcing his eyes open though it seems to take great effort. “Want what?”

“You,” she answers, slowly dragging her hand up and down the length of him. Once. Twice. “Do you think I would let you do the things you do? The things you’ve *done*?” She pauses to squeeze, delighting in the way his whole body jerks. “Do you really think I would let you bend me over a table like that if I didn’t want it as badly as you do? What do you take me for?”

A groan he’s been trying to hold back fights its way out as she sweeps her thumb over the swollen head, gathering up the moisture steadily leaking from the tip.

“That’s your mistake. Your one fatal flaw,” she says, starting to pump up and down again. “You decide what you can’t have without *asking*.”

He yanks her to him so suddenly that her grip on him fumbles, hand getting trapped between them as his tongue delves into her mouth.

“Don’t stop,” he pants around her bottom lip when her touch falls away, but even then he’s already turning them around — twisting to pin her up against the counter in that way he can’t seem to help.

She blooms under his touch, opening and loosening and going slack for the first time in so long. Her head falls back as he mouthes a burning path down from the corner of her lips to the valley above her collarbone, moaning against her all the while like he’s quenching a desperate thirst. Giving in to a filthy habit.

She doesn’t mind being a habit. Not if it feels like this.

“Why did you do it?” she asks without thinking, eyes closed and mouth agape as he tugs down the sleeve of her dress to expose her shoulder. His teeth graze the skin and she shivers, bucking a little against him. “W-Why — why did you go?”

He doesn’t answer at first. Only drags his tongue back along the expanse between her shoulder and her throat. Her legs start to shake.

“Why...when it feels like this?”

“*Because* it feels like this,” he admits unexpectedly, nipping at her pulse point. “It feels like this, and I know I don’t deserve it.”

She scoffs at that, frustrated by the modesty of his hands resting on her hips. She yanks at one and presses it against her breast through the thin material of the dress, feeling his breath catch against her throat. “Well, that’s fucking ridiculous,” she says.

“I think you swear more than I do, now.”

The sarcasm in his tone has a surprising effect on her, a pulse of heat riding up her spine.

She drags her head up from where it hangs, placing her lips at his ear. “Apologize to me,” she demands.

“For what?” Oh, he’s playing the game now. It’s a clear challenge.

Threading her fingers into his hair — distracting in its new length, so easy to tangle in — she takes his earlobe into her mouth and suckles at it, hips jutting forward instinctively when he moans.

“For making such a bad decision,” she breathes, tracing the shell of his ear with her tongue. “For wasting two years of my life — and yours. Apologize to me.”

His lips pause just beneath her jaw, warm breath giving her gooseflesh. For a long moment, he just stands there, pressed against her, shoulders rising and falling steadily with each exhale. An unexpected spike of anger flares up in her at the hesitation.

Her tone comes out a little vicious. “Unless you’re too *proud*.”

He goes completely still. Pulls back a moment later, pulls away.

Hermione stands her ground — doesn’t say another word, even as his eyes search hers, expression swimming in them indecipherable.

“Proud,” he echoes, low and quiet. “I’m not proud.”

Her breath catches in the seconds that follow, because he sinks to his knees.

She stares down at him, and he gazes up at her, and slowly — so slowly — his guard falls, and she can see what’s behind his eyes. In all the years she’s known him, she’s never once seen him so vulnerable. A position of utter submission. Just kneeling there in front of her, hands on his thighs, eyes pleading and desperate.

“I’m not proud,” he says again, barely audible. And then he lifts one hand, touch featherlight on her bare shin as the rough pads of his fingers skate up to the back of her thigh. He leans forward, eyes still on hers as he rests his forehead just above her knee. “All I have is shame.”

She can’t help herself. She slides her palm against his cheek, breath stuttering again when he leans so hungrily into the touch, his eyes falling shut.

“I’m a coward, Hermione,” he murmurs against her skin. “I run from things. I — I’m weak, and I always have been.”

That anger flares in her again, sharper than before. She takes his chin in hand less than gently, urging his eyes to meet hers. “You are *not* weak,” she growls, teeth bared. Furious. “And I don’t ever want to hear you say it again.”

His eyes flash, expression flickering through so many emotions in a matter of seconds. Shattering, igniting, bleeding, breaking apart.

And then something seems to take over, and he’s lifting his head — rising up from where he rests back on his ankles. Both hands find the fronts of her thighs, sliding up slow and deliberate and taking the hem of her dress with them.

His eyes are locked on hers, dark and full of intent now as he lifts the dress up to her waist, fisting one hand in the fabric. The other finds the back of her knee again and drags her legs apart.

She bites down hard on her lip, a sharp pulse fanning out low in her stomach.

“These are nice,” he murmurs, hooking a finger in the thin band of the black lace piece she chose this morning.

“Wishful thinking,” she admits in a whisper — doesn’t mean to say it out loud.

The briefest grin spreads across his face at that, disappearing a moment later as he presses a kiss to

her inner thigh, dragging down her underwear while he does it.

“I’m sorry,” he breathes against her skin, teeth grazing close, too close — not close enough. Her hands scramble to grip the counter tight as he tosses the scrap of lace somewhere behind him, mind racing. She didn’t think it would go this way. Didn’t dare to dream. It was just wishful—

His mouth takes to her mercilessly, and her hips buck, a strangled, startled little shriek ripping its way out of her throat. He moans and drags himself closer, burying his face between her thighs as he laves his tongue from the apex to her entrance.

“*Fuck*, you taste the same,” he says against her, and in an instant he becomes ravenous. His jaw twists back and forth like he wants to taste every inch, only pulling away to gasp and come up for air. Pressure and warmth and the smooth slick of his tongue, the graze of his teeth where she’s far too sensitive.

She trembles and writhes and even thrashes once or twice, and all the while he keeps saying it. Soft and reverent, like a prayer.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Okay,” she gasps each time in response. “Okay. *God*, okay.”

Once, he even whispers, “Forgive me,” as he hitches her leg up over his shoulder, spreading her wide — opening her up. She comes fast and hard, almost immediately as he slides a finger inside of her, clenching around him and seizing up. Knotting her fingers in his hair.

“O-One...one day,” she stammers as she comes down from the high, shaking and fighting him when he doesn’t stop. Doesn’t pull away. “One day I will.”

There’s a clumsiness to it all. A desperation.

Almost like they’re fifteen again. Like they don’t share a war between them. Like the world is different.

“I don’t have a condom.”

“That’s okay. It’s okay.”

A stumbling up stairs, shoes and shirts and inhibitions scattered and left behind. Questions and conversations strung between the breathless rock of his body against hers.

“Where are we?” she wants to know as he pins her wrists above her head on the pillow.

“Wales.”

“How — how long did you look?” he asks as she straddles him, as his hands guide her hips up and down, back and forth.

“Too long.”

With his sheets gathered in her fists and his damp chest against her back, weighing her down — with the scent of him everywhere — she can’t stop herself from asking.

“Has there been anyone? Any— *Christ*, anyone? Anyone else?”

“No.”

He doesn't ask her the same until he's chased her over the edge for the second time — not until he's limp and panting on top of her, nosing at the column of her throat.

She cries when she tells him about Theo. Expects to lose everything. Expects to watch his eyes disappear for the last time behind the slam of a door.

She doesn't expect him to kiss her fiercely, brows drawn in tight, fist in her hair near bruising. Doesn't expect him to slide back inside of her, raw and sore, and ask her to promise him — “*swear to me*” — never to speak of it again.

Sweat-laden and strewn out across his chest, his arm belted around her waist — he's *never* held her this way — she can't help but ask again.

“Why did you leave?”

For too many seconds, he stares up at the ceiling in silence, and she just waits for him. Traces her fingers along the line of his jaw.

“You read the letter.” His voice is scratchy. Exhausted. His lips are swollen.

“Yes.” She rests her chin on his chest so she can meet his eyes. “And then I burned that letter and spent the next two years of my life trying to undo every word of it.” A kiss pressed to his sternum to soften the blow. “So suffice it to say your answer wasn't good enough.”

He blinks slowly at her — drowsy and drunk on orgasm. “You want the truth?”

She nods.

“The cold, hard truth?”

She nods firmly.

“I hate the idea of us together. I *hate* it.”

Hermione works to keep her face blank, waiting for him to finish. He deserves that much. She can hold her breath a little longer.

Draco tugs on a stray curl, pushing it out of her face. “It's the basic law of things. Good should have good. Bad should have nothing. Light needs more light. Darkness only thinks about itself.”

She can't imagine the look on her face, but whatever it is, it makes him raise an eyebrow.

“You think I'm light?” she huffs.

He doesn't respond. He can hold his breath, too.

She stretches against him, swinging her leg over his hip to plant her hands on either side of his head and prop herself up. “This might be difficult for you to remember — what, being *two fucking years ago* — but I've cast my fair share of Unforgiveables.” She leans down. Lets her lips hover over his. “I tortured a man and *liked* it. I no longer qualify as light.”

She kisses him when he opens his mouth to speak, lingering a moment too long when his tongue

flicks against hers.

“And you saved my life. More than once. Why can’t you be satisfied?” She drags his lip out between her teeth, meeting his eyes through her lashes before setting it free. “*We* — are a gray area. Be satisfied.”

His breath hitches. He reaches out to trace her lips. “I am more than satisfied.”

“*Then come back with me.*”

A myriad of emotions crosses his face — conflicted and torn. “I can’t.”

“Why not? You — well, you sort of exiled yourself, didn’t you? Prematurely. I don’t think it would be all that difficult to—”

“Hermione, I *won’t*.”

She swallows her words. Stares at him, feeling her chest tighten.

“Listen to me.” He sits up, taking her with him — bracing her in his lap. “Listen. I need you to understand. I need this. I like this. This is...it’s good for me. I feel strong, for once. Useful. Capable. In control.” He finds her hand, limp at her side, pulling it up and holding it between them. “Feel this.” He uses his other hand to trace her fingers down his palm. Callused. Rough. “I feel like I’ve *lived*.”

She exhales slowly. Knows he can feel her shaking.

There’s an apology in his voice when he speaks again, letting her hand fall away. “I can’t go back.”

It takes an unprecedented amount of time to force herself to ask what she does next. She’s more terrified of the answer than she thinks she’s been of anything else in her life.

“And...and if I stay with you instead...?”

His expression flickers. Brows furrow. It takes him almost as long as it took her to admit it.

“I didn’t think I could have both.”

There’s a pause in which they both draw in a breath. And then her mouth lands on his — hard and disbelieving. “God *damn* you, you only had to *ask*.” She takes his face in her hands, only able to break away from his lips every few seconds to get the words out. “I want — you by my side — and inside of me — and next to me when I wake up in the morning — *every morning*. And if this — is where I have to be — to have that — then this — is where I’ll be.”

He makes a sound against her lips — wounded or elated, she isn’t sure — and yanks her suddenly back beneath him. It’s slow and heady and nebulous. He takes her gently, with her thigh in his grasp, hitched up against his side. With his mouth on hers and his eyes squeezed shut.

“Just...just love me,” she pants around a kiss.

“I am. I *do*.”

“Love me.”

“I — *fuck*, Hermione — I *do*.”

“Stay with me.”

“I will.”

April 5th, 2001

Diary,

You don't know what it's like. To wake up and see her there.

But I do.

Draco

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for the ride

Feel free to come yell at me: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/313342693333861/?ref=share>

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

I can't thank you all enough for everything. If you care to, listen to:

Again - Mako

I Run To You - MISSIO

September 1st, 2001

Michael,

Congratulations, I've been assigned to you. You should consider yourself lucky. I'm not going to make you write any ridiculous fucking prompts, I'm not going to tell you to watch your language, and I'm probably not going to judge you for your exceptionally poor life choices unless you do something really fucking ridiculous. When I had to do this myself, no one on the other end of it had to respond to me, so just know you're getting a much better deal.

First and foremost, your mother sounds like a cunt—

She flips the top half of the page down so she can see his face.

“No.”

“No, what?”

“No, you can't send this.”

“Why not? What's wrong with it?” He's leaning against the sink, aggressively drying a teacup with a dishrag, and he sounds genuinely confused.

She raises an eyebrow. “Would you like a list?”

“What?” He waves the rag at her. “It's honest. It's straightforward. Poor, pathetic Michael What-So-Fuck probably just needs someone to tell it like it is for once.”

She leaves that eyebrow where it is. “If you want this program to last longer than a week, you'll have to refrain from calling the subject's mother a cunt.” She glances back at the letter. “And you'll have to tone down the arrogance significantly.”

He raises an eyebrow back at her, lip curving up on one side. “What arrogance?”

She huffs a laugh and tosses it onto the kitchen table. “Fix it. Before Kingsley changes his mind.”

Draco rolls his eyes. “It was Kingsley's fucking idea.”

That's not entirely true. Kingsley signed off on it, of course, but really the concept came from Draco. One of his *'only good ideas,'* she often tells him — because she likes the way it makes his

face screw up.

In truth, it's brilliant. Not only a public service, but also a purpose for him. A link to the world he chose to leave behind in peace.

He still can't go back. His wand will remain locked up in a Ministry vault; perhaps one day it might be returned to the Malfoy Estate, when enough time has passed, but never to him.

But there was something impossibly wrong about it, when she found him. Something utterly unfair in watching him work a menial Muggle job — the only sort he could manage with such limited knowledge of Muggle life. He, with all his talents. All his brilliance left behind in the Wizarding World.

So she'd returned to the Ministry. Risked arrest admitting she'd sought him out. Kingsley had been stern about it until she insisted she was entirely to blame. After all, Draco never asked her to find him. Perhaps didn't *want* her to find him.

She tries not to think on that. Can't help it sometimes — even admitted it to Draco once, in the middle of the night, tangled up in the dark. His response was brief. Uncompromising.

"Don't be an idiot, Granger."

The first time she met with Kingsley, she tried to argue for a reversal of the entire arrangement — against Draco's wishes, and at the expense of every dish in that small Wales kitchen. He smashed them all to bits when he found out, shouting about his '*own fucking choices*' as he launched bowls at walls.

They went several rounds over that one, screaming at each other well into the early hours of the morning across a floor covered in shattered glass.

By sunrise, they reached a compromise. He has a bad habit of slamming his lips to hers in the middle of a sentence, almost always when she's got an important point to make. But it's difficult to form coherent thoughts with his mouth tracing intricate shapes down the length of her throat.

"I don't want to go back."

"I don't want you to lose everything."

He made some sort of joke at that. Something about the Wizarding World being spared his shockingly offensive journal entries. But then he went quiet, laughter dying off as the gears turned.

"What if — what if I could help?"

As it turned out, the St. Mungo's Trauma Rehabilitation Program was a disaster. Very little by way of regulations. No accountability. An abysmal success rate. And of course there's the utter uselessness of that whole one-way treatment plan.

With a little sway from Harry, Hermione got herself appointed to the Ministry Board overseeing it. She began implementing significant reforms immediately, chief of which being Draco's contribution.

The Co-Recovery Initiative.

He hates the name — "*Despicably uncreative.*" — but he was one of the first to volunteer, under a pseudonym of course. And from now on, once a week, she'll be bringing him back letters from

assigned patients in the program and returning with experienced — albeit immensely crass — words of wisdom.

She spends three days out of the week in Wales, and the rest in London. Those three days are usually spent arguing, if she's honest. About how, no, he *doesn't* know more about television antennas than she does. And no, that *isn't* al dente. And no, she's *not* going to allow him to practice Muggle photography by taking naked photos of her. No. Not a chance.

But those three days are also sometimes spent on that rocky beach out in front of the cottage, teaching him how to sew and how to use an MP3 player. Spent watching old, horrible Muggle horror films on the sofa he's very proud to have picked out himself. Spent adjusting — recalibrating, recuperating. Remembering how to breathe again.

She can't use magic in his presence, and yet she's never felt the need to.

It's apparently common knowledge in the Wizarding community that she found him.

Witch Weekly paid photographers to follow her around in the weeks after she first returned from Wales, and an alarming number of gossip columnists suggested she looked too well-adjusted for someone who'd lost a lover. They printed full-page articles with comparisons — photographs from those two years previous and photographs from the present.

Even she admits the difference is staggering.

But Draco's name remains stricken from every record, his location a secret bound by Unbreakable Vows between a select few. Herself, the Minister, Narcissa Malfoy, Harry and Theo.

Theo...

It couldn't go on.

She spent an entire evening after work pouring her heart out to Harry about it, several pints deep at the Leaky Cauldron. Because how is she supposed to leave him behind? How can she move ahead knowing he can't? How is that fair? How is it even *human*?

Harry, though — with a depth of empathy unmatched by anyone she's ever met — offered the only thing he could. Something he could offer only once. Something — possibly the *only* thing — that could ever hope to stitch Theo back together again.

And it has to happen today.

“Hogwarts is very cautious about who can access the Grounds, and when,” he'd said. “I'm sure you understand why. But I'm meant to oversee a sweep with a team of Aurors before the school year begins. Seek out any potential threats. We could do it then.”

She'd barely been able to nod her head, she was crying so hard.

That was a month ago. A month that felt like a year.

And now it's the 1st.

“When does he get here?” Draco reaches up high to put away the last of the dishes in the top cupboard, and she catches herself admiring the long, agile shape of him. She'll probably never be used to seeing him so healthy. Never get over the way it makes something in her chest swell with warmth.

“Theo should be here any minute. Harry, I’m not sure.”

Draco scoffs. “Leave it to Potter to show up whenever he pleases.”

“You do realize he’s violating at least a dozen Auror protocols for this. He’s even letting *you* go — which, as I think you know, is more than just a violation, it’s illegal.”

“It’s really the least he could do—”

“*Malfoy.*”

He turns to face her when he hears that tone, tossing away the dishrag and moving to lean against the table in front of her. “*Granger,*” he echoes, flashing a devious little grin and reaching out to flick the tip of her nose. “Lighten up, I’m only joking.”

She lets out a breath, realizing only then how nervous she is. “What if this goes wrong?”

That finger slips down from her nose to her chin, tilting it up to make her look him in the eyes. “Do they offer positions in worrying?”

A weak smile slips free. He’s asked this before.

“Maybe,” she says.

“You should look into it.”

“I will.”

The knock at the door startles them both. No one ever knocks here.

“Don’t act so nervous,” Draco says when she stands. “If you’re nervous, he’ll wonder what the fuck is going on, and then he’ll be nervous, and that’ll make you *more* nervous, and then Potter will just get nervous by proxy, and I don’t want to be the only sane one here.”

She scoffs and swats at him, moving towards the door. “As if you were ever sane to begin with.”

Her hand still shakes when she reaches for the knob. She doesn’t want to hope for what can never be guaranteed. It’s part of the reason Theo knows nothing about it. But she also can’t fathom failing him. Not again. Not like that day on the Manor floor, looking into those desperate eyes with nothing to say. No way to help.

That can’t happen again.

Swallowing the knot in her throat, she opens the door.

“How is it already so fucking cold in Wales?” asks Theo from the porch, shoulders hunched as he blows warm air into his gloved hands.

She huffs a laugh. Can’t help a smile. “Come on in, then.” And she steps aside for him, pulling the door the rest of the way open.

Theo steps over the threshold, kicks mud off his boots, then looks up and sees Draco. For the first time in two and a half years.

He’s about as eloquent as she was.

“You *bastard*.”

Draco crosses his arms, leaning back against the table in that superior way he does and raising an eyebrow. “Takes one to know one.”

They stare at one another for a good fifteen seconds in silence, and Hermione’s not sure what to make of it.

Draco breaks first, choking on a laugh and pushing off the table, and then a smile spreads its way slowly across Theo’s face. She pretends that’s all she sees. Not the tears in his eyes. Not the hitch in his breath.

They meet in the middle, an embrace so rough it’s almost aggressive — arms hooked around necks and faces tucked into shoulders.

“Fuck you for doing that to her,” she hears Theo mutter as he thumps him on the back.

Draco only laughs again. An easy, relieved sort of laugh. “She’s been telling me that for five months.”

“As she should. Fucking prick.”

Draco shoves him away and points a finger, still smiling even as he says, “Watch it, yeah? I’ve got every excuse to beat the shit out of you.”

Theo’s brow furrows. It takes him a moment. Then, realizing the implication, he shoots Hermione a horrified sideways glance.

In turn, she looks to Draco, narrowing her eyes. “He knows better than to bring that up.”

“Do I?” he asks. It’s playful — but somehow it’s also anything but. And she can’t even express how grateful she is when another knock sounds at the door.

“Call the Muggle cops on me already?” Theo jokes — and god, she can only hope that sense of humor survives through all of this. She swallows again, clenching and unclenching fists at her sides as she returns to the door.

“Hi, Harry.”

He’s in his Auror robes, wand in hand and his father’s invisibility cloak thrown over his arm. She’d recognize that patterned velvet anywhere. He raises both eyebrows, puffing out a steaming breath in the cold. “Everyone ready?”

She senses Theo appearing behind her.

“Potter?” he blurts out, confused.

Gathering her own deep breath, she turns around in the doorway to face him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to spend a month overthinking it.”

Theo’s gaze flits between hers and Harry’s over her shoulder, tense and confused.

“I’m... I’m not here for tea?”

Harry doesn't let them take the cloak off until they've walked a good thirty meters into the Forbidden Forest. Theo spends that walk in complete silence — only the occasional nervous breath skating past his lips. She spends it worrying. And Draco spends it complaining about Harry not owning a more spacious invisibility cloak — which is probably the only thing that keeps the tension from boiling over.

“Okay,” Harry says when he thinks they're far enough.

“Oh, *thank fuck*.” Draco claws at the velvet immediately, yanking it off the three of them like it's poisonous. The crisp air of the Forest floods in around them, welcome and refreshing.

“Everyone alright?” asks Harry, but his gaze is fixed on Theo.

Hermione glances sideways and finds him still as stone. Only the faintest puffs of breath escape from him — feeble little clouds of steam — and his eyes are unfocused. It's as though he's in shock.

She laces her fingers through his. Tries to remember what he once said when she felt the same.

“Come on, Slytherin.”

Theo huffs at that. Seems to snap out of it, if only a little. “Courage isn't one of our attributes.”

“I disagree,” she says.

Draco suddenly appears on his other side, dropping a hand on his shoulder. “Stubbornness is, though. Let's get a move on, Nott.” He shoves him forward, and for a moment Hermione thinks it's too much. Too forceful.

But Theo's stiff posture seems to slacken all at once, and she remembers she's not the only one who knows him so well.

“It's just ahead,” says Harry, already halfway up the hill in front of them.

“I'm amazed you remember where it is.”

He tosses a tucked smile at Hermione over his shoulder. “Sometimes wish I could forget, if I'm honest.”

The words send a brief ache through her chest.

Theo squeezes her hand when they reach the top of the hill, pine needles crunching under their shoes. “Can you — can you explain to me again? How it...how does it work?”

She squeezes back, doing her level best to ward off tears at the uncertainty she hears in his voice. She cannot cry. She has no right to cry. Not if he isn't. “There is an enchantment on the stone. Whoever holds it can temporarily connect with those they've lost.”

Theo makes a quiet noise in the back of his throat. Swallows and coughs, as though to cover it up. “But...it's real?”

Harry, having stopped just ahead, turns to face him. He gives Theo a solemn nod. “It's real.” He slips his wand into his pocket then, bending down and sifting a hand through those pine needles. A

moment later, he straightens up and takes several steps back. “I shouldn’t touch it,” he says, gesturing to the spot.

Hermione glances sideways at Theo again. Says, “Go on, then,” in a gentle voice before trying to extricate her hand.

He doesn’t let go. Squeezes tighter.

“Are you...”

He nods, throat bobbing as he swallows compulsively. “I’m fine. Fine. I...I just...”

“Do you want us to give you some privacy—”

He’s already shaking his head before she can finish the sentence. “Don’t leave. Please don’t leave.”

It gets impossibly harder to fight back tears. “Okay.”

Only then does he let go of her hand, hesitating another moment before taking a step forward. She moves off to the side — over towards Draco and Harry, giving him a decent amount of space.

He glances over at them when he reaches the spot where the stone is. “Do I need to — to do anything special, or...?”

Harry shakes his head. “Just hold onto it and think of her.”

He makes that noise again. Can’t seem to help it, clearing his throat when it fights its way out. “How long will I have?”

“Not long.”

He nods. Steels himself. She sees the large cloud of steam escape when he breathes out.

And then he bends down and picks it up.

About twenty seconds pass in silence. The air seems to settle low around them, cold. Almost electric. Alive with something. The hair stands up on the back of her neck, a chill riding up her spine.

And then Theo’s choked gasp cuts through the quiet.

...

“Hello, you.”

Pansy’s there. An arm’s length from him. Just a shadow of her — a gray shade, a sheen.

But she’s there.

Hermione’s hand flies to her mouth to stifle a sob, and Draco’s hand covers hers almost instinctively.

“*Pansy...*” Theo stammers. It’s barely a whisper.

She smiles at him. That same sly, playful smirk she’s always had, and she looks so beautiful, even as a shadow. Her glossy black hair flows down over her shoulders like it’s weightless, her eyes so

bright and alive.

“Still handsome as ever,” she says. Her voice is as clear as a bell — and yet also somehow no more than an echo.

Theo is crying. Choking on it — trying in vain to hold it back, his fist pressed against his lips and a tearful, disbelieving smile in his eyes as his chest heaves with sobs.

“Not happy to see me?” Pansy teases, cocking her head to the side with a little laugh, and Hermione sees the faint glint of tears in her own eyes, too.

“Happier than you could ever know,” he says when he can manage it, sniffing. Trying to gather a steady breath.

“Took you long enough, Potter,” Pansy calls, and suddenly she’s looking their way.

Harry laughs quietly. Speaks under his breath. “She doesn’t change, does she?”

“No,” says Hermione, a smile fighting free as Pansy meets her eyes.

“Still haven’t learned how to fix your hair, have you?” she asks, crossing those shadowy arms in front of her and jutting out a hip the way she always used to.

Hermione laughs too. Shakes her head.

Pansy shifts her gaze to Draco. “You. Still an ass?”

“Oh, of course.” His tone is arrogant as ever, but when Hermione glances sideways at him, he’s wiping roughly at his cheeks. “Still a bitch?”

“Of course.” She smiles wryly at him, then looks back to Theo — and it’s quite a thing to watch that smile soften so drastically. Melt like ice over a flame. “And you,” she says, taking a step toward him. The morning sun passes straight through her as it flickers across the tree line. “How are you?”

He can only shake his head, another sob fighting its way out. He reaches out for her before it occurs to him, then quickly tucks that hand away again.

Pansy’s smile fractures. “It doesn’t work like that.”

“I know,” he nods, wiping his nose. Struggling so hard to keep his composure. “I know.”

Despite this, Pansy takes another step closer and reaches out herself. Lets the ghost of her hand play at brushing the hair out of his eyes. “I watch you all the time,” she says, and his breath hitches. “I *hate* seeing you like this.”

“Pansy...”

“Listen to me, alright? We don’t have long.”

He nods. Can’t stop nodding, rubbing at his eyes.

Pansy reaches out both hands now. Places them on either side of his face, and Hermione wonders if he feels the energy of it. Feels her somehow. From the sound he makes, she has to believe he does.

“I would not have gone out for *anyone* less worthy.”

He lurches forward. Almost buckles in half, it makes him cry so hard.

"*Shh...*," she soothes. "Hush and listen to me, Theo. Listen to me."

Still nodding, he forces himself to straighten back up. Forces himself to look at her, the tears streaming down.

"Don't you waste it."

His eyes fall shut. Hermione watches a lone tear fall from his chin all the way down to the forest floor below. His hand shakes around the Resurrection Stone.

Pansy's thumb moves across his cheek as though she can truly stroke it. "I want to see you happy. I want to see you loved. Do you hear me?"

It's both a nod and a shake of his head at once. Like he can't fathom the idea.

"Promise me," she says.

"I..."

"Promise me."

He forces himself to nod. Forces his eyes back open. "I promise," he breathes. "I promise. I love you. I promise."

She smiles brightly, then, a ghostly tear cascading down her cheek. "Took you long enough."

He tries to put his hand over hers. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"No." She shakes her head. "No. We both know I forgot to say it too." She huffs a sad laugh. "We're both idiots."

"Idiots," he echoes, nodding fiercely.

"But I do love you. And now I want to see you love someone else. I want to judge every stupid little mistake you make and I want to watch you fall in love all over again. Alright?"

"Alright."

"Promise me?"

"I swear."

"Good." She flashes him a final smile, utterly incandescent. "Then it was all worth it." And she lets her palms fall away from his face in the same moment the stone falls from his trembling hand. "Behave yourself, yeah?" she asks, voice faint — trailing off.

A moment later she vanishes.

Swallowing back a sob, Theo turns to look at Hermione.

It takes him almost half a minute to manage the words.

But then he whispers, *"Thank you."*

Draco squeezes her hand. That final lingering weight on her shoulders falls away.

She breathes in.

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