

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

“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

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.

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.

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



“Breath Mints / Battle Scars” by Onyx\_and\_Elm  
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Fandom: Harry Potter  
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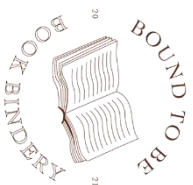
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Trigger warnings may apply

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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.

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Typeset by



September 17th, 1990

Drarry,

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 hurt. 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 drups. Something different. Anything. Take it away. I'm not against begging — as you've seen before.

But you don't care, do you?

I 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 drups.

Give me drups give me drups give me drups give me fucking drups.

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

Draco

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.

Breath Mints | Battle Scars



Buye\_and\_Ely

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



"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



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 Quilt? 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-heads. 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*.

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.

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*

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 Muggleborns 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 — hiccupped 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.

Granger's already a know-it-all. I can't imagine anything worse than a sulking know-it-all. And that fizzy 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 Striping 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



September 24th, 1990

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 Graper. Fucking Graper. 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 obnoxious, loathsome, know-it-all, stubborn, suck-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 wing 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 broon up hers that makes everything so fucking difficult.

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

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 fuses 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.



September 4th, 1990

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 guilt. Thank you again! Hope you get ink stains on your bloody hospital wear. Fucking kno-bends.

What am I forgetting? Oh, yes — the fucking people for today. Even more rules for stream-of-fucking-consciousness writing. Indexicles. 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

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 pace 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.

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

*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 chaps.*

*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 Swoglor'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 re-turning 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