

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 dick — 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.*

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 splay 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

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

what you're doing."

She bites down on the inside of her cheek. "Well, yes, I'm doing research—" "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. Errm. 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 ass wound about things. And for fuck's sake, Potter, don't censor anything or she won't fucking believe you."*

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 *Rectusentpra* 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 sigh.

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

-  
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.*

...

*Mervin, 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

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 Anorexia 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 Shakespeare 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.*

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.

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 Galileons, 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.



*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 stare, 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.

*George and Elvi*

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

“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 swollen 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.”



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 CFF? 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.

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?"



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.

*George and Elvi*

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...?"

"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

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 hush.

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.

*“Allohomora.”*

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.

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.

“...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, Evercrech, Goyle, Greengrass — both of them — Lofthouse, Malfoy, Meads, Montague, Nott, Parkinson, Phipps, Pucey, Rowland, Sykes, Tharcham, 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.”

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 Jewelfeed, 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.

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.”

"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 bies 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

"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."



*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.