

Burbage narrows her eyes at her. Her lip twitches, pursed to the point it looks painful. But she does glance down at Zacharias and quirk a brow. “Is there more to that sentence?”

Zacharias shifts uncomfortably. Turns back to the page and clears his throat for what must be the fortieth time. *“I want to fucking kill her almost as much as I want to kiss her.”*

She’s expecting more from the crowd. A softening of some sort — anything. The way they softened for Pansy.

But the looks tossed around are wary. Unconvinced.

And Burbage is practically grinning as she turns back to Hermione. “Satisfied, Miss Granger?”

Hermione blows a hot breath out through her mouth.

“Take your seat.”

Harry tugs her back down.

And Zacharias just blinks around stupidly until he’s given the nod to continue.

“So, um, yeah — *November 1st, 1998...I want to rip her fucking hair out...I feel like my blood’s boiling...I’m thinking of doing something stupid.* Then there’s *November 12th, 1998...uh, every time I close my eyes I see her screaming. Writing on the floor. I can see the whites of her eyes and the unnatural curve of her spine and I cannot, for the life of me, stop dreaming about it—*”

She launches herself back to her feet, and she’s — she’s shouting now. She doesn’t even care. “No. NO. You do *not* get to take that out of context!”

“Miss Granger, you are *out of line.*”

“This is enough!” She cries. “Enough! The law is not one-sided. This is not a just representation of that boy —” And now she jabs her finger towards the cage, simultaneously aware and in denial of the wetness she feels on her cheeks. “I *won’t* stand here and let you do this.”

“*Sit. Down.*”

Bulbs flash frantically. She glares at Burbage until her eyes sting.

“Mione...” a pleading whisper from Harry as he yanks at her. “Mione, please.



February 9th, 1999

DEATH EATER ARRAIGNMENTS BEGIN INSIDE THE NUMEROUS RETRIALS COMMENCING TODAY

SHE SPOTS THE HEADLINE ON THE CORNER OF ANOTHER WITCH’S DAILY PROPHET AS THEY ENTER THE MINISTRY, AND THE WORDS MAKE HER SUDDENLY NAUSEOUS. The courage and bravado she can absorb from extensive research only goes so far, and imagining every argument she’s going to make in her head is one thing.

Actually doing it is another entirely.

She’s had lives depend on her knowledge before — Harry’s, in particular, so many times during the war — but never like this.

She’s never had to stand in front of someone who knows her words are the only thing between them and the Dementor’s Kiss.

You’re being dramatic.

No, she isn’t, but she can’t allow herself to mentally unravel before she even reaches the courtroom.

She steels herself. Adjusts her posture — jackknives. Her fingers toy absently with the hem of her pinstriped blazer. McGonagall’s bony hand squeezes her shoulder.

The doors pull apart.



How exactly did McGonagall describe it? A media circus, wasn’t it? Yes, that’s precisely what this is. Tightropes, ringmasters, fire and all. She’s

had her photo taken at least a hundred times and she hasn't even said a word yet. Merely sits in the otherwise aggressively empty character witness box.

The Wizengamot assembles slowly. Lazily. As though to say they're perfectly aware the lives on the line today aren't theirs.

Hermione breaks out into a cold sweat. Her mind is suddenly blank, save the one thing she shouldn't be thinking about right now. The words of a reporter, thrown at her on the streets outside the Ministry this morning.

"Don't worry, Miss Granger — today can just be practice!"

McGonagall's sharp grip had tried to prevent her from turning to face the man, but Hermione has never known how to leave a question unanswered.

"Excuse me?" she'd asked. Demanded, rather.

Hidden behind his camera, the man had snapped a shot of her and announced — quite plainly and without any reservations — "For when you defend Draco Malfoy. That's of course the only reason you're here, isn't it?"

McGonagall had dragged her away before anything further could be said, but now his words bounce around the inside of her skull.

Practice...

Just practice.

Human lives aren't *practice*.

But she has to consider whether a small, concealed part of her had been looking at today that way. Can hardly bear to think about it.

It's even more surprising that the reporter was able to piece things together so quickly. Nowhere publicly did she state that she would be operating as a character witness today.

Almost every other reporter had inquired as to why she'd come to "spectate."

But there was no shortage of whispers and hushed gasps when she'd taken her seat in the witness box.

"Ladies and gentlemen, silence please. Thank you." The gavel strikes, Kingsley's deep voice echoing through the chamber.

Hermione drags herself back to the present.

Kingsley isn't acting as Chief Warlock — he's merely presiding over the trials

"September 8th, 1998...Fucking Granger...you don't know her but you'd be sorry if you did...erm, skipping ahead a little, uh — I'd been so hoping I'd be ordered to kill her during the war. So hoping—"

The crowd openly gasps, and Hermione just squeezes her eyes shut because she knows they're looking at her.

"Uh...You'd kill her too, if you had the chance. You'd wring that ridiculous, avian little neck before she got a full sentence out. Um. Right. Next entry. Ahem, uh — September 18th, 1998...and wouldn't it be rather lovely if that mudblood Granger didn't exist? One less know-it-all in the world to deal with...uh..." He flips some pages.

Of course — of course he's going to make sure they're all the worst entries about her, because she's the one who's about to fucking defend him.

"October 2nd, 1998...I take back what I said. Nothing's working. I just want to be gone. Let me be gone. I'd love to be gone...and then, let's see — right, I think it's important to mention that this is around the time he physically assaulted Miss Granger on school grounds—"

Hermione jerks to a half-stand, but Harry's so quick to yank her back down almost no one notices it.

"So this is, yeah — this is him, erm, commenting about it. October 6th, 1998...I fucking attacked her...uh...she makes me fucking insane...I called her a—" Zacharias visibly squirms, *"cunt. A fucking mudblood cunt."*

And the crowd — bloody hell, they just keep gasping. So desperate to be offended. So out for blood.

"I want to fucking kill her...uh, right, and then moving o—"

"Finish that line," she blurts out. Can't stop herself.

All eyes fly to her like hungry wolves to bait.

"Miss Granger, you will do well to remain quiet during testimony—"

"Make him finish that line," she says again, louder now, jerking against Harry's arm and standing up. "You can't accept testimony of something so abridged. You can't let him alter the facts. I've read that entry, and he—" She points roughly at Zacharias, "— needs to finish that line."

I had it last. How did he fucking get it?

No, no, *no*. This is unimaginably bad.

She'd had to make a choice whether or not to include the diary as part of her defense, and she'd decided there was far too much inner violence spilled across those pages — too much for those small slivers of his humanity to shine through. And that's exactly what Zacharias is going to play up.

She shoots a desperate glance at Malfoy, turning Harry's hand to mush inside her fist — and Malfoy's just...

He's still not reacting. Like he's not even there behind his eyes. Like a dazed statue.

Zacharias clears his throat, and she whips her gaze back to him.

"It contains several concerning entries that I believe suggest the fragility of his mental state."

"He's been coached," she hisses, feeling Harry glance her way. He has to've been. She seeks out Dawlish in the crowd — doesn't have the chance to find him before Zacharias continues.

"Should I...read them now?"

There he is. That timid fool of a boy. Oh, she wants to watch him choke on poison. Wants to throw him from eighty stories. Wants him a million ways beyond *dead*.

"Mione, please," Harry all but whimpers. "I'm sorry, I can't feel my fingers."

Releasing him is like prying an industrial clamp loose, but she manages, never taking her eyes off Zacharias's treacherous face.

"Yes, if you please," says Burbage primly.

He clears his throat again. Opens the diary to where it looks like it's been bookmarked. "I — erm — apologize for the, uh...*language*," he mutters.

Malfoy wakes from his daze enough to huff a laugh. He's — he must be delirious, or something, at this point.

"Right. I'm — erm — I'm just going to skip to the highlighted bits."

Hermione has to swallow back a growl. Of course. Of *course* they're going to take his words out of context.

as a spectator. He won't be acting as judge, jury and executioner, the way Fudge did. Which is admirable. Really, it is.

Only, today she wishes he hadn't made that decision. Then at least she'd know the verdict would be a fair one.

No, the Chief Warlock is actually a Chief Witch in this instance. Hermione sees the swish of her hair as she comes to replace Kingsley at the main podium, thanking him for the call to order.

And her throat closes up.

It's Faith Burbage. Younger sister to Charity.

Hermione knows she's being photographed. Can't afford to let her emotions show on her face — but if she could, she'd scream.

How is this a fair trial? How — *how* can they allow someone so emotionally involved to preside over these indictments? Someone whose sister died in the house of one of the accused?

Her fingers start to shake, and to make matters worse, Faith glances down at her, lightly aged face pursing into an unreadable expression. Her eyes flit away just as quickly, but it's enough to assure Hermione her presence isn't appreciated, nor welcome.

Plum-colored robes swishing, Faith waves a hand and the members of the Wizengamot, along with the spectators, take their seats.

"Thank you for being here," she says, removing a pair of glasses to perch on her nose, and Hermione finds herself searching her tone for any semblance of leniency.

She finds none. This woman is a stone wall.

"Today, we begin proceedings with a reexamination of the case for one —" she glances down at the parchment in front of her, "Adrian Pucey, charged with supporting the Death Eater cause. Please bring in the accused."

Hermione blows a slow breath out from between her lips. And Adrian Pucey rises into the chamber in a cage.



It reminds her of those rides at Muggle playgrounds. The metal ones that spin and spin and spin. That make you want to get off. Make you want to be sick.

Her notes are dog-eared and torn, her fingers trembling each time she flips for a different page, certain — always so certain — that she must be forgetting something. A better answer. A different answer. One last thing she can use. One last piece of evidence. One more step back from the Dementor's Kiss.

The Wizengamot's prosecutors are battle ready. Steadfast. They refuse to let her come up for air.

"Describe an instance in which Mr. Zabini contributed to the betterment of Wizarding society."

"Is it not true that Mr. Pucey's grandparents were schoolmates and friends of Tom Riddle?"

"I look at this photograph, please — do you deny that that is Mr. Zabini, top right?"

"Did Mr. Pucey ever express doubts to you about his family's Pureblood supremacist beliefs?"

"Do you recall Mr. Zabini accompanying Draco Malfoy on Death Eater patrols the night of May 1st, 1998?"

"Can you look at this photograph?"

"Do you recognize this handwriting?"

"Please produce some evidence of your amicable relationship with Mr. Zabini."

"Miss Granger, stay with us please."

"Do you know who this man is?"

"Has Mr. Pucey ever used degrading language with respect to your blood status?"

"Miss Granger?"

"Focus please, Miss Granger."

"Miss Granger —"

"Hermione?"

"Hermione, you're back —"

All the while, Malfoy stares at his accusers dully. Eyes glazed. Almost like he might fall asleep, which is the last thing she needs from him right now.

Without Harry's hand twisted into hers, she doesn't think she'd still be up-right — and as they make their massive case against him, she just keeps reminding herself that this is manageable. This is debatable. Defensible. She can bring them around. She can take the reins and steer them away from all this damning rhetoric.

She repeats it like a mantra in her head, until the moment everything gets turned upside down.

"As I understand it, this year has also been quite turbulent for you, Mr. Malfoy," says Burbage.

Hermione makes the mistake of looking at him. She keeps doing it — doesn't think she'll be able to stop doing it.

Malfoy's expression remains flat.

"We've received a rather compelling piece of evidence from a peer of yours — one they would like to share with us all now." And Burbage tips her head sideways to look upon the newcomer, taking their place in the witness stand.

Hermione feels like the floor drops out from under her. Squeezes Harry's hand until he grunts at the pain.

"Please state your name for the record."

"Zacharias Smith."

"Fuck," she whispers under breath. Because she knew. She *knew*. She was so sure this would come back to haunt her, and then she'd had the absolutely *monstrous* nerve to forget about it. To think it'd all blown over, as nothing ever does.

And now here he is. Ready to do more damage than she can possibly imagine.

"And what evidence do you have for us today?"

"A diary," says Zacharias, and she can literally feel the blood drain out of her face. *"One that belonged to Malfoy."* He holds up that unmistakably purple journal for the whole of the courtroom to see.

How did he get it?

How did he get it?



February 22nd, 1999

DRACO MALFOY IS RATHER DETERMINED TO DIE.

That much is clear not even five minutes into the proceedings. He shifts around in his cage as the extensive list of charges is read, snorting and scoffing at times and drawing shrewd eyes. The way his body sways each time he pushes off one side of the bars in favor of the other leads Hermione to believe he's somehow managed to get drunk. Which seems both impossibly stupid and impossibly *Malfoy*.

And if Theo could bribe a guard for the Prophet, then it's hardly unthinkable.

Hermione only realizes she's digging her fingernails into her palms when Harry's hand falls into her lap, covering her gathered fists.

"Breathe," he says, lips barely moving. "And remember you have eyes on you."

She goes stiff instantly, turning another fraction away from the swarms of press and trying to focus solely on one bar of the cage. Trying not to look past it.

Very quickly, it becomes clear that this trial is going to go a lot like Pansy's. It's *hours*. Hours and hours of charges against him. Evidence. Witness accounts — all against, nothing for.

They bring out the necklace he cursed in Sixth Year — not destroyed, apparently — and Hermione has to disguise her sharp intake of breath as a cough.

They remind him that his father is in Azkaban, and that his mother might as well be, and that *the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, you know*.

They wheel in that bloody *Vanishing Cabinet*, and Hermione feels sick to her stomach.

George and Elvi

"Mione?"

"Are you..."

She crawls numbly into the depths of her four-poster, ignoring every utterance of her name from the Great Hall all the way up through the Gryffindor common room. Lays face first in the crimson pillows until she can't breathe, then shifts onto her back. The tight elbows of her blazer pinch. Her eyes itch. Her neck aches.

"Cleared of all charges."

Adrian had not been present in enough Death Eater propaganda — in enough damning photographs — to garner a conviction. She'd come to that conclusion early on in his trial, but his frightened blue eyes — locked on her in such a way, so desperate, so unsure — had prevented her from giving anything less than every sentence of research she'd collected on him.

Tired and irritated, the Wizengamot had likely chosen to save their strength. There were more important battles to be fought, after all. They'd released Adrian after only forty-five minutes of testimony.

But the wings on her heart were short-lived, and soon to be plucked out.

Blaise Zabini's trial took nine and a half hours. Only brief pauses were allowed for use of the lavatory and to procure water. By the end of it, Hermione could see his legs shaking in the cage, exhausted.

Several times throughout, she'd reminded herself that this level of scrutiny was neither good nor bad. Trials end quickly when they are clear cut.

Just as Adrian's had, for the good.

And as Lucius Malfoy's had, for the worst.

To the Wizengamot — and to Hermione, though she'd never care to admit it after all the research she'd done — Blaise was an enigma. Shrouded in mystery, he'd appeared in many of these damning photographs, and he'd been standing on the wrong side when it all ended.

But his cool demeanor over the years had worked in his favor, as he'd maintained silence in the media with regard to blood purity and his loyalties, even when his parents were so fiercely outspoken.

That, Hermione decided, saved his life — and not her useless, never-ending testimony about his good marks in class, that one great-great aunt back in his family who turned away from all things Pureblood, and his general polite manner.

By the end of it, she was fumbling. Grasping for straws.

And her stomach had well and truly dropped, eyes locked on Blaise — a mask of indifference — when they delivered the verdict.

“You are hereby sentenced to a year’s probation, and you will be required to pay damages of 12,000 galleons.”

Her eyes had fluttered shut in relief, then flown back open to see Blaise’s reaction.

Was he relieved, too? Or was he angry? Did he have the money? Was the probation too—

As the cage descended, Blaise met her eyes, allowing his mask to crack with the briefest of smiles and the slightest of nods.

After that, she’d used the adrenaline to successfully return to Hogwarts, but upon setting foot on the grounds, every inch of her shut down.

She’d done hardly anything, and today was just day one.

How in god’s name is she expected to save them all?

February 10th, 1999

There’s a one-day gap between that first stretch of trials and Pansy and Millicent’s arraignments. McGonagall has excused her from classes for the duration of the proceedings, but that in no way makes today any kind of respite.

The first thing she lays eyes on when she sits down to breakfast is the Prophet.

HERMIONE GRANGER: OUR BRIGHTEST WITCH GOING DARK?

WAR HERO TURNED DEATH-EATER SYMPATHIZER

350

What if she can’t do this?

She’s — she’s not —

“Mr. Malfoy,” barks Burbage, as though she’s more than aware the words carry a heavy weight. “You stand accused as an accomplice and a weaponized agent of the Death Eater cause. Do you understand these charges?”

His face is wan. Eyes wreathed in bruises either brought on by exhaustion or violence. It’s only been a week since she’s last seen him, and yet so much has changed. More weight lost, more strength depleted.

Even less light in those gray eyes.

But he stands up straight. Rigid. Emotionless. His already split, bloody lips seem to bleed fresh as he parts them to speak.

“Yes.” His tone is clipped. Gives nothing away.

“Do you have anything you wish to declare before proceedings begin?”

“Yes.” He steps forward in his cage, and Hermione’s breath hitches as he wraps his hands around the bars. Says in a flat, perfectly serious tone, “A thumb war.”

There’s a long, confused, somewhat baffled silence.

One, two, three, four... whispers a voice in Hermione’s head.

Burbage’s face darkens, eyes tightening. “I suppose you think that’s funny.”

“Oh, I think it’s hilarious.” Draco pulls his bloody lips back over his teeth, smiling up at her, face against the bars. “One, two, three, four...” he murmurs in a voice that’s got nothing left to lose.

One, two, three, four...

Burbage practically snarls. “Let’s begin.”

I declare a thumb war.

371

Harry's eyebrows are at his hairline when she comes out, eyes questioning behind his glasses. "Alright?"

She wipes her mouth. Pinches her cheeks to work color into them. "Fine. Just fine."

But she's unprepared for the crowd in the courtroom. There's barely enough space for the actual members of the Wizengamot.

Bulb's Flash at every angle, questions shouted from dozens of voices as she moves to take her usual — now all too familiar — place in the ever-empty character witness box. A glance to the side shows Harry taking a seat next to McGonagall. But her eyes catch two rows above them, on Blaise and Pansy, seated together.

She didn't think they'd come. It's both an encouragement and an additional shot of nerves.

Because while it's two more in the room not out to see her fail, it's also two more who might watch it happen.

Hermione picks at her cuticles, hands folded in her lap, as the questions ricochet, every reporter in the room trying to get in one last juicy detail before Faith Burbage takes her place at the podium.

And then it's so quiet, Hermione swears she can hear her own blood rushing through her veins.

"I see we have a full house, today," says Burbage, eyes sliding to Hermione to deal her usual dose of cold disdain. Then they flit back to the crowd. "I hope you're all aware I expect silence in my courtroom at all times."

Murmured assent.

"Let's make this quick and painless, then. Bring in the accused."

By now, Hermione's heard the way that cage rattles as it rises at least two dozen times. And yet it's like hearing it for the first time. She thought she was prepared for the sight of him inside it.

But when that colorless, white-blond hair catches the light of the courtroom, it's like an industrial grade needle gets plunged through her stomach. She's not ready for this.

She can barely stomach her toast.

The photograph splashed across the front page under the headline shows a small, hollow-looking girl with fear in her eyes. She doesn't even recognize herself.

Everyone at the Gryffindor table is reading the article, save Ginny and Harry. Ron isn't present.

"Went for an early morning fly," Harry tells her when she asks.

No one says anything about the trials — thank heavens for small mercies — but the air is thick with words unspoken.

Only they are spoken. Just not by who she expects.

As the owls flutter in with the mail and Hermione focuses intently on successfully chewing and swallowing one bite, a pair of talons drop a plain, unaddressed envelope on her plate.

Like a magnet, all eyes find it instantly, and for a moment she doesn't want to pick it up.

It turns out she doesn't have to.

It floats upward on its own, and there's a collective intake of breath because everyone — *everyone* — knows what that means.

The letter opens, and the voice of Draco Malfoy explodes across the Great Hall.

"GRANGER, YOU TRAITOROUS BITCH! I MADE YOU SWEAR! I MADE YOU SWEAR NOT TO. YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE UP AGAINST! YOU CAN'T EVEN PRETEND YOU DON'T BECAUSE I TOLD YOU, YOU SELFISH FUCKING CUNT, HOW CAN YOU—"

Stunned and speechless, her wrist flicks impulsively — instinctively — and sets the Howler ablaze. Malfoy's furious voice cuts short, echoing away into nothing and leaving a silence so heavy she feels as though she's weighted to the earth.

The letter crumples to ash.

Hermione drops her head into her hands and doesn't look up until she feels an empty table around her.



February 11th, 1999

SHE WAKES UP IN A COLD SWEAT AT HALF-PAST TWO IN THE MORNING.

In her dream, she watched Pansy Parkinson sink back below the floor of the Wizengamot chamber, caged and blank-faced, the words “*hereby sentenced to death*” echoing off the walls.

But in life!

No, sorry, that’s just not good enough.

She throws off the covers and leaves the dormitory behind, belting her robe around her as she takes the steps two at a time down to the dark, empty common room. With a swish of her wand, a fire springs to life behind the grate — and in it, she tosses every note she’s ever taken in preparation for the trials. All those histories and records she spent countless hours digging up.

None of it worked. Not for Blaise, not for Adrian. Those family lineages and words of good faith meant less than nothing in that courtroom. They had no impact whatsoever on the Wizengamot’s final verdicts. What mattered was only the cold hard evidence, and something she’s slowly realizing means more than anything else —

Intent.

For Blaise and Adrian, it was their apparent lack thereof. Their passiveness — the Wizengamot’s belief that they had seemingly been pulled by the current into dark waters. That their drive went no deeper than that.

For Pansy, it’s hardly that simple. Pansy was *active*. Like Draco, Pansy had been sent on missions.

Unlike Draco, Pansy had completed them.

Hermione’s hands shake as she slams down a blank sheet of parchment, quill

George and Elvi

She’s somehow both more prepared than she’s been for any of the other trials, and simultaneously significantly less all at once.

Because she *knows* Malfoy — or, at the very least, she likes to think she does. She’s got a good handful of useful information in her back pocket.

But he’s also refused to see her. Flat out.

His last Howler was dated over a week ago.

So they have no strategy. No plan. No understanding of how they mean to spare his soul — him. The one with the most evidence mounted against him. By far the most hated.

Hermione has always loved a challenge, but this is not a challenge. This is a rigged game.

And add to that, Theo to follow. Only an hour later.

If she fails, she won’t even be able to hold herself up — let alone defend another, almost equally hated boy from almost equally damning evidence.

She’s been set up to fail.

Harry seems to know this as well, because when she exits her dormitory, compulsively flattening out her skirt, he hands her a flask.

She tries to conjure an ounce of humor. “Liquid luck?” Her smile is painted on. Harry tucks his lips in — a sad echoing smile as he shakes his head. “Whiskey.”

Her nose wrinkles. “Firewhiskey?”

“No, the Muggle kind. For your nerves.”

She doesn’t need more encouragement than that. She downs what must be about two shots worth. Hands it back empty. “Thank you.”

And she marches out of Gryffindor.



There’s a rumor going around that tickets are actually being sold for today’s trials. Malfoy’s specifically.

People are emptying their pockets to see Draco Malfoy earn a death sentence.

And Hermione has to skirt off to the lavatory five minutes before the trial starts to vomit, that precious whiskey coming right back up.

teasing another stinging jinx out of the Wards. He shakes his hands out as he yells, “I never fucking asked! Who told her she had to kill for me? Almost die, for me?”

“No one told her,” says Hermione. It’s automatic. “She did what she felt was right.”

There’s a strained pause. When she manages to meet his eyes again, they’re full of a very familiar rage. Rage she’s used to seeing in lighter, colder eyes. “You’d know all about that, wouldn’t you? That’s what you think you’re doing for him — isn’t it?” He juts his head down the hall, but she doesn’t need to look.

“I’m trying to,” she whispers.

He whispers, too. Only his tone is deadly. “No wonder he *fucking hates* you.” Hermione blinks slowly. Glances down again.

She has to force herself to move to Tracey’s cell.

February 22nd, 1999

IT’S BEEN HELL ON EARTH.

But at least the Howlers have stopped coming. Either the Ministry’s finally stripped Malfoy of his rights to a quill and parchment, or he’s finally exhausted himself. He had to’ve been using wandless magic, after all. His wand is locked up in a Ministry vault.

Whatever the reason, she’s grateful. Today, of all days, that’s not something she’d be able to handle.

It’s by design. She’s sure of it.

Furious at her dumb luck — her somehow baffling ability to keep each and every name on that list of McGonagall’s away from a Dementor’s kiss — the Ministry has saved their best for last.

The two most difficult trials, scheduled back to back on the same day.

Malfoy and Nott.

The morning of, from the instant she opens her eyes, she feels sick to her stomach. Like she’s swallowed a leech that’s slowly consuming her insides.

368

poised above it, waiting for something. Anything. Some stroke of genius to prove that Pansy did what she did for good reason. She doesn’t even need to prove it, she just needs to be able to argue it. She needs to—

“Mione?”

She jumps, and the quill falls from her trembling hand.

Harry stands at the foot of the dormitory stairs, glasses and hair askew, Marauder’s Map in hand. “Sorry, erm...” he says, holding it up, “sometimes it helps me sleep to look at it. I saw you pacing and then you, well — you sort of stopped and went very still and I got a little worried—”

“I’m alright, Harry,” she says quietly, looking at him — *actually* looking at him for what feels like the first time in a long while. He’s thin. Thinner, even, than he was leading up to the war. And he looks tired. And she wonders how exhausting it must be for him to put a smile on his face every day.

“Oh — yeah, right. Alright.” He turns. Takes a few steps back up. Some inner instinct warns her that, in some unspoken way, this is a last chance.

“I’m scared,” she blurts, desperate.

He goes still. The little clock above the mantle ticks endlessly.

“I’m...” she swallows a lump in her throat, “I’m scared and I’m very alone.”

What feels like an eternity passes before he says anything, and all the while Hermione feels herself going red in the face — feels tears pricking at her eyes — because she knows she sounds weak and ridiculous and pathetic and—

“That’s the one thing you’ve never been able to do, you know,” says Harry, not turning around just yet.

She slaps away the first tear that dares to escape, sniffing. “What?” She’s fairly certain she doesn’t want to know the answer.

“Ask for help.”

A muscle in her forehead twitches — spasms. She stares at Harry’s back until he does a little corner turn and meets her gaze with one eye.

Another long silence.

Then he quirks one brow and she realizes he’s waiting for her. Giving her an opportunity — that last chance. He’s...he’s *offering*.

369

To help.

And she realizes, though it's like a cannonball sinking into her gut, that he's right. She never asked. Never knew how.

The clock ticks away thirty more seconds, and then Harry starts to turn back. Takes one more step up—

"Help," she whispers feebly. Clears her throat. "H-Help..help me." Two more tears track long, wet streaks down her face. "*Please.*"

Still, more silence.

But then Harry turns fully to face her, and there's a ghost of a smile on his lips.



"Did she have any House Elves?"

"I don't know. Possibly. Probably. None that were treated well, I'm sure of it. They wouldn't speak on her behalf." Hermione is upside down at this point, literally. She's lying flopped over the arm of the sofa, mange of curls brushing the carpet, staring at the ceiling. Desperately hoping a change of perspective might help her to think more clearly.

That, or she's hoping all the blood pooling in her skull will somehow knock an idea loose.

Harry is bent over a pile of notes they've taken down over the past few hours, early morning light slowly creeping through the diamond-paned windows like a threat.

They'd wasted time, in the beginning, talking about the 'why' of it. Necessary time, she supposes, because she needed Harry to understand. He deserves to understand.

That's not to say she did a bang-up job of explaining herself.

"She's sort of awful..."

"I know."

"And she used to make fun of your teeth—"

"I know."

Nott's eyes tighten. "*Granger.*" He pulls it back and slams it against the bars again. "What is this?"

She tries not to think about what Pansy would want her to say in this moment. Tries not to consider what she'll do to her if she doesn't. But Pansy is already back at Hogwarts. At Hogwarts, with Blaise and Millicent and Adrian — the best place she could possibly be. Only, now she's got a trace on her.

Still, she's safe.

She can forgive Hermione for this.

"The truth," she answers at last, doing her best to hold his gaze without faltering. She feels she's intruding on something. A very private aspect of two very private lives. Lives she has no business being involved in, even when she's trying to save them.

"This isn't some typical Skeeter shite?" Nott's eyes are more wide and desperate than she realized. "This is what happened?"

"For the most part," she hedges, blinking and dropping her eyes. "Without all the tears and the handkerchiefs."

There's a loud bang.

Her eyes fly back up — Nott has yanked on his bars so hard he's activated their protective Wards. He staggers backward, stung by the resulting jinx, the Daily Prophet floating to the floor at his feet. "*Bleeding fucking hell,*" he hisses, pacing a small line back and forth.

"I'm sorry you found out this way," is all Hermione can manage. She has no idea what's going through his head. "Pansy didn't want anyone to know. But it was all we could do."

His bruise-bracketed gaze finds her again, sharp and yet somehow all at once soft. "She's a fool," he says in a quiet voice.

Hermione can't help but step back. Something stings in her chest. She's not sure what.

"She's a fucking fool," he says again, huffing and shaking his head.

"How can you say that?" she breathes. "After everything she's done for you?"

"For me? *I didn't fucking ask her to!*" He's at the bars again, rattling them,

asked Miss Granger. ‘*Terrible things*,’ said Parkinson. ‘*And why did you do these things?*’ To which Parkinson replied, ‘*For Theo.*’”

“In her closing statement, the Brightest Witch of Our Age posed one final question to Miss Parkinson. ‘*What would you do for Theodore Nott?*’ An audible gasp fanned out across the courtroom — several heartbroken cries of outrage — as Parkinson revealed, ‘*Anything.*’”

For better or worse, the press has taken their side.

There’s only a small footnote regarding Millicent’s trial. It’d been quick and rather painless, especially when compared to the others. Millicent had broken down almost immediately and done most of Hermione’s work for her — weeping, apologizing, opting for the Veritaserum and then spending the next half hour drenching the courtroom in just how “utterly useless” she always felt. Ridiculed and ostracized until she was accepted by Voldemort and his followers. She just wanted to feel included.

And lucky for Millicent, she’d never used an Unforgiveable. She was fined. Not even a probation.

But Hermione has a sinking feeling it’s the best outcome she’s going to see from here on out. Nothing’s going to get easier.

Today is Tracey Davis and Daphne Greengrass.

Tracey’s cell is somewhere along the middle of the corridor, but she’s stopped before she can reach it.

“Granger.”

Her shoes scuff on the stone floor. Nott’s bruises are slowly healing, but the majority of his face is still a mottled shade of purple. He’s standing at the bars like he’s been waiting for her, a copy of the Daily Prophet in one hand.

“How did you get that?” she blurts without thinking. Surely, there are more important questions to ask.

“Bribed the guard,” he says plainly, but before she can ask what he could’ve possibly offered, he flattens the paper against the bars so that she can see the headline. “The fuck is this?”

“Today’s paper,” she deadpans.

“And your hair—”

“I *know*, I just — I see more to her, Harry. I’m — I’m logical, and I have to think about the circumstances, and when you think about the circumstances you — you just...well, she makes more sense. The world she grew up in.”

“What about when you were staying with Slytherin?” He sort of winced as he said it. “Was she nice to you, then?”

“No.”

Harry opened his mouth. She beat him to the punch.

“But she let me stay.”

And that was the extent of it. After that, Harry let it go. Didn’t ask any more questions with regard to the ‘why,’ and instead the two of them shifted focus to the ever-elusive *‘how?’*

Four long hours of trying to find some spin on Pansy Parkinson that could make her look redeemable.

Four long hours of nothing.

She’s trying to hide how much she’s panicking, which is possibly a third reason for lying upside down. Harry’s eyes are bloodshot with exhaustion.

“Okay, okay.” He stands up suddenly, voice a little louder than it’s been. He claps his hands together. “Okay. New plan. Can I see her journal again?”

Hermione throws out an arm sideways and slides the peach-colored diary towards his feet. Let’s her head flop back again. Not only had Pansy had seen fit to hex the words ‘STUPID FUCKERY’ into its cover, but she’d also taken the time to Ward-guard its contents, so that whenever anyone opens it they find only blank pages.

Because it couldn’t possibly be any *more* difficult to defend this girl.

“You won’t be able to break them, I already tried,” she says, finally sitting up and enduring the head rush of a century.

Harry lowers his wand and sighs. “I understand wanting privacy, but this seems excessive.”

Hermione gathers a pillow into her arms and squishes her face into it. “A bit, yeah,” she mumbles into the fabric. “Probably didn’t want Theo to read it.”

“Who?”

She drops the pillow and lays back against the armrest. Massages her temples.

“Theo. Theodore Nott. He’s in our year—”

“No, I know who he is, ‘Mione, I’m just — I mean, why him? What does it matter if he sees it?”

“Oh, erm...” She’s put her foot in her mouth, she realizes. Swore never to tell anyone. “Well, it’s sort of private.”

Harry cocks his head at her, a very familiar look on his face. The same look he’s always given her when he thinks she’s being unreasonable or unrealistic.

“Hermione—”

“Harry, I *promised* her—”

“I really don’t think she’ll care at this point—”

“It’s not even important, it’s just—”

“Hermione, tell me.”

She heaves a great sigh and rubs circles into her eyes, a sharp prickle of guilt in her chest. He’s right. She has to concede that he’s right.

“Fine. Fine. It’s just — she’s in love with him. So that’s probably why. She didn’t want him to happen upon it because I’m guessing she mentioned it more than once in her entries. You see? Useles—”

“*Mione*, that’s it!” Harry exclaims, so suddenly and so loudly she almost falls off the sofa. Someone rolls over in bed above them, the dormitory floor creaking.

Hermione looks at him like he’s grown a second head.

“Don’t you see?” He waves the journal out in front of her. “That’s what you tell them, Hermione! That’s how you spin it.” He drops it triumphantly on the coffee table with a hollow smack. “It’s a love story.”

“Harry, I don’t—”

“Theodore Nott was a Death Eater, yes?”

She hesitates, brows furrowed. “Yes. Unmarked, but yes.”

“And don’t we do everything in our power to stay close to the ones we love? To protect them?”

“I’m sorry, Miss Granger.”

And she suddenly remembers her day isn’t over.

She has to speak to Millicent Bulstrode.

“Thank you, Headmaster,” Hermione deadpans. “Twenty minutes should be more than enough.”

She clips on the badge with clammy hands and steps into the lift.

February 12, 1999

THE STAR-CROSSED LOVERS OF A DARK RE- GAME

HOW LOVE FORCED PANSY PARKINSON INTO YOU KNOW

WHO’S MIDST

Skeeter’s article is bursting with flowery, decidedly less-than-accurate details. Of Pansy wiping away “*glistening tracks of tragic tears*” and “*lamenting the consequences of this brutal love*.” Of Hermione handing her handkerchiefs and urging the Wizengamot to “*find their humanity*” — a completely fabricated quote.

There are, however, a few truths stitched into the mess.

“And when our Golden Girl inquired as to the nature of this relationship, Parkinson — sighing wistfully — described it as ‘*purely one-sided*.’”

“Pausing here to remind my lovely readers once more that Miss Parkinson was under the influence of Veritaserum at this time.”

“*What do you think about when you think of Theodore Nott?*” our War Heroine pressed her, to which Parkinson replied, starry-eyed, “*Many things. His voice, mostly. It’s the most comforting sound I know. The only thing that calms me down. Makes me feel safe.*”

“*Did [(You Know Who) — our Golden Girl neglected to use this reader-friendly term] make you do things?*” Miss Parkinson could only nod. “*Bad things?*”



February 11th, 1999

WHEN PANSY HEARS THE WORD 'PROBATION,' HER STEEL WALL FALLS.

Hermione watches her go slack against the side of the cage, all the fear she so resolutely refused to show now plain on her face. And then their eyes meet.

And she feels as though she's seeing Pansy Parkinson for the first time.

Because the bloodshot eyes that stare back at Hermione regard her as an equal. For the first time, Hermione has a sense of what it must be like to *know* Pansy Parkinson. To stand on the inside of her walled-in life.

And her words from before suddenly ring true.

She can see her.

Pansy Parkinson is more than a cold, pretty face.

As her cage starts to lower back into the holding cells, from which she'll soon be released, the silent members of the crowd begin to rustle for their things. Hermione's knees are stiff — numb. Her face is blank.

Luck. Pure luck — that's what this was.

Had one wrong word come out of her mouth, one poorly phrased question, the atmosphere of the room would've been entirely different right now.

Faith Burbage deals her a withering look from the podium before disappearing behind it. No doubt to recollect herself before the next retrial.

And as Harry appears at her side, walking Hermione from the room — still too stunned and speechless to feel relief — John Dawlish stares holes into her back.

It will only get harder from here.

"Twenty minutes was all I could secure for you," says McGonagall once they reach the atrium, handing Hermione another visitor badge.

364

George and Elvi

Hermione sits up straight, lips parting.

"So, that's it, then." He taps the cover of the journal one more time for good measure. Right on the word 'FUCKERY.' "Everything she did, she did for him. For love."

If his words hadn't blown her eyes so wide, they would've made her laugh — like something out of a truly terrible romance novel. But instead, she's silent. Speechless.

Until—

"Oh my god," she breathes.

A genuine smile splits Harry's face.

"Oh my *god!*" She leaps up from the sofa and takes his face in her hands, kissing him square on the nose. "You are *brilliant*, Harry Potter. Well and truly *brilliant*."

He dips into a mock bow, but stops short when she rakes hold of his arm, eyes serious. The humor bleeds away.

"Will you come with me?" she asks. Squeezes. "If it's not too much to ask..."

He puffs out a breath, and in the next instant, he's dragging her head up against his chest, smelling warm and familiar. Like Harry. "You just have to *ask*, 'Mione."

It's only when she pulls away and finds his shirt damp that she realizes she's crying.



EXTREMELY DISAPPOINTING, UNACCEPTABLE

C.F.J. FOUNDER RESPONDS TO FIRST TRIAL OUTCOMES

It's the headline being sold all across the Ministry atrium this morning, but she doesn't take the time to read it. Her focus is sharp like a needle point, and everything else is background noise.

Besides, today it isn't her they're taking pictures of. Isn't her they're bombarding with questions and bright flashes. It's Harry.

357

A few paces behind her, in step with McGonagall, he holds a hand in front of his face to guard against the assault, repeatedly saying, “Sorry, I have no comment,” as they pass through as quickly as possible.

McGonagall wastes no time charming the lift doors to shut early as they slip inside, and the noise falls away as they sink down.

“Sorry, Harry,” Hermione says, but he only shrugs. Accustomed to it, after all these years. McGonagall excused him from classes so he could accompany her, and she’s grateful for it in more ways than one.

The moral support is only a part of it. She’ll admit, she feels a great deal more powerful walking into the courtroom with him at her side. Feels unstoppable, like she used to, when it was just the three of them against the world.

“Headmaster,” Hermione says as they reach the doors. She nearly forgot. “Would it be possible for you to request visitor access to the holding cells again? For this afternoon?”

The doors swing open. McGonagall makes a flustered noise, but squeezes her shoulder none the less. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Cameras flash. Purple robes swish. Kingsley calls everyone to order, just as he did the first day, and as Harry moves to sit amongst the spectators (several witches and wizards actively get up and move to be closer to him), Hermione makes her way to the empty character witness box.

Faith Burbage resumes her position at the podium — delivers an identical greeting — though, if possible, the angle of her jaw is even sharper today. No doubt she was disappointed, too, by Tuesday’s outcome.

Out the corner of her eye, Hermione catches sight of Dawlish in the crowd, amongst some of his followers, and a rush of ice floods her veins. He must’ve felt the need to come after those initial verdicts. Must’ve assumed his presence would somehow change something.

Hermione squares her shoulders. It won’t. She decides then and there that it won’t.

“Bring in the accused,” Burbage orders, and Hermione bites down on the inside of her cheek, watching Pansy rise up in the cage. Her dream comes back to

Pansy’s gaze is razor sharp. But Hermione can see the faintest, trembling breath escape her chest.

“Trust me.”

She can feel Pansy’s fingers shaking. Can see what just might possibly, maybe, be the glisten of tears forming in her eyes. But she closes them before Hermione can be sure and straightens up. Goes hard and stiff, the practiced posture of a true Pureblood.

“Okay.”

Hermione lets her spell fall and whips around, meeting Burbage’s impatient gaze. “We’re ready.”

“Miss Parkinson, do you consent?”

Pansy crosses her arms and glares at Burbage like she’s picturing her burning alive. “Granger asks the questions,” she snaps. “I consent if Granger asks the questions.”

“Madam Burbage, you can’t possibly allow th—” It’s Dawlish, from the crowd, but she cuts him off.

“Spectators will be silent.”

There’s a long pause.

Burbage’s eye twitches. She glares from her podium, but not at Pansy. At Hermione.

“Bring in the serum,” she barks.

She knows they’ve just won.

fists to hide their shaking. “A — a moment, please!”

Burbage gives an exaggerated sigh but waves her hand. “Very well.” Hermione rushes to the cage, casting a swift *Muffliato* around them and reaching through to take Pansy’s wrist — giving her a shake. “Pansy? Pansy, are you listening?” she rasps.

Oh, Pansy is absolutely listening. Sharp, heavy eyes stare back at her behind lowered lids, completely at odds with her slumped posture. “Faithless Mudblood bitch,” she breathes, barely audible, leaning back and letting her eyes fall shut.

“I don’t care what you call me.” She shakes her again — grips her harder. Urgently. “You and I both know it was the only way. And I know it’s the truth. At this point, the Veritaserum can only help you—”

“You’ve just condemned me,” she murmurs, eyes still closed. “You know that, don’t you?”

It feels like she’s just swallowed a rock.

Pansy’s lids crack slowly and she leans forward, voice venomous, “You really think that’s all they’re going to ask me? *Did you love the boy? Oh, sweet Pansy, were you heartsick? Was that it?*” Her lip curls up. “No. Stupid girl. They’ll ask me who I’ve murdered. They’ll ask me who I’ve tortured. What information I gave up. You just got me killed.”

Hermione digs her fingernails into her palms. “Not if I ask the questions.”

The expression on Pansy’s face doesn’t budge.

“Listen to me.” She shakes her again, worried a little more each second that she might lash out and bite her, of all things. “That’ll be your condition. You’re allowed to consent with conditions. I know how to word the questions.”

Pansy’s gaze flickers with something, but her jaw remains hard. Set.

“Pansy, trust me.” Hermione lets go of her wrist and forces her fingers into Pansy’s stiff hand, entangling them. “I can see you,” she says, only a desperate whisper now. “Behind all of it, I can see you. I know you aren’t this.” She squeezes hard. Until she’s sure it hurts. “Trust me. I have your back—”

A scoff. “No one ever has—”

“I do.” She yanks her hand. “I have your back.”

her, playing on repeat inside her head — an endless loop.

Pansy looks gaunt.

That’s the first thing she notices. Malnourished, her birdlike arms and cheekbones even more pronounced. Somehow, though, she’s managed to tie up her hair flawlessly — an elegant updo. Even on Death’s door, it appears Pansy will not be seen looking rumpled.

“Miss Parkinson, you have been charged as an accomplice to the Death Eater cause. Do you understand these charges?”

Pansy’s nose scrunches up, but she keeps her voice flat and steady. “I do.”

“Do you have anything you wish to declare before proceedings begin?”

She leans carefully against one of the spiked walls of the cage, lifting up a hand to study her fingernails. “Only that the living quarters you provided for us are filthy and unmaintained.”

Murmurs scatter throughout the hall, and Hermione grits her teeth. Catches

Pansy’s eye and gives her head a faint shake.

Don’t make this any harder than it already is.

Pansy seems surprised to see her. One of her thin, dark brows arches up into her hairline, but she gives nothing else away in her gaze before turning back to face Burbage.

“Is that all?” she drones from the podium.

“Yes,” says Pansy.

“Very well. Let’s begin.”



The case the Wizengamot presents against her is aggressive, to put it lightly.

Throughout the first few hours, Hermione isn’t even called upon to speak because they’re too busy slucking out incident after incident as evidence. Her name signed on a meeting ledger. Her picture with Greyback and Dolohov. Her words on the night of the battle.

All the while, Pansy maintains a strict poker face, appearing almost bored — but Hermione can see the faintest tremble in her hands, gripping the bars.

And then Burbage calls out, “Is there anyone here who wishes to speak on behalf of the accused?” and Hermione decides she has to be even more aggressive.

She stands, like she did the last two times, except now her arms aren’t overflowing with notes. And now she takes the liberty of stepping down and out of the witness box to stand on the courtroom floor, beside Pansy.

“I do,” she says, meeting Burbage’s gaze and funneling every ounce of strength she possesses into her voice.

“Miss Granger, is this going to become routine?” drawls Burbage, eyes narrowing behind her spectacles.

“Until I have no one left to speak for, Madam, yes,” she replies.

A heavy sigh from the podium. They both know there’s nothing Burbage can do to stop her. It’s perfectly legal to operate as a character witness for as many of the accused as she likes, provided she’s met them all in person.

Hermione double-checked this morning.

“Proceed, then,” deadpans Burbage.

“Thank you, Madam.” She turns her back on her, moving in a slow circle to address the entirety of the Wizengamot. “Ladies and gentlemen, I am not here to deny Miss Parkinson’s participation in these crimes.”

A low hiss from the cage beside her — it’s likely Pansy believes she’s about to seal her fate, rather than restore it.

And Hermione is very aware of how much she’s going to hate her after these next words.

“You have provided evidence of an impressive volume, and I am not going to dispute that. But I do think it’s very important that you are all aware of the reason why. Her reason.” She feels Pansy’s heavy gaze on the back of her neck. Finds Harry’s eyes in the crowd, fueled by his encouraging nod. “Everything Miss Parkinson did, she did in the name of someone she loved. To protect them.”

Scattered gasps.

“Granger,” she hears — a hard, flat warning from Pansy.

“You’d do well to remain silent, Miss Parkinson,” barks Burbage.

Pointedly avoiding Pansy’s gaze, Hermione picks a spot on the far wall and

speaks to it. “Pansy Parkinson joined the Death Eaters because, in her eyes, it was the only way to ensure the safety of Theodore Nott, who she’s been in love with for —”

The wave of gasps is drowned out by Pansy’s rasped cry, “I’m going to *RIP YOUR HAIR OUT!*” She yanks at the bars like she’d lunge at her in their absence, teeth bared, but Burbage flicks her wand and an electric shock scatters across the cage, knocking Pansy back with a sickening zap.

She slumps against the other side of the cage, conscious, but barely, tendrils of smoke rising off her skin.

Hermione’s mouth hangs slightly ajar.

“What proof do you have?” asks Burbage, voice bored — as though the past ten seconds haven’t happened.

It takes Hermione a second to refocus. To meet her eyes. “I...well...” She gestures limply at Pansy in the cage, “I should think that’s proof in and of itself.” Then she turns in another circle, searching the many eyes of the Wizengamot, imploring, pleading, “She’s scared. Can’t you see it? She’s always been scared. For him. For herself. For what would happen to either of them if she didn’t follow the Dark Lord’s wishes.”

A resounding silence. She finds Harry again, and he gives another, firmer nod.

“Nothing she did was done in her own self-interest,” she adds. A last-ditch attempt to plant that seed of doubt. That’s all she needs. Just a prickle of doubt.

Burbage leans back, a brow quirked. Hums in thought. “And if we were to give her Veritaserum—”

“That’s *illegal*,” Hermione snaps before she can stop herself.

“Not if she consents.”

This time, the silence is deafening.

Hermione’s mouth forms soundless words, gaze flitting back and forth between Pansy, unmoving, and the rest of the room.

“Well?” probes Burbage. “Does she consent?”

She has to swallow all the saliva pooling in her mouth. Claps her hands into