

she glances down at her bare torso, the sheets gathered around her waist.

"You see me naked all the time," she says, resisting the powerful urge to cover herself. Draco may have said he loves her, but he has never explicitly called her beautiful — and she's wondering now if he notices the slightly larger swell of one breast as opposed to the other. The clumsy snattering of freckles in the valley between them. She wonders if it bothers him that she doesn't have more to offer in this department.

"But I never get to *look*," he says, and again it's like he's reading, eyes sweeping back and forth across every available inch of skin. She starts to itch with it, growing nervous. And she *can't* be nervous if she plans to follow through on this.

So she swallows and wets her suddenly dry lips and makes herself ask, "And what do you think?"

The last thing she expects is a scoff. "You know what I think," he drawls, shaking his head. Sharp. Dismissive.

She swallows again, infinitely more nervous now. "No. You've never told me."

Something passes through his gaze at that. There's a slight quiver in his brows. He readjusts his posture where he sits, silent for a long moment.

Then, "I've *shown* you what I think."

Her pulse settles a little in her chest, but she's still far from satisfied. She urges herself to sit tall and push him to his limits. "I'd like to hear what you think, if you don't mind."

His lip curls up at the snark in her tone, eyes narrowing just a fraction, and for the briefest moment it feels like they're back in First Year. Testing and riling one another. "Oh, if I don't mind?"

"Yes, if you don't mind." She sits up even straighter, internally hyper-conscious that she's on full display for him.

Draco crosses his arms, letting his head fall back against the headboard and surveying her through lowered lids. His expression exudes superiority and arrogance, and for just a moment she well and truly panics.

Because what if this is one of those moments he chooses to air out the ugliness

This won't help."

She practically crumples back into her seat, and Burbage lets the silence fester for a moment. Then, with a sigh,

"Mr. Smith, let's speed this up a bit. Any final entries you'd consider particularly concerning?"

Zacharias looks like a deer in headlights for a moment, then flips urgently ahead — back a few times, mouthing words to himself as though trying to pluck out the single most damning sentence he can find.

And he finds it. Oh, by god, he finds it.

She's gritting her teeth so hard her jaw aches.

"December 7th, 1998...Prompt: *If you could change one choice you made in the past year, what would it be?* ... And then he writes, erm — *Almost too easy. My appeal. Mother insisted on it, but if I could go back, I'd plead guilty and accept all of those initial charges.*" Zacharias pauses to look up and around the courtroom, punching in the last line with all the emphasis he can muster. "*Azaban sounds like a lonely paradise.*"

Hermione's eyes fall shut.

"Right then," announces Burbage. "Thank you, Mr. Smith. You may step down. We will submit the journal into evidence. The defense may take over after a short recess."

The bang of the gavel is impossibly loud in her ears.

When Harry shoves the cup of tea between her shaking hands, it sloshes over and burns her fingers. She barely feels it.

"Just... try to relax," he says feebly, taking a seat beside her near the atrium fountain. "It's not over. Now's your chance."

"What chance?" she asks flatly, staring straight ahead.

"There's absolutely a chance. Don't give up—"

"Zacharias dug him a grave, Harry. I'm not a fool."

"Miss Granger!"

"Miss Granger!"

“Are you willing to comment, Miss Granger?”

Bulbs flash in her face, momentarily blinding, and she spills more scalding tea into her lap. Vaguely, she registers Harry stepping in front of her. Saying politely, “Not now, please. Thank you. Thank you all, but not now...”

And oh, the way they bow down before their hero, scurrying away with his name on their lips like a reverent prayer.

“Wish I could do that,” she mutters down at her teacup.

“Do what?”

“Ask to breathe and then be given the space to do so.”

“Mione—”

There’s a sharp pop and then another frantic, “*Miss Granger!*”

Harry sighs. Turns again. “Please, I said not — oh.” He hesitates. “Erm. Her-mione?”

She forces her gaze up from the murky tea and finds a house elf, of all things, standing before them and looking particularly small. Her first thought is of Dobby, but this elf’s not nearly as filthy. Or bruised. She’s got a nice little set of black robes on, big glistening eyes, and a letter clutched in her tiny hand.

“Hello,” Hermione manages.

“Miss Granger, Miss — Tepsy has an urgent message for you, Miss.”

She forces a small, polite smile onto her face. “Hello, Tepsy. From who, if you don’t mind?”

“From my Mistress, Miss Granger. She is not supposed to be sending it, Miss. She is not supposed to, but she tells Tepsy she *must*.” Tepsy pushes the letter eagerly into her hand.

The envelope is thicker and heavier than expected. Like there’s something more inside than parchment. A dark wax seal is melted onto the back, but no address.

“Who is your Mistress, Tepsy?”

Tepsy rocks back and forth on her heels, looking nervous. “Mrs. Narcissa Malfoy, Miss.”

pulling away. Because there’s something she’s been wanting to do — to try — and if it can somehow simultaneously prove him wrong, then that’s two birds with one stone.

But *god above*, what a thing it is to watch all his defenses fly up at just that slight movement. Fear and fury and doubt cloud up in his eyes as they break away from hers, like he suddenly can’t stand to have her look at him. And it’s simply too sharp and painful to witness for even half a second longer.

With twice his enthusiasm, she surges forward and captures those lips. His small gasp makes way for her tongue to slip inside, caressing the sharp edges of his teeth — the soft warmth of the roof of his mouth. It’s a more filthy kiss than she thinks she would’ve ever dared before, but after a day like today she feels very little still exists in the way of limits.

She slips one hand across his forehead between them, being careful not to press too hard on the bruises as she smooths out each crease of worry.

“So quick to doubt me,” she murmurs around the lash of his tongue.

His arms have curled around her now, and he’s giving back as good as he gets — starting to press her down into the mattress.

“Wait,” she says, breaking away from his lips once more, because if she lets him settle between her thighs she’ll never get the chance to try what she wants to. And before the doubt can creep back across his face, she strokes a hand down the sharp plane of his cheek and tells him, “Trust me.”

He does.

Enough to allow her to slide out from under him. Enough to turn and sit back against his headboard, raising a curious brow as she sets about finding her wand in the messy pile of their clothes.

“I never see you like this.” His voice is quiet and low — contemplative — as he watches her conjure a hair tie and set about gathering her chaotic mane into something manageable.

“With my hair up?” she asks, trying not to get distracted by the angled slopes of his shoulders, now more visible in that sliver of light.

He shakes his head and she realizes where his gaze is trained. Flushes red as

into silence.

"You say you'd pick me out of a room of hundreds," he continues, still watching his hand slide back and forth, "and then you run."

A lump forms in her throat, and he lets that hand drift downward, disappearing beneath the sheets. His eyes flit back to hers when one finger slides between her legs — still warm, still wet from moments ago — and she can't help but twitch as she holds her breath.

"You fuck me in a hospital bed," he says softly — always speaking in tones that don't match — and his forefinger starts to draw torturous circles around her clit. "You let me have you first — I couldn't even believe it when I saw you bleed. I thought you were lying."

She gasps sharply when his thumb slips inside of her.

"You let me have you first," he says again, "but you can't bear the thought of anyone knowing it."

Her mind wants to turn to static, ripples of pleasure shooting up her spine, but she wakes up enough to defend herself. "I changed my—"

"Yes, you changed your mind, I know." Draco lets the back of his thumb press hard against her inner walls, and her back arches, hands coming to rest on his chest without knowing it. "I'm only making a point."

"What — *god* — what is your point?" She's hardly focused now, all efforts diverted to angling her hips so she can press harder against his hand.

"You say you love me," he whispers, going still.

She freezes too. Holds her breath.

"But all you ever do is cause me pain." He stares at her out from beneath those blond lashes, unapologetic. Blinking slowly as he watches her process his words.

After a moment, she releases that breath, and it tousles the damp hair hanging across his forehead.

"Pain," she echoes at first, because it's all she can think to say.

His eyes flit back and forth between each of hers. As though he's reading her like a chapter in a book. A chapter he doesn't understand. "Yes," he says. "Pain."

But when his jaw grazes hers and he leans in to kiss her, she finds herself



February 22nd, 1999

TEPSY IS GONE BEFORE SHE CAN GET ANOTHER WORD OUT, LEAVING THIS THING IN HER HANDS.

This thing which feels suddenly a great deal heavier.

"From his mother?" Harry echoes quietly. "But she's on —"

"House arrest." Hermione nods, staring down at the letter. She's hardly conscious of her thumb already breaking through the seal.

"That's...*risky*. Must be important."

She nods again, but she's not really listening to him. Because what's rolled out of the opening into her palm is distinct and unmistakable. A vial — bearing one small, cloudy wisp. It glows faintly blue against her skin.

A memory.

"Is that—"

She doesn't bother to nod this time, scrambling to yank the letter that came with it free of the envelope. Nearly tears it as she spreads it open on her lap.

*Miss Granger,*

*I've been following the news as closely as I can, though my access is limited. But if what I've read is true, then you are the one defending my son.*

*We both know the odds are against him. And I know my son. He is against himself. He will not help you. Even this, which I give you now, may amount to nothing — but I believe they need to see it. You need to see it. The memory is mine. Please submit it as evidence. Submit it so, at the very least, he knows his mother tried to save him.*

*Nicissa*

Hermione blinks and reads it over again. Wets her dry lips, hand closing around the vial like a final lifeline.

“We have to see what it is,” she blurts.

Harry’s been trying to read the letter upside down. “We don’t have a Pen-sieve.”

“We have to find a way. We’ve got to—”

“Ladies and gentlemen, please make your way back into the courtroom,” calls a member of the Wizengamot. “The trial will resume momentarily.”

“Bollocks,” mutters Harry, meeting her gaze.

She feels abruptly helpless, and he must see it in her eyes. Some pleading look that begs him to make the decision for her.

“You have to use it.”

She swallows thickly. “But I don’t know wh—”

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“I never said that,” she gasps out.  
“Please,” he mocks in a whine. “Please, please, please.”

And she would be pulling away — swatting at his arm and giving him a dirty look — if he weren’t punctuating each word with a languid, angled thrust. Instead, her eyes roll back into her head, and she pushes herself tighter against him, tucking her nose into the crook of his neck to press a kiss to his throat. She tastes salt and finds herself tracing her tongue over the spot in search of more.

“Oh, now I have your attention?” he murmurs — deep vibrations against her lips.

“You never lost it.”

He goes still inside of her. Just hovers there for a long moment, his dark shadow draped over her side. And she has a feeling he’s talking about something else entirely when he says, “I don’t believe you.”

His tone makes her shift away, even as every muscle and every nerve ending in her body begs her not to. That strange, throbbing emptiness takes his place when he slides out, and she feels abruptly cold as she twists in the emerald green sheets to face him.

The only light by which to see him comes from the thin sliver of sea-glow seeping through a crack in the bed curtains. It paints a quarter of his face blue, the rest left in shadow, but she can see his right eye. Can see the bruises — part of the reason she wanted to face away in the first place.

“What don’t you believe?” she whispers, resting her head on the pillow.

He stays propped on one elbow, staring at her. For a moment, he doesn’t answer, letting the rougher-than-usual pads of his fingers trace the hollow beside her hipbone. He glances down, watching the movements as he speaks. “You say one thing, and you do another.”

“I—”

“You tell me we’re the same, but you spend all your time trying to remind yourself why we’re different.”

“That’s not—”

His palm flattens out across her bare stomach, the soft caress surprising her

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poster, with the sleeping form of Blaise Zabini not two meters to the left.

And a part of her is realizing why she blurred out those ridiculous words in the boathouse.

To her, the bed is a symbol, and Hermione has never shared a bed — a real bed — with anyone. Not with Viktor. Not with Ron. Not even just to sleep. There's something too personal about it. Too vulnerable. It's incredibly different from those pillows on the floor of the Divination classroom. It's as if—

Draco's lips glide from the pulse point on her throat to the shell of her ear, grip tightening on her hip ever so slightly as he rocks in a little deeper. Still so tortuously slow.

"If you're going to solve puzzles in your head while I'm inside of you," he murmurs, voice a little ragged, "the least you could do is include me."

Hermione tilts her head, nose brushing his unexpectedly. She speaks against the corner of his mouth, each slow thrust moving her lips across his cheek. "You want to help me solve a puzzle?"

His hand frees her hip, palm splaying out across her thigh — sliding up along the tendons to the crease behind her knee. The delicacy of it mixed in with the way he rolls his hips makes her shiver and buck against him.

"Well yes, if it's so much more *interesting*..." He slides in to the hilt, jolting the breath out of her. "— than this."

She's left panting for several seconds, eyes falling shut as she fists the sheets tighter in hand. The word, "*Faster*," falls from her lips in a hiss.

Draco hums into her shoulder. "Odd. I seem to remember you begging me to go slow."

She scoffs instinctively, the jerk of it proving interesting with the way they're connected. He tenses. She groans.

"I did not *beg* you for anything."

His lips part against her pulse, teeth grazing skin as he speaks in a breathy croon meant to be her own. "Please. Oh, please *please*, Draco — fuck me slow."

She grinds herself back against him in a way that's supposed to be indignant but earns a moan from both of them instead.

"You don't have a choice. You're right, Hermione. Smith dug him a grave in there. And no matter what brilliant defense you lay out, you're in danger. This might tip the scales."

"*Please* make your way back into the courtroom," says the same man, looking pointedly at the two of them. "The trial will recommence *immediately*."

She yanks her eyes back to Harry, panicking now. "But — what if...what if it makes it worse?"

"It's his mother, Hermione. Would she risk that?"

"I...I don't..."

"You have to." He takes her hand. Pulls her up to her feet and squeezes once. "You *have* to."



The vial rests in her blazer pocket as she takes the floor to lay out her defense, a weight as sure and heavy as an anvil.

It's her last resort, she's decided. She'll do what she can to read the room. If she feels they're leaning in his favor, then they'll walk out of this trial together, and she'll lock it away somewhere and never think of it again.

If she feels otherwise, then...so be it.

She does her best to skirt around Malfoy's cage without looking at him. She needs her focus now more than ever. But instead, her eyes catch on Dawlish, and a flush of rage fans out across her face. Bubbles and broils in her gut.

She looks away. Looks to Burbage. And it begins.

Her strongest defense — the one she'd felt such confidence in before — now feels somehow insignificant. Even so, she imprints it into the minds of the Wizengamot. Over and over again, as many times as she thinks it takes to stick.

"...and we would never've made it that far had Mr. Malfoy identified Harry to his aunt..."

"...looked Harry plain in the face — a boy he'd attended school with for nearly *seven* years — accompanied by two of his closest friends, no less — and refused to confirm. He knew. Let me be perfectly clear. He knew."

“...at which point I’ll remind you, Mr. Malfoy — at great personal risk — neglected to identify Harry, despite what safety and reward it may’ve procured for himself and his family.”

But as that line of defense grows cold — as her palms start to sweat and Burbage’s eyes start to twitch from all the repetition — she abruptly switches tactics. It’s not something she originally intended to utilize, but Smith has forced her hand.

She’d thought to bring up Dumbledore. Perhaps yesterday — before this morning — the fact that Malfoy stayed his hand would’ve counted for something. But now she feels that path could prove far too treacherous. Chooses to avoid it entirely.

No, instead she requests his journal be handed over to her. She’s going to read the *right* sections, in the *right* context — damn them all.

That violent purple is far too familiar in her hands now. She thinks she’s read every entry more than once. Knows it back to front. And yet her thoughts feel more disorganized than ever, and she’s not sure where to start — where to finish.

As the Wizengamot looks on, impatient, she tries to remember the most damning entries Zacharias read.

She pieces together her narrative slowly.

“I believe Mr. Smith’s intentions were to portray Mr. Malfoy as unhinged. Am I correct?” She twists and finds him in the crowd — stares flatly for as long as she dares to pause — long enough for his eyes to drop away and his face to flush pink. She turns back and holds the journal aloft. “I invite you all, then, to consider why. Mr. Smith was very careful, after all, to gloss over the entries outlining what Mr. Malfoy truly experienced this past term. And it is my firm belief he was set up to fail.” She flips to an entry she knows very well. “This is from September 17th. In this particular section, Mr. Malfoy is referencing his Dark Mark — more specifically, the pain it’s causing.” And she clears her throat. “*What was it you said, again? The situation doesn’t ‘qualify’ for more powerful treatment?*” — this *you*, of course, referring to the Healers at St. Mungo’s monitoring these entries. He writes, *‘I only want drugs. Something different.*



THE SHEETS CLINGING TO THE DAMP, NAKED FLESH OF HER SIDE ARE SLYTHERIN GREEN — AND SHE’S THINKING THAT SHOULD FEEL STRANGER THAN IT DOES.

She’s always had bad timing. Always had bizarre epiphanies and aimless trains of thought strike at the wrong moments. And this feels like the absolute *worst* moment to be wondering what her fifteen-year-old self would be thinking — this moment, with Draco Malfoy’s strong, pale hand splayed across her bare hip, holding her in place; with her knee hitched up high to accommodate and her hair clinging to the pillow with sweat; with those Slytherin green sheets gathered into her fist as her breath catches around a moan; with him pressed against her back, quiet gasps sweeping across the nape of her neck as he slides in and out *slowly* — slower than he ever has — because she asked him to.

And yet she’s wondering all the same. Figures her fifteen and sixteen and even seventeen-year-old selves would all be horrified to find that their future held a moment like this. Because surely, the universe can’t have tilted so far on its axis that she’s staring at serpent-adorned bed curtains as those warm, electric pulses surge up from between her thighs. Surely, it can’t be Malfoy — *Draco* — she’s letting do this. Surely, it can’t feel the way it feels.

But it *is*. And it *does*. And it’s sunken in before, but never quite this deep. Because before, every time always felt so spur-of-the-moment. Unexpected collisions in even less expected places.

This, however — this is deliberate. Letting him tow her along the deserted corridors and down the all too familiar Dungeon steps. Letting him lead her wordlessly through the common room, a few Slytherins still awake — none of them even looked up. Watching him cast silencing charms around his four-

his nose gently against hers. Again, he says words that don't match up. Quietly. Lovingly.

"I don't forgive you."

She releases a shuddering breath against his lips.

"I didn't apologize."

*Anything. Take it away. I'm not against begging — as you've seen before.*" She looks up — stares Burbage directly in the eyes, reciting what's only too easy to recite from memory. *"Give me drugs, give me drugs, give me drugs, give me fucking drugs."* Burbage flinches, if only just.

"This is, in fact, one of no less than twenty entries requesting pain relieving medication. Requests which were denied without explanation, which can only lead me to assume that Mr. Malfoy's well-being was not of great concern. There is no representative here from St. Mungo's to speak to this, so I'll leave that where it lies. But I'm curious." She lets her gaze slide across as many members of the Wizengamot as she can manage. Feels powerful suddenly. Knows her direction. "Have any of you studied the Dark Mark? In detail? You know of it, I'm sure — but do any of you have the faintest idea what it *does*?"

"You'll do well to watch your tone, Miss Granger," Burbage warns from the podium. "You are in no position to play Professor."

"Not Professor," she says. "No, in fact this is not a part of any regular school curriculum. It's not spoken of." She risks a glance behind her — at Malfoy. His eyes are hooded. Cloudy. But they're fixed on her, none the less. "I just have a reputation for wanting to know everything." She forces herself to face forward again. "And this was something I wanted to know."

She starts to pace, doing her best to remember everything she's ever read about it.

"The Dark Mark is a very intuitive piece of magic. It behaves as though it has a mind of its own. A symbiote. Some believe it's even aware of the intentions of its host. And I have no argument with this after seeing what it did to Mr. Malfoy. His Mark was attacking him. Physically. Burning him from the inside out. His entries make it plain. Endless, daily, *excruciating* pain. Tell me — why would a dark thing attack fellow darkness?"

She lets that thought simmer for a moment. Allows her eyes to find Harry, and his nod floods her with courage.

"It is my conclusion that the Dark Mark sensed Malfoy's shift in stance. It sensed light in him, and it attacked it like a virus."

A member of the Wizengamot raises a hand. An older witch with octagon-shaped spectacles perched above her nose. "Is it not true that Death Eaters consider taking the Mark a great honor? A source of pride?"

Hermione almost wants to thank her. It leads her seamlessly into a point she wasn't sure how to make.

"They do. Absolutely, they do. So — you have to wonder. Why would a *proud* Death Eater try to physically cut it off?"

The rustle of whispers is enough to tell her most of them don't know. Invigorated, she whips around and approaches Malfoy's cage.

"Mr. Malfoy, please show the ladies and gentlemen of the Wizengamot your arm."

Now, his eyes tighten — and she's reminded of Narcissa's words.

*He is against himself. He will not help you.*

She glares back at him.

*You'll help me. God damn you, you'll help me.*

"Do it," she growls low. Too low for others to hear. "Or I'll do it for you."

He hisses something under his breath. Something she can't catch. Then he yanks his arm out, wrenching up his wrinkled sleeve. She steps aside so they can see.

The clean white scar lining his forearm from wrist to elbow.

A gasp or two is all the reaction she gets, but she pushes on.

"Mr. Malfoy resorted to such drastic measures, there was nothing left for it but to remove all living tissue from his arm. He can feel nothing."

Malfoy yanks back down on his sleeve and slumps against the back of the cage.

"Please, tell me," she says, turning around. "What *proud* Death Eater would rather lose all sensation than keep this *great honor*?"

Burbage sighs loudly. "How long do you intend to belabor this point, Miss Granger?"

She tries to hide the way it makes her grind her teeth. "I'll move on."

Her eyes catch again on Harry as she glances down to sift through the journal

hands fist in his shirt. Any other day, she'd hate herself for begging. But right now she can't bring herself to care. "Don't stop. *Please*. Don't stop — don't stop." And she's actually rather impressed with herself when she manages to shift her hips upward, even at the strange angle, taking him in hungrily — as deep as she can. "Not now," she pants, one hand freeing his shirt to card through his sweat-damp hair. "Later. *Later*. Please."

He punishes her by hesitating. Waits until she actually *whimpers* before starting up the rhythm again and then buries his face in her curls. "Make up your fucking mind," he huffs. But she can hear the smirk in his voice.

"*Ah* — there! Right there. Harder. Please. *Please*. Harder." She's been reduced to single-word sentences.

He starts to drive into her at a pace that aches, and she lets her nails scrape down from his scalp to his lower back. The hitch in his breath is enough to tell her to do it again.

And that throb starts to build. Reaching, crawling, trying to crest that hill.

"I'm close. I'm close. *Draco*. Please — I'm so close." She's a broken record, now.

His lips find her ear, and between hushed whispers of, "*Come. Come for me,*" he sucks and bites at her earlobe. It undoes her.

With a sharp cry, she tenses up against him — feels the pressure explode, hips gyrating out of control. Spasming. Pulsing as she shakes and clutches at him to keep from falling.

He doesn't let her fall.

Not even when she feels his muscles coil and lock — when he suddenly drives in deeper than she thought he could, coming with a pained sort of yelp that's so vulnerable it's almost heartbreaking.

Her heart slams in her chest as they sink down from the high together, her cheeks flushed, sweat dripping down the back of her neck.

For a moment it's just the silence. The silence and their staggered breathing and the quiet laps of waves against the boathouse dock.

Then Draco pulls his face from the crook of her neck, eyes closed as he drags



"I thought you were smart," he groans. It's muffled by her skin, and he follows it up with an impossibly delicious, desperate kind of sound. Like he's wounded. Like he's losing control. He bites and sucks at her neck as he starts to thrust in hard. The type of hard that sees their hipbones colliding — bruising.

"*Ah!* So did — *god*, there, right there — so did I."

The need to kiss him is suddenly overwhelming. She struggles to unlock her wrists from around his neck, gasping as the shift invites him in deeper. Her hands scramble for purchase, skating across his chest and up along the smooth cords of muscle lining his throat, finally finding the cool planes of his face and dragging him away from her neck.

"Please — *please*, I —" She cuts herself off when her mouth finds his, and she doesn't care that their teeth clash, too eager. Doesn't care that she tastes the blood of his split lip. She only cares about the warmth of his tongue as it curls around hers. The exquisite pressure as he sucks and licks and *bites*.

It makes the muscles in her lower abdomen clench around him, and he rewards her with another strangled groan, this one into her mouth. "*Fuck*." The rhythm of his hips stutters, then picks back up again faster — harder — sending little shockwaves down her legs and up her spine.

And she must short-circuit somehow, because the oddest thought pops into her head. "Draco, I — *oh* — I just realiz — *oh, god* —"

He doesn't cut the rhythm. Not even a fraction, even as he grinds out, "What?" in a breathless, irritated tone.

"I — we've — we've never done it in a bed."

This does make him pause, halfway sheathed inside her. And it's both a breather and a unique sensation all its own, making her swirl her hips a bit to get a feel for it.

He hisses and grips her waist hard to make her stop, panting against her mouth. Then, quietly, "Do you want me to fuck you in a bed?"

The thought floods her with a gelatinous wave of pleasure. "Yes."

"Fine," he says. But panic rips through her when he starts to pull out.

"No. *No!*" She probably scratches him, grabbing at him the way she does,

— he's mouthing something.

*Do it.*

His lips form around the words over and over again.

*No, she thinks. Not yet. Not unless I have to.*

Instead, she delves back into the journal — reads aloud any and every entry she thinks even *slightly* humanizes him. Reads how he stepped in front of her to face the Boggart. Reveals his own Boggart, despite the hiss he blows through his teeth behind her. Details, much to her own embarrassment, how he and his House took her in when she felt unwelcome elsewhere. And she feels like she's airing out their dirty laundry in the most public way there is.

Still, she keeps on. Even when she knows she's beating a dead horse, she's hoping — if anything — that there will be too much of it for the Wizengamot to remember anything Zacharias said.

That's her goal for the following hour and a half. And Burbage looks fit to boil over.

"Is this all you have, Miss Granger?" she barks out at last, cutting Hermione off halfway through her description of Professor Haverishin's bias. "Mr. Malfoy's behavior over the past term? Is this the sum of your defense? Because unless you have anything further to add, I'd say we're fit to deliberate."

She swallows back the saliva pooling on her tongue. Glances towards Harry, already certain of what she'll see.

*Do it*, he mouths, and his eyes widen with emphasis. *Now*.

She shuts her eyes for the briefest moment, all too aware of Malfoy's eyes glaring daggers into her back.

And then she pulls out the vial — the clear little weapon that will either make or break her case.

"I have one more piece of evidence." She holds it up. Out. "This is a memory from Narcissa Malfoy. His mother."

"Granger," Malfoy bleats suddenly. "*No*." And her heart rate spikes.

"Silence, Mr. Malfoy," snaps Burbage. She flicks her fingers at Hermione. "Hand it to the guard. We'll have to test whether it's been tampered with."

She's not sure why she's so nervous to do so.

Surely, Narcissa wouldn't risk tampering with it. No. No, she wouldn't.

Even so, Hermione's hand is shaking when she passes the vial to the guard.

He performs a spell she knows very little of, and Burbage leans forward over the podium to watch as the vial glows. First white, then a pale shade of blue.

Hermione lets out a slow breath.

The disappointment on Burbage's face tells her all she needs to know.

It takes a good ten minutes to set up the Ministry-grade Pensieve at the center of the courtroom. It's the sort large enough to display the memory to everyone — the sort they use for all trials. And Hermione panics as she realizes — she's going to have to act like she's seen it before. Like she knows what that blue wispy contains. Eyes will be on her.

Whatever shock ensues, she's going to have to hide it.

And she's never been good at that.

Clutching her hands into fists at her sides, Hermione locks her knees and prepares for the worst. Burbage deals a nod to the guard, and he tips the contents into the massive pool.

For an impossibly long moment, the memory swirls around in the water — an inky black mass. Then, all at once, the image launches itself into the sky — and Narcissa's memory is displayed as though from a Muggle projector.

Not one second in, Hermione already has to stifle a gasp.

Because it's herself she's looking at. Splayed out on a marble floor she still hasn't forgotten the texture of. And it's her voice she's hearing. Her screams.

The members of the Wizengamot shift uncomfortably as they watch Bellatrix torture her.

It's a moment she never thought she'd have to relive.

Her screams echo up off the high ceiling and come ringing back, absurdly loud — but not loud enough to cover Malfoy's voice.

"Stop it!" He roars from his cage, and Hermione feels her stomach twist. "Get rid of it! *STOP IT!*"

"*Silencia*," Burbage casts without a thought, eyes fixed on the moving images

She's done saving lives.

"I mean it."

And *god*, the way he bares his teeth — like he plans on making her regret it.

"Then say it again," he demands. A threat.

"I mean it."

"No." Abruptly, he shoves her skirt up over her hips, rough enough to punish — to hurt. She can hear the fabric tear. "Don't play games with me."

She only notices his hands are shaking when he goes for the fasten on his trousers, and her pulse starts to hammer in anticipation. Her mouth runs dry.

"Say it again," he growls, just before he performs a rather impressive bit of wandless magic. One moment her stomach glows pink, and the next she's up in his arms, legs spread. Hitched up over his hips as he lines her up, hands carving into her backside as he presses her back against the wall. The friction is *unbearable*. She tries so hard — it's humiliating how hard she tries to grind against him, wanting him inside. Wanting to fill the void.

But he's got her pinned too tightly to allow it.

"Hermione." His voice has dropped to a whisper. Full of malice. Full of hatred that doesn't match, doesn't coexist with the way her heart swells at the sound of her name on his lips. She's realizing it doesn't matter how he says it. As long as it's him. "*Say it. Again.*"

Swallowing her fear — swallowing her pride — she meets his eyes again the way one meets an enemy on the battlefield. "I love you."

Draco lets the words hang in the air for a fraction of a second. Enough time for her to smirk in his face. A challenge.

Something feral rips out of his throat, and the next instant he's inside of her.

She chokes on something halfway between a moan and a shriek. Her body's forgotten him — has to familiarize itself with the way they interlock all over again. Stretches. Accommodates. But she hasn't forgotten the way he presses himself in close, nesting into the crook of her neck. Blasting hot breaths against her flesh as he pulls out and drives back in — slow, so torturously slow — the first time.

“Yes,” she gasps, forgetting it’s not a question. She shifts to loop both her arms around the back of his neck, not even shy as she starts to grind her hips into his hand, rising and falling with each slow pump of his fingers.

He groans again as she does it, picking up the pace and licking a stripe up her neck. “God, I hate you.”

It just slips out. Forever, she’ll blame it on the way his fingers curl up — find that spot that makes her eyes roll back into her head. But she knows that’s not why she says it.

“And I love you.”

She thinks she has for a while.

His reaction’s not what she’s expecting. To his credit, Malfoy — *Draco*. *He’s inside of you*. *Draco* — always manages to surprise her.

He tears his fingers out, and the loss is unbelievably painful for a moment. Leaves her wanton and desolate until he takes her jaw in his hand — wet with her essence and pressing hard into her skin — and forces her to meet his suddenly burning gaze. “Look at me — *look at me*.”

She stares, wide-eyed. Doesn’t dare blink.

“Don’t you fucking say it unless you mean it.”

The urge to correct him is surprisingly immediate. She has to stop the words halfway up her throat, just to get the chance to think. And it’s admittedly hard to think right now, throbbing the way she is.

But he’s giving her an out. Not even hiding it. The one-time-only opportunity to take it back, which is more than she can say she did for him.

No, she backed down. Backed away. *Ran*. Like a coward.

But here he is, pressing bruises into her skin and daring her to step on his heart. Throwing himself on the grenade.

And they probably both know she should take the offer. It’d be best for everyone. Might even save some lives.

She shuts her eyes. Breathes deeply, channeling every last drop of fearlessness she possesses before she opens them again. His gaze hasn’t moved an inch — unwavering — but she meets it head on.

in the air. Malfoy’s cries cut off.

“*I didn’t take anything!*” her past self continues to scream. “*I swear! Pl-please, please! I swear, I didn’t take anything!*”

Narcissa’s slow, methodic blinks rarely interrupt the image. And for a long while, it feels like it goes on forever. Hermione never realized how many times she said the same thing. Over and over.

“*I didn’t take it! I didn’t take anything!*”

But then suddenly Narcissa’s voice rings out. Quiet and low, spoken under her breath — and yet louder than anything else because it’s right at the forefront.

“*Draco. Stop.*”

Hermione can’t help but glance sideways at him — finds him still screaming himself hoarse in silence. Yanking at the bars.

Almost at the same time, Narcissa’s memory glances sideways, jerking her attention back. And there he is in the past. Wearing those same clothes burned into her brain. In that same spot in the Malfoy hall she’ll always remember. Staring straight ahead, watching her scream.

Except — no. That’s not all he’s doing.

His low, unintelligible murmur can only just be heard over her shrill cries, but the moving of his lips is unmistakable.

“*Stop*,” Narcissa warns again. “*She’ll see you.*”

He doesn’t stop. Not even for a moment. Keeps saying the same muffled words, over and over again. Unblinking. Unmoving. Even when Narcissa reaches out and yanks at his arm. His focus is steadfast, his tongue equally so.

And Hermione knows what a counter-curse looks like.

She feels like the breath’s been knocked out of her. And when the memory fades into darkness above them all, her knees buckle. She narrowly manages to grip one of the bars of his cage.

*Keep your composure.*

Her eyes flit upward. Find Malfoy no longer screaming.

But there are rare tears in his eyes and his face is a brilliant, furious red and he looks — he looks defeated. Defeated and betrayed and overrun by pure rage.

Burbage has the good sense to wait an extra minute before she releases the silencing charm.

Hermione clears her dry throat. Feels like she's sleepwalking as she steps away from the cage and rasps out, "Mr. Malfoy...can you explain to the Wizengamot what you were doing?"

*Can you explain to me?*

For a long while, he says absolutely nothing. Only huffs out furious breaths, white-knuckled fists wrapped around the bars in front of him.

"Please explain the nature of the counter-curse," she presses — and she sounds like she's pleading. There's no way to hide it. There's desperation in her voice.

*Save yourself. Damn you, Malfoy. Save yourself.*

She fights back tears.

*The way you saved me.*

Because she knows. Even before he says it — grinds it out like the words themselves are a death sentence. She knows. She never knew then, but she knows now.

"My aunt was using a knife dipped in poison. The counter-curse forbid it to spread."

Hermione digs her nails into the heels of her hands. Straightens her back and lifts her chin to the Wizengamot, even as two identical tears track wet lines down her cheeks. She clears her throat one last time.

"In other words, he saved my life.

spreads its fingers to scrape its nails along her scalp. She hisses through her teeth, eyes falling shut. Gooseflesh spreads across her like a wildfire.

"You — you're —" she stutters, tongue tripping over itself as his hand drags a slow path down between her breasts, over her stomach, landing low — too low — on her hip. "You're the one doing the ruining. It's like — *ah* —" She gasps as his head dips suddenly, teeth grazing the spot just below her jaw. "It's like you want it ruined."

He mouths at the spot for a moment. Huffs a laugh, then puts his lips at her ear. "Maybe," he whispers, breath hot against the too-sensitive skin. She clenches her thighs together. "But only by you."

She squirms as his hand glides past her hip and down her leg, fingers curling under the hem of her Ministry-approved pencil skirt. And then she starts to shake as he traces the bare skin of her inner thigh, walking those fingers up the last few inches towards the apex.

"Going to let me in?" he murmurs, tongue lashing at her earlobe.

She spreads her legs instantly, head falling back into his hand. And Malfoy just laughs, low and dark into her ear, even as his hand slides home between her thighs. "Look at you. You don't even fight back anymore."

Her breaths are coming in desperate little puffs, a tremor riding up her spine as he applies just the faintest pressure over her underwear — but she still feels the pulse of indignation. With the hand not hopelessly tangled into his hair, she reaches out and gropes him *hard*. Harder than she knows she should, earning a cut grunt out of him. "Want me to?" she sneers.

"Bitch," he hisses, but she can feel him growing harder against her palm.

She lets loose a breathy sigh as he adds more pressure to the lace between her legs, dropping her head forward onto his shoulder. Losing focus. "You smell like prison," she mumbles against his shirt collar.

He responds by yanking her underwear to the side, rough pads of his fingers finding her clit like they're magnetized. She jerks violently against him.

"And you smell *wet*," he says. It's meant to be snide, but it's more a groan than anything as he gathers up the moisture and uses it to push two fingers inside.

so good — *too* good — going for the kill. “Can’t stand to be disobeyed. Can’t stand the thought of someone other than *Daddy* coming to his rescue.”

Malfoy’s searing eyes flash, and he yanks her head away from the wall enough to fist his free hand in her hair — yanks hard, dragging on her scalp.

She just feels encouraged. “Doesn’t know how to behave,” she hisses, eyes watering. “Doesn’t know how to say thank you.”

“*Thank you?*” he seethes, pulling harder until she can’t help a little, pained squeak. “Oh, I’m not going to *thank* you.”

He’s so close, his nose is slotted against hers. So close her eyes have the treacherous urge to flutter shut — because normally when he’s this close she gets to taste him. And she shouldn’t *want* to taste him.

“Make no mistake,” he growls, and he has the nerve to nuzzle her cheek as he says it — a threat wrapped in affection. “If you get yourself taken away from me, I will *kill* you. Do you understand?”

She swallows a heaving breath by mistake.

“I will bring you back from the brink of death if I have to, and then I will fucking *kill* you. Just so I can do it myself.”

There’s a gap of rigid silence, with only their ragged breaths to fill the space. And she has no explanation. No excuse.

But it’s her head that tilts back. Her lips that seek out his — slot against and seize them like a lost possession. It forces a strangled sound out of his throat, and it sends a chill through her as his grip on her neck goes slack.

His mouth parts against hers like it doesn’t want to. Like the very concept of a kiss infuriates him in this moment. But then his teeth sink into her lower lip, dragging it out and releasing it with a wet, filthy sort of sound that makes her thighs quiver. And for a moment he just lets his forehead rest against hers. Pants into her face as his hand slides down to her collarbone, hesitating over her thudding pulse.

The scent of peppermint clouds around them.

“You’re going to ruin my fucking life,” Malfoy breathes, finger tracing abscent circles on the skin of her chest. The other hand, still buried in her curls,



THEY DON’T DELIBERATE.

They muse and mull and *drag* their way through it, as if they know each and every second has Hermione grinding away another thin layer of her teeth. Her jaw aches. Her eyes itch and sting. She stares resolutely at the base of Burbage’s podium, because glancing to her left is out of the question right now.

And all the while, the same word bounces back and forth off the walls of her head.

*Why?*

*Why — why — why?*

She’s not a fool. She has no misgivings about the human heart — no silly daydreams about love at first sight. People don’t fall that way. Not very often. And she’s convinced the ones that do have actually just suffered some sort of synaptic malfunction. An ill-timed dopamine release.

*Most* people — like her — like...like *him* — take a lot more convincing.

Malfoy didn’t love her on that cold marble floor. Those eyes she stared into — through the strain, through tears, with a knife carving into her skin — they weren’t the eyes of a lover. There was just fear. Hers and his. Fear and desperation and disbelief and just this silent plea of *please — please, you know me — we were classmates — please.*

And at the time, she’d thought that plea went unanswered. At the time, everything sort of fit.

Malfoy made her life a living hell in school, so why would he lift a finger now? It fit. It *fit*.

This doesn't.

Her eyes glaze over, losing focus, and the podium starts to morph into two the longer she stares at it. She doesn't even realize she's tracing the letters of her scar until the ragged edge of one of her fingernails — bitten raw over the past few weeks — snags on the rough skin and sends a jolt of pain up her arm.

She blinks her eyes back into focus and glances down at it, watching a little fresh bead of blood trickle down over the word *'BLOOD'* itself.

Poison. How could she not have known? How could she not have felt it, seeping into her? Even amongst all that pain? How could she have missed it leeching through her skin, in and then back out again?

How could she have missed Malfoy's moving lips?

She thought she remembered everything about that day.

Instinctively, her eyes flit left — before she can stop them. He's staring back at her through the bars. Bloodshot, hoarse. Heaving. A single strand of blond dangles between his piercing eyes, sweat-soaked.

She's seen Malfoy in lots of states, she thinks, but never like this. Even half-frozen to death — even in a fit of rage — he's never looked quite like this.

"Look what you've done," he says, low and breathless. Quiet enough it's only for her ears.

Hermione's barely conscious of the rest of the room. It seems to fall away when faced with the look in his eyes.

Even as Burbage calls out, "We have reached our verdict," she finds she's only half-listening. Can't tear her gaze away. The words "*probation*," and "*damages*," glide across the podium to her, but they're meaningless. Words that don't make sense.

All she can hear is him.

"Look what you've done," he murmurs again. "Now, it was all for nothing."



Harry has to talk her through what happened.

Everything after Malfoy's cage sank back below the ground is a blur in her

"To what?" she splutters, spreading her arms wide. "Return the favor? Why can you save me, but I can't save you?" Two more steps, and they're nearly chest to chest. Again, she tries to soften, "Malfoy...it's — it's *over*, now. Once I go back for Theo, it's *ov*—"

"If you're stupid enough to think this is over, then I guess you're not the brightest witch of your age."

She blinks at him for a moment, at a loss.

"They're killing anyone who defends us. And you've made yourself a prime target. You — you've gone and fucked everything." He huffs an unfriendly laugh in her face. "How could you be so *selfish*?"

The slap is hard and unforgiving — so fast, she barely even realizes she's done it. But she sees the color bloom in his cheek. Feels the sting spreading across her palm. Shock and fury flashes through his gaze. She opens her mouth to defend herself —

Malfoy's hand finds her throat in an instant, taking hold and twisting to force her back against the stone wall. Her gasp is choked, shoved out of her chest by the impact. Her hands fly up to pry at his fingers as he squeezes tight and draws in close. Puts them nose to nose. "Is this what you want from me?" It's only a murmur, but his tone is as deadly as his grip. "You want me like this?" He flexes his fingers once, allowing a single breath to trickle in before squeezing again. "Why? *Why*? Why do you *always* make me do this?"

Hermione manages to dig her nails in enough to slip a few fingers under his, sucking down gulps of air. But she can't bring herself to surrender. Can't bring herself to back down, even as the blood in her head starts to rush.

"You're the selfish one," she wheezes, almost enjoying the way his eyes spark and narrow. Whatever the reason, though, he lets his hand drop lower on her throat — no longer crushing her windpipe, just holding her in place. Almost like he's daring her to continue.

Her head is spinning. But she will. Damn him, she *will*.

"Spoiled, little rich boy," she pants, sneering at him. She bares her teeth, even as alarm bells blare in her head. *This isn't you. This isn't you*, they cry, but it feels

the steep, stone stairs.

This will be their reckoning. She can tell as much from the angle of his shoulders as he walks. From the fists he keeps gathered at his sides, flexing them once as they cross the threshold into the small enclosure.

But even when he stops walking, standing statuesque at the far end of the boathouse, there's still at least a full minute of silence — every second of it spent with his back to her.

Then, at last —

“Are you happy?”

It's a snarl. Low and quiet.

Hermione's surprised how quickly the cold laugh tumbles off her lips. “Am I *what?*”

“Happy?” he repeats, slowly turning to face her. “Satisfied? Proud of yourself?” She had a sense he'd try to take this road — even in her daze as she left the Ministry, she'd considered it. Malfoy doesn't take to being helped. Even his mother acknowledges it.

“Yes,” she says, taking a few calculated steps toward. The intensity of his breathing seems to kick up a notch with each one. “I'd say so. Actually, I'd say I'm *very* proud,” another few steps, leaving only a meter or so between them, “especially considering I managed it without so much as an *ounce* of help from you.”

And even as she says it — even as his nostrils flare — she feels that it's wrong. It wasn't supposed to go this way. She didn't want it to go this way.

Because no matter how absurd he is, no matter how selfish and pigheaded and *stubborn*, she can't erase what she saw in that courtroom.

He saved her.

She forces her face to soften, taking another more timid step toward him. Makes herself say it out loud. “You saved me—”

“*And what good is it now?*” he hisses, so sharply and so abruptly she's tempted to take a step back. “After what you *did*? I told you — I *warned* you — I made you *swear* not to —”

memory. But apparently there was quite the uproar. Many witches and wizards — not just Dawlish — had crammed their way into that trial to watch Malfoy fall. As Harry explains it, some of them actually tried to throw things at the Wizengamot before being escorted out.

But that part she understands.

What she doesn't understand is why she isn't already in front of the podium again, this time for Theodore Nott.

“They postponed it,” Harry says again, clutching her shoulders gently as though to keep her upright. They're still in the Ministry atrium.

“I...I don't understand,” she manages.

“Unforeseen circumstances,” says Harry. “It's been postponed indefinitely — probably because of all the chaos in there. They said you'll be notified when they're ready to move forward.”

It takes her a moment, and then she's nodding numbly. All she can think to ask is, “How's Pansy?”

Harry offers a wry, winded smile. “She's...erm, less than pleased. It wasn't pretty. But I told her it'd just give you more time to prepare his defense.”

She nods again. “Thank you.”

“Mione.” He gives her shoulders a shake. “You've *won*. I know it was a lot to take in but — you did it. You *won*.”

*Then why doesn't it feel that way?*

She just nods a third time. Plasters a false smile on her face.

Malfoy's not allowed to leave with them. The Ministry claims he has to be *formally discharged*, and it takes Harry a long while and lots of tugging to get Hermione's feet to move.

Part of her doesn't believe they'll really let him go.

When they make it back to the Great Hall, Harry insists she come back with him to Gryffindor for a nap. But he hasn't even finished his sentence, and she's already turning in the direction of the Dungeons — leaves him with a squeeze of his shoulder.

Her feet take her to the false wall instinctively, her infamous knock echoing

down the corridor. They all know it by now.

But this time it's...different.

This time, when Blaise finds her at the door, there's no air of disinterest. No mocking smile. No sense of unwelcome as she steps past him into the Slytherin common room.

She recognizes most of the students spread out across the room, now. Ones she never knew the names of before. Probably because she's defended more than half of them.

And this time, as their eyes follow her to the corner of the leather sofa she always takes, she doesn't feel like a target. Her eyes stumble on Adrian Pucey as she takes her seat. At first she thinks it's a trick of the light.

But no. That's a nod she saw. A nod from him.

She blinks back at him for too many seconds, stunned. Finally forces herself to tip her head in return. Adrian looks back down at his book like nothing happened — but her world is tipping on its axis. Keeps tipping as Blaise appears in front of her again, holding out a glass of Firewhiskey.

"T-Thank you," she says, a little dazed as she takes it.

"*Acta non verba*," is his response.

Her brows bunch together. For a moment, she thinks he's offering a sort of cryptic comment on the situation. *Deeds, not words*, the Latin means. She knows that much.

But then he says, "It's the password."

And when she blinks stupidly up at him, he juts his head at the door she just came through.

"We had it changed this morning." His lip curves up, just barely on one side. A half-smile. "Don't need to knock anymore."

He leaves her open-mouthed in his wake as he heads up the stairs to the dormitories. And she literally has to sit back — stares at her lap and takes a moment to fully grasp it.

*Trust*, she finally realizes. *It's trust*.

The same trust she now has for them. All of them. A trust that allows her to

nearly drift off half an hour later — on *their* couch, in *their* territory. But her eyes have barely slipped shut when the false wall gives way again.

She jerks up, head whipping to the entryway. And there he is.

Hermione jumps to her feet. The noises of the common room cut off abruptly, all eyes lifting to the two of them.

His clothes are dirty. Torn. Somehow more noticeable now than they were in the cage. His black eye still hasn't fully healed. But he's here. *He's here*.

She's barely formed a smile when she puts together the expression on his face.

He's furious.

She can see it — not just in his eyes or in the set of his jaw, but in the way his chest heaves up and down with every breath.

A few unwitting Slytherins actually stand up to greet him, only backing off when they see his face. And all the while, he doesn't take his piercing eyes off her.

She doesn't dare move. Doesn't speak.

Not until he grits out, "Can I have a word?" and juts his chin over his shoulder, voice tight.

It's probably unwise to go anywhere with him right now. But she hasn't seen him in weeks without the separation of bars between them, and the concept of being face to face again eventually wins her over.

She follows him out, the silence of the common room dull and hollow in their wake.

Malfoy doesn't look back even once as he leads her through the corridors. A few students still milling about in the late afternoon actually jump upon seeing him, either because of his state or because they never expected him back.

She realizes she should be nervous — perhaps even afraid — as he stalks out into the courtyard, shadow long and thin in the dying light. There are only a handful of reasons they'd need so much seclusion. She doesn't stop though. Not as he continues down the hill and further still to the steps that lead to the boathouse. The memories that flood through her at the sight of it make her breath hitch, but she doesn't say a word. Only follows in silence the whole way down