

White spots cloud her vision, the thin stream of oxygen dwindling as she sucks it down greedily — waning with each ounce of pressure he adds.

“He won’t,” says a calm voice, almost inaudible amidst the chaos. “He can’t.” Dawlish is looming over them, expression that of a man conducting an experiment. “He knows nothing of anything except what *I* want. The rest is a blank slate.”

“Granger — Granger, it’s the Imperius — it’s not him, it’s —”

“*Quiet.*”

He’s kicked Theo, from the sound of it — but Hermione can’t pry her eyes away from the cold face above her, even as hard lines grow soft and lights grow dim.

“*Please,*” she whispers again, raw and ragged. All the blood is trapped in her head.

“It’s pointless,” says Dawlish. “He won’t stop. You of all people should know, Miss Granger. Aren’t you the brightest witch of your age?” He huffs a laugh. “Only the incredibly strong-willed can resist the Imperius Curse. Immensely powerful wizards, like your friend Potter perhaps. Ones as weak as this don’t stand a chance.”

She has less than a minute to live. There’s no air in her lungs — no strength in her veins.

“By the time your Order arrives, you’ll be cold and stiff. Along with all the others. We will be gone, and do you know who they’ll find standing in the middle of it all? Covered in your blood?”

Whatever Dawlish says next fades away, drowned out by the ringing in her ears. Tears pool in her eyes, washing out what little vision she has left until she can’t see his face. But it isn’t his face she’d be seeing. It hardly matters.

Theo’s shouts seem faint and far away.

“*Hear my voice! Come back! Open your eyes and look at her! Look at who she is — see her! That’s Hermione! That’s Hermione!*”

Not long after, he fades away too, and then it’s only the unforgiving pressure on her throat and the blurry outline above her. Mercifully, the pain starts to

between them?

“Well, Granger, if you *must* know —” he all but hisses, and it takes everything in her not to squeeze her eyes shut. Not to yank that sheet up and over herself and *hide.* — I used to imagine you.”

Her expectations fly out the window. “What?”

Draco shifts with discomfort, glancing down at the sheets in favor of looking at her and tugging on a stray thread. “In Third Year,” he continues, tone still sharp and somewhat indignant. “Father was suddenly around less. Busy with meetings — I’m sure you know what sort. I suddenly didn’t have to spend nearly as much time trying to best Saint Potter, because I knew I wouldn’t get a scathing letter every time his marks were half a point better than mine.”

She feels a stab of something. Guilt? She thinks he’d murder her if he knew it was sympathy, judging by the way he shoves past the subject.

“I had time on my hands that I’d never had before, and lots of space in my head he wasn’t taking up any longer.” A quick glance her way, then back at the seam of the sheet he’s unraveling. “I was thirteen,” he says with a shrug. “I didn’t know what was wrong with me. I just knew I constantly felt like I had to sneak off to broom cupboards and shove a hand down my trousers.”

She feels herself blush. And that’s where he sort of loses it.

His tone comes out bitter and biting and increasingly furious, and it in no way aligns with anything he’s saying.

“I felt like I lost all self-control. I was so ashamed of it, but it was also the only thing I ever wanted to do. And Merlin fucking knows I’d never seen anything as pretty as you.”

Her breath catches. He hardly seems to notice.

“You in those fucking ridiculous Muggle jeans, with your monstrous hair and your gorgeous little mouth. Fuck, I hated how it always used to be you. I’d lie right fucking here —” He slaps the mattress, and her pulse jumps. “— and do my level best to picture Pansy in one of her absurdly short skirts, or Johnson that time I saw her changing after Quidditch practice, and I would just...” He trails off, squaring his jaw and gritting his teeth as he makes the lewd up-and-down

motion with his hand in favor of saying it. Then his eyes jump to hers, quick and unexpected. Like the crack of a whip. “But *every fucking time* my mind would just — just fucking implode, and one second it’d be Pansy up against the wall and the next it’d be those fucking eyes.” He points at her. An accusation. “That fucking hair. These hands.” He reaches out and yanks on one, making her gasp before he lets it drop. “One second it’s Pansy, and the next it’s you I’m on my knees for, and it’s your cunt I can taste — though I swear I never imagined you’d taste quite like you do, *fucking hell* — and you just fucking blindsided me.”

It’s like one of his diary entries. Incessant, furious rambling he can’t seem to stop.

“I was supposed to find you repulsive. I was supposed to think of you like vermin, and yet there I fucking am, pumping myself fucking dry night after night, wishing I knew what you felt like on the inside. Wondering if Wesley fucking knew and wanting to be fucking sick. And to make matters worse, I still *fucking hated* you. I thought I was losing my mind, because every time I looked at you — with that superior little tilt of those fucking hips, and those ridiculous fucking eyebrows — I could somehow simultaneously picture making you writhe under me and kicking your fucking teeth in. Because I didn’t know you. I knew absolutely fuck-all about you except that your blood was supposed to be filthy and that your eyes made my mouth water.”

Her cheeks are wet. She hardly knows.

“And now look at me.” He spreads his arms wide and gives a defeated, incredulous sort of huff. “Now, I *do* know you, and now I’m fucking hopeless. Now I don’t lose sleep over missions, or Marks, or my fucking father — I lose sleep over *you*. Wondering what happens to *you* if I ever fuck up again. If I’m already fucking things up just by being involved. You — you sit there after barging your way into my head, into my fucking bloodstream — *trespassing* — and you want to hear what I *think*? You want me to tell you you’re pretty? So bloody beautiful I want to gouge my fucking eyes out? You want to hear that? After you took this stupid fucking organ out of my chest with your little fist and you just —” He gathers his own hand into a fist. “— just fucking *squeezed* until it looked fit to

*It looks the same as it did before, she thinks, drunk with pain. It takes a good while to get her muscles to work enough to turn her head.*

Pansy has knocked Draco clean off his feet, the two of them struggling — him to push her away and her to pin his wand arm down.

“—the *fuck* are you doing? What the *fuck*?” Pansy’s screaming, and when she manages to kneel on his elbow, she lands an unforgiving punch with her free hand.

Hermione watches as though through a screen. Distant. Not all there. She can feel the drool slipping out the corner of her mouth.

Dawlish orders two of his Aurors to pull Pansy off of him, but Pansy’s reflexes are sharp, and she stuns them both with Draco’s wand in a millisecond. It’s as this happens that Hermione feels the faintest tug at her arm, and it frees her momentarily from her daze.

She tilts her head the other way.

Theo is dragging himself towards her, pale and bloody, eyes half-lidded. He gathers her sleeve in his fist and pulls her limp body closer, voice in shreds, “Granger...Granger, he’s — Draco, he’s —”

The next grip that finds her isn’t gentle, as Theo’s was. The cold clamp of a hand on her ankle, yanking her back. She screams, her bones still freshly broken in her mind, and when her head lolls forward she finds Draco on all fours, dragging her to him with that same blank stare.

Pansy has his wand, busy warding off the next wave of Aurors. Their spells crackle through the room around them, rebounding off of walls. Draco hardly seems to notice.

“Draco! Listen to me!” Theo is shouting, loud and hoarse. “Hear my voice! *Listen to me!*”

He doesn’t stop. Doesn’t falter. Only lurches forward to seize her throat in a vise, those beautiful grey eyes empty. There’s not a fragment of him left in them.

“Please...” she gasps out, clutching at his wrist with both hands, legs kicking out helplessly.

“*Draco!*” Theo shouts again. “Stop!”

I'd feel terribly guilty otherwise, you see."

Her heart rate spikes in her chest, eyes flitting around, seeking out threats. But she holds all the cards. She has the advantage. It doesn't make any sense.

"I need the Ministry — the whole of the Wizarding World, for that matter — to recognize the danger they pose. They have to see the cost of such blind forgiveness." Dawlish takes one more step. "This will prove that they aren't worth saving. That they're beyond our help. And I'm sorry, my dear Hermione Granger, but it's you — darling of the Wizarding World, champion of the downtrodden and the unworthy, our *golden girl* — it's you who'll tip the scales."

Her brows draw in tight, wand faltering, and in the same instant Dawlish tilts his gaze towards Draco.

"Do it."

She can only process the next few moments in pieces. The swish of Draco's black robes as he steps in front of her. The sweat on his brow — the only aspect of him that isn't stiff and emotionless. The black tip of his wand as he points it between her eyes.

"Crucio."

The world whites out and the agony floods in. She barely registers the crack of her skull against the marble floor as she falls. All she can comprehend is pain.

Her bones fracture — heal themselves, then fracture again. Her skin is peeled away, layer by layer. A fist squeezes her stomach, her lungs, her heart, until they burst. And she can't help but scream, even when each sound she makes feels like shards of glass slicing open her throat.

Though none of it hurts quite so much as the sight of his face, angled over her — gazing down without feeling. She wishes to die, then and there, if only to never see his eyes like that again.

Time disintegrates. She has no idea how long he tortures her.

Later, she learns it was no more than twenty seconds. The onslaught of pain cuts off with the sound of a heavy thud. Hermione gasps up at the ceiling, blurry to her eyes, her nerves crackling like she's been electrocuted.

burst? After I begged you not to stand between me and whatever consequences I fucking earned? After I told you I couldn't stand to have one more fucking thing weighing on my conscience? After all this fucking pain you put me through, you want to hear what I *think*?"

He's panting when he finishes, hand still pulled tight in a bloodless fist between them. And she slaps the tears off her cheeks as quickly as she can, even as she knows he's already seen.

For a moment, they do absolutely nothing. For a moment, it feels like nothing can be done.

But nothing is not an option.

"Pain?" she asks again, stupidly, into the raw silence.

"Yes," he breathes. "Pain."

She has to do it now — before she allows herself to process what she's just heard and utterly break down.

So she sniffs back the residual tears and screws up her courage, walking forward on her palms until they bracket his thighs beneath the sheets. "Alright," she says and starts to tug them down from around his waist.

"What are you doing?" Gone is the furious vitriol of moments ago, and now he's the one who sounds nervous.

"Tell me if this is pain."

His hand shackles her wrist before she can slide the sheet down those last critical inches past his hipbones, the smack of it loud in her ears. When she glances up at him, a question in her eyes, he looks suddenly young. Boyish. Frightened and unsure.

She quirks a gentle brow, leaving the question unspoken.

And he puffs out a breath he must've been holding for a while. "Can you — can you blame me for expecting you to bite?"

That stabbing pain in her chest swells, and her hand shakes a little as she places it on top of his. "No," she says, slipping her fingers beneath his until they loosen and free her wrist. "But I won't."

His fingertips linger on her skin. It takes him a long time to fully let go, and

when he does she's quick to pull the sheet down the rest of the way. Before either of them can change their minds.

And even though at times it feels like she's been intimate with him in every possible way there is, this is different. She's never been in control like this, and it's so brutally obvious how much that scares him.

He's still hard. Skin still as silky as it ever was when she dared to touch him before, but from the way he sucks the air in through his teeth as she wraps her fingers around him, it's clear they're both in new territory.

He must be able to feel her trembling. She can certainly feel his. And she figures she may as well say it out loud, even though she's sure he already knows.

"I've never done this before." Glancing up at him as she manages a gentle stroke, up and down, she clears her throat and says the words she's always hated to say. "But I'll try my best."

In her mind, if the best isn't the end result, then she never really tried at all. But she's not sure that really applies in this situation. It doesn't matter, though. Before she can properly overthink it, he responds in a quiet voice and changes everything.

"I wouldn't know the difference."

She can't stop the way her eyes pop wide. The way she blinks vacantly up at him for too many seconds. "You've never...?"

"No." And she can tell by his guarded eyes, he thinks she's going to judge. Make assumptions.

There's no way for him to know how that ripple of selfish pleasure rides up her spine. Not until the small, coy smile splits her face — and even then, perhaps he thinks she's mocking him.

So she says exactly what she's thinking, and then forbids herself to stall any longer.

"Something of yours for me to take, then. I think that's more than fair." She dips her head, her lips only a hair's breadth away. "Don't you?"

"I—"

She tastes him. Lets her tongue glide up his smooth, thick length. Slow.

aim back to Dawlish.

"I wish you understood," he sighs.

"There's nothing to understand."

"How could you know if you never stop to listen?" Dawlish must expect there's a silencing charm on the tip of her tongue, but he continues none the less. "The lot of us," he says, gesturing around at his Aurors, "we were shamed after the fall of the Ministry. Even more so after the war. Endless accusations. 'Why didn't we stop it? Why didn't we see it coming?'"

He takes a step forward, only pausing when Hermione brandishes her wand in warning.

"I have that answer now," he says. "Our lenience is our downfall. We failed once before to cut the head off the snake. Failed to do away with every semblance of the Dark Lord's following the first time he fell from power. Miss Granger...don't let us make the same mistake again. You have the power. Right now, you can decide."

"Decide?" she snaps. "Decide *what*? That my former classmates deserve a death sentence? That no one can change?"

"No one does," says Dawlish, taking another step forward.

"Stop moving."

He holds up his hands in surrender and goes still again, but he doesn't stop speaking. "Does it mean anything to you that you were their only character witness?" he asks. "Did you even stop to think why it was so easy to take them from the castle?"

Hermione's hand has begun to sweat around the base of her wand.

"No one noticed. A Glamour here, a Glamour there — no one stopped to give it a second look. We led them out right under their noses. Because no one cares, Miss Granger. Don't you see?" He sweeps his hands out, encompassing Draco, Theo and Pansy in one. "They aren't even worth it."

Hermione hisses out a breath through her teeth, eyes tightening. "We're done talking."

"No," he says casually. "We're not. I just want to be sure you understand first."

Pansy's already looking at her when she glances sideways. The same expression passes between them.

*This can't be right.*

But sure enough, an Auror begins casting severing charms on Narcissa Malfoy's bonds. Two others take an arm of Theo's each, dragging him forward despite Pansy's sharp intake of breath. They leave him at her feet, and Pansy drops to his side instantly.

Hermione doesn't blame her. But now she's alone on the offensive.

"Finite," another Auror calls loudly, and Draco's posture slackens, immobilizing charm falling away.

Hermione risks a glance, finding his expression a mask — tightly guarded. He shoots a look at Dawlish.

"Go on. Go to her," he says.

*This is all wrong.*

Draco doesn't put his back to them as he steps toward her, movements slow and careful. She hooks her finger in the fabric of his sleeve as soon as he's close enough — a movement so instinctive and desperate, she hopes Dawlish doesn't see.

"Are you hurt?" she asks him under her breath.

His voice is stiff. Without emotion. "No."

Hermione swallows the knot in her throat. Her wand arm is still trained on Dawlish, but now with Draco at her side it doesn't shake quite as much.

Dawlish hasn't moved. Hasn't given any order to attack. He's letting Narcissa Malfoy rub out her sore wrists and step away from the chair by the hearth.

At Hermione's feet, Pansy is murmuring softly to Theo, face buried in his neck. The extent of his injuries is unclear.

"Where are the others?" she forces out after a long while, cold suspicion sliding around in her gut.

"Downstairs," says Dawlish. "We'll have them sent up."

With a snap of his fingers, an Auror strides out a side door. Hermione momentarily jerks her wand in his direction, but he's gone too quickly. She shifts

Experimental. But from the way his spine lurches up off the bed — the way he gasps — it's like she's burned him. Hermione waits with the flat of her tongue against the head, allowing him a moment to ball the sheets beneath him into fists. Then she decides she was too distracted on the first go to get a true sense of how he tastes, so she does it again.

He groans — loud enough to give her a real appreciation for his silencing charms — and she closes her eyes to focus. There's salt and musk and a faint sweetness she never expected. It has her licking a third, long stripe upward before she even realizes, opening her mouth wider this time.

And when she reaches the head, spurred on by the shifting of his hips, she gathers a deep breath and takes him into her mouth.

It's abruptly and abundantly clear that nothing the girls ever said on those late nights in the dormitory was accurate.

Oral sex is a *privilege*.

She knows that in the instant he lets loose a guttural, "Fuck," and tangles lazy fingers into her hair. And she commits herself to the intimidating task of making his first time unforgettable. Goes into it with the unmasked intent to ruin him for anyone else, ever.

And then it's just a fever of sound. His labored, disbelieving breaths and profane, pleading whimpers — the wet, almost grotesque slurps of her mouth and tongue as she bobs her head up and down his length until her jaw aches — the quiet rustle of her hair as he tugs it free of the conjured tie, so he can gather it into his fist instead — the desperate choke in the back of her throat as she gags when he loses control, thrusting his hips against her face — the silent drip of sweat down her temples — those soft, little encouragements he gives that she'll remember for the rest of her life.

Because she's willing to bet Draco Malfoy has never uttered the word *'sweet-heart'* in his life. And yet —

"Fuck — like that, sweetheart — yes — fuck — just like that. Don't — don't stop."

God, the way he *stutters*. It's side of him she's never seen.

"Pl-please — please, I'm — fuck — fuck, I'm begging you. I h-have — I have to. Please — please. Let me. *Please.*"

And for some reason it doesn't occur to her what he's asking for until she feels the warmth as he comes down the back of her throat, bitter salt splashing onto the edges of her tongue. She wills herself not to choke — to wait to breathe. Inhales through the nose and focuses instead on how beautiful he sounds, committing each of those desperate gasps and ragged groans to memory.

And when at last he pulls free of her mouth, panting, she makes good on a promise to herself and meets his gaze head-on as she swallows. Allows one stray drop to leak out between her lips before swiping it up with her thumb and licking it away. His eyes flash at the sight of it.

"Was that pain?" she asks, voice more calm than she could've hoped for.

A heavy breath blasts from his throat.

"Of a sort you can't even imagine."

*February 23rd, 1999*

THE SOOT-STAINED LETTER DRACO FINDS ON HIS SILL. THE NEXT MORNING IS FROM THEO, AND IT'S ADDRESSED TO HER.

*Franger,*

*Maybe you're all out of lovers, but I thought I'd try for one more. I need to see her, and her probation doesn't allow for it without an escort.*

*Bring Pansy to me. Please.*

*Theo*

expression wan and hair disheveled, sweat dripping down the sides of her face. It's Theo, undoubtedly the source of the blood, lying on his side on the floor, nowhere near conscious.

It's Draco, standing stiff on his own two feet, held in place by immobilizing charms and dressed head to toe in black — traditional Death Eater robes.

His eyes find her fast. The only movement he can make. And where she thought she'd see fire — fury and frustration — she sees a stone wall.

And perhaps that's worse.

Pansy finds her words first. "*What is this?*"

Dawlish turns from the hearth, facing them fully. "Did we get it wrong?" he asks, tone intentionally light. "These two, wasn't it?" He gestures from Theo to Pansy. "Him for you." Now he points at Draco, then at Hermione. "And him for you." A humorless smile cracks his face. "Or perhaps it's the other way around."

Hermione bites down on the white hot rage she feels lash at the back of her throat — directs the tip of her wand at Dawlish instead.

When her voice comes at last, she can only be grateful it's not ragged. "Whatever this is, it's over."

"Soon," agrees Dawlish, unfazed.

"Release them," she demands. It's difficult to hide the way her wrist is shaking. Something is wrong about this. "All of them. Now."

Dawlish assesses them for a moment, eyes swooping back and forth between herself and Pansy like a lazy pendulum.

His Aurors are arranged strangely. Not in convenient positions to put up a good defense. Sort of clustered together — no perimeter, no vantage points. The only ones even remotely spread out have their wands trained on Draco, keeping him motionless.

Hermione doesn't dare let her eyes flit to him again. She'll lose all focus.

"*Now,*" she snaps into the silence.

"Do as she says," orders Dawlish, relaxing back against the mantle once more.

*What?*

make a sound, but Pansy's movements are so dexterous — so like a cat — that Hermione wonders how many times she's had to do this.

When they reach the end of the corridor, it proves hard to turn the corner. Hermione knows next to nothing about the layout of Malfoy Manor, but every step could be a step closer to the dining room. To that expanse of floor she's not sure she could handle seeing again. Bile rises up in her throat, and she nearly stumbles before Pansy grabs hold of her — a sharp grip on her elbow.

"Steady on, Granger."

"I'm fine," she breathes, but she can feel the way the color's drained out of her face.

Pansy takes her word for it either way. They move on. Past several more corridors and a winding staircase, not grand enough to be the entrance hall but still incredibly lavish.

All the shutters have been closed, blocking out the daylight. The gleam of their wands will reveal them long before they reach anyone.

Hermione tries to settle her stomach by running through her best hexes in her head. Silently rolling the shapes of them across her tongue. She tells herself she'll cast at the slightest movement, the faintest sound — no hesitation.

The trail of blood begins to taper off as it rounds another corner. She and Pansy exchange a look. Her grip tightens on her wand, rib throbbing with each breath.

And they turn the corner, flanking one another, wands out.

"Well that took ages," says a voice.

Her eyes have to adjust. There's light in this room, bright from the fire at the hearth.

But the moment she can properly take it in, she's swallowing back a gag, joints locking in place. Somehow she knew it would be the dining room.

And yet it's not that. It's several things at once.

It's Dawlish, leaning casually against the mantle, surrounded by fellow corrupt Aurors — other *Crusaders*, as he calls them.

It's Narcissa Malfoy, bound to the chair beside him, too close to the fire,



*February 23rd, 1999*

"STAY."

She's got her back to him, blouse halfway buttoned, wondering if anyone at the Ministry will notice she's wearing the same clothes as yesterday — and it's so quiet she's not even sure he really said it.

"What?" she asks in a casual voice, hoping he didn't and glancing halfway over her shoulder.

"Stay," he says again, a little louder — a little more sure of it. He's leaning back against the headboard, green sheets still tangled up beneath him, lazily swaying his propped knee back and forth.

She abandons the buttons and turns fully to face him. "I don't understand." Draco huffs and swings his legs sideways to sit at the edge of the mattress. She's shocked how natural a movement it is to step between his knees when he reaches for her — to let his hands slide up the backs of her thighs.

"You should stay," he murmurs, resting his forehead against her ribs. It's a simple, subtle thing, and yet the blossom of heat it sends through her is anything but.

"Pansy and Theo," she says, more a reminder to herself. Already, her fingers are carding through his hair — still so surprising in its softness — and she wants nothing more than to let his mouth trail lower and lower on the path it's already started.

But Theo's letter still sits on the nightstand in her periphery.

"They can wait," says Draco, nuzzling at the space above her navel as he starts to untuck her blouse from her skirt. He's not often like this. And she wants to close her eyes and let her head drop back, but she stills his hands instead.

"I get the feeling he wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

Draco sighs, warming her skin with it briefly before he leans back. "That's what you get when you hang other people's clothes in public, or whatever the Muggles say."

"Is that what you call saving someone's life? Because that's what I did. And it's dirty laundry, by the way, not—"

He reaches up and covers her mouth almost like it's an instinct. She raises an eyebrow at him, but when he drags the pad of his forefinger down along her bottom lip, she doesn't think. Just opens her mouth and sucks on it gently.

Draco hisses out a breath and tugs her into his lap in one fluid movement. "You have to stay," he growls, mouth sweeping forward to trace the column of her throat — teeth grazing her pulse point and biting down.

Hermione allows herself a small moment of weakness. Figures she's earned it. She lets her head loll forward onto the smooth, warm curve of his shoulder, small gasp breaking on a moan when he flattens his tongue and laves it slowly across the expanse between her collarbone and her ear.

"I don't trust it when you're anywhere else," he whispers, nibbling on the lobe and making her shiver. "As it is, you're the one who asked to be taken to my bed. And I think I like the look of you in it."

She's helpless — can't *not* taste him, buried in the crook of his neck as she is, smelling his clean sweat; his sweet, smoky scent, like damp morning earth. She finds herself kissing along the cords of muscle of his throat — can almost feel the blood rush through his veins when his breath hitches and his grip tightens on her waist.

"Stay," he demands again against the shell of her ear. His fingers slide beneath the hem of her skirt, stretched tight where she straddles him. "Stay, and I can make you come. I'll make you come so hard, Granger, I promise." His teeth drag on her earlobe just as the warmth of his palm settles between her legs. "I want to taste you again. I want to eat you."

She huffs out another gasp against his skin, feeling the blush bleed out across her face. She'll never know how he says things like that with such confidence —



February 23rd, 1999

THE PORTKEY'S MAGIC IS UNREFINED AND HAPHAZARD, YANKING THEM THROUGH TOO VIOLENTLY TO PLANT THEIR FEET. She hits cold stone fast and hard.

"Fucking hell," spits Pansy from somewhere off to the side. Hermione gathers up her limbs, clutching at the rib she might've bruised and trying to hold her wand steady.

The hallway is dark.

"Lumos."

Light unfolds across marble walls and arched ceilings, portraits in obsidian frames lining the expanse.

*Oh god*, she thinks, breath catching painfully in her chest. *Not here.*

"Why are we at the Manor?" Pansy asks under her breath, adding to the light with her own wand. She must've spent time here as a child.

"I don't know."

They get to their feet at the same time, almost instinctively standing back to back and turning in a circle. The corridor is empty. Empty save a small, dark trail of what looks like blood, glinting in their wand light.

Hermione glances over her shoulder at Pansy. She's bleeding where she hit her head upon arrival — a slow trickle down from her temple.

"This isn't yours, is it?" Hermione gestures to the trail.

It's the sort of obvious question Pansy might've marked at not so long ago, but now the shake of her head is sober.

"Let's go."

They follow the blood. Slow, careful, deathly silent steps. Neither of them



She doesn't do Pansy the dishonor of asking whether she'll stay behind. She's safer here and they both know it.

But the gargoyle leads her to Theo, and she reached for it like something lost and precious. Hermione knows that feeling too well.

No, she only murmurs, "*Expecto Patronum*," waiting a moment for the wispy blue otter to take full form.

Pansy's brows have drawn together.

"Deliver this message," Hermione tells it. "Harry — Dawlish has taken them all. If I don't go now, they'll be killed. I am not asking you to fight — I could never ask that of you again — but please alert the Order. If they're willing to send aid, follow my Patronus to the portkey." She stops. Chokes on the word *goodbye* and never gets it out. "Go," she says instead, and the otter swims off obediently.

Pansy is staring at her.

"Are you ready?" Hermione asks, aggressively wiping away a few tears.

"I saw what he wrote," says Pansy, voice quiet and inscrutable. "Draco. I read it over your shoulder."

Hermione's tone comes out more cold than she intended. "So?"

"He doesn't want you to go."

She bites down on the back of her tongue. Says again, "So?"

Only Pansy could ask it so bluntly. "So you don't love him?"

A bitter, incredulous laugh bursts from her chest. She sniffs angrily and slaps away one more tear, then tightens her grip on her wand and takes Pansy's wrist.

"If loving him means letting him die, then no. No — I guess I hate him."

She touches her foot to the gargoyle, and they're gone.

so unabashed. How he makes her throb so easily.

"You're being selfish," she says, practically a squeak as he starts to trace the damp seam of her underwear, rocking his fingers back and forth. Smiling into her skin when she bucks against him.

"What, you think this isn't what he wants to do to Pansy?" He tugs her underwear to the side, guiding wet fingers back and forth over her center. Tracing her entrance. "Fucking hell, it's so obvious. Maybe not on Pansy's end, until now. But Nott was always done for when it came to her."

Hermione almost swallows her words when he slides two fingers inside of her. "So you think he loves her too?"

Draco scoffs, pulling away from her neck and taking her chin in his free hand to line their gazes up. "Are you *blind*?" he asks, incredulous, as he runs the tip of his nose against hers. "Haven't you seen the way he looks at her?" He nips at her bottom lip. "Fuck, Granger — you should know that look by now."

Something flutters in her chest — something bright and heady and all-consuming — and then she's kissing him. Sloppily. Drunkenly. Uncontrolled. But he must enjoy it from the rough sound he makes when she presses an insistent tongue into his mouth. His fingers start to pump faster, his hips raising with every thrust like he wishes it wasn't his fingers at all.

And she has more than half a mind to reach for the fasten on his trousers

"We have to stop." Hermione drags herself away from him the way adhesive peels from skin — a process painful and slow. Pulls his hand from between her legs, glistening in such a way she can't help but flush a deeper red. "We...have to stop," she repeats, breathless.

"Says who?" he hisses, nipping at her bottom lip again.

A loudly cleared throat makes them freeze.

"Well, I'd certainly appreciate it," comes the groggy, muffled voice of Zabini from behind his bed curtains. "Unless one of you can fucking remember how to cast a silencing charm. Otherwise I'll have to blind *and* deafen myself to get to breakfast."

Mortified, Hermione starts to right her clothes, trying to pull away, but

Draco keeps her steady in his lap, response as casual as ever.

"I thought voyeurism was one of your things, Blaise. You know. Like that time in Fifth Year, after the quidditch game—"

"Oh, fucking hell, not this again."

"I, for one, remember *vividly*."

"Shove off, Malfoy — fine! Do whatever you want with Granger ten inches from my face. Go for it. I'll just —" His voice becomes severely muffled by something else, but the rest of the sentence sounds vaguely like *"lie here and suffocate."*

Draco grins against Hermione's lips, kissing her once more, slowly, before pulling back. Her cheeks are still burning, and he reaches up to take her face in hand, tsking. "Shy as ever, Granger. When are you going to learn you have no reason to be ashamed?"

She's not sure why she says what she does — it's clear from his eyes, he's only teasing — but maybe she's bitter about being caught yet again with her knickers down, literally. Or maybe she just has no self-control.

"For years, you gave me every reason to be ashamed. Don't you remember? About my teeth, and my hair and my dirty blood."

His face falls slowly, and she wonders whether she's ever going to stop ruining things. Watches anxiously as a muscle works in his jaw, shifting in his lap all the while.

There's too long of a silence. The dormitory's too quiet. And it's so uncomfortable, she's halfway considering taking it back by the time he speaks.

"I regret that."

She blinks at him — has no hope of masking her surprise.

"I don't regret a lot of things, but I regret that." His hands have fallen to her waist, toying absently with the buttons on her blouse. "I'm almost as mad at myself as I am at you for believing any of it."

She huffs, but he continues before she can argue.

"You don't have an excuse. You don't." He shakes his head and shrugs, then dips forward to place another open-mouthed kiss on her throat, setting her even

An involuntary noise forces its way out of her — not unlike a hurt animal. It takes what feels like an age to notice Pansy, hovering just behind her.

"Are we going?" she asks, voice tense.

Hermione allows herself one more moment of stillness, then lets the journal slide out of her fingers.

"Yes," she says. A croak that makes her clear her throat. "We're going."

"Please tell me you have some idea where."

She nods mutely, turning to face Pansy. "I'm sure of it."



Just as it was when they left the Ministry, they don't stop to consider. Don't stop to sort out details, even when perhaps they should. They don't stop to assist the traumatized younger students. Don't stop to ask for help or grab supplies. Hermione doesn't go near Gryffindor.

She borrows a pair of jeans from Pansy, altering them to fit so she can run, and that's the end of it.

They leave the castle, out through the side corridor that leads towards the Quidditch pitch. She paced that spot where she saw the fissure in the wards so many times that her feet find it instinctively.

Pansy sounds confused, but not quite doubtful. "Here?"

"I'm sure of it," she says again. Speaks even if Pansy doesn't fully understand, just to get the words out. "They prepared for this. Long in advance. If the trials didn't go how they planned, they'd take matters into their own hands. And they have." She swallows thickly, then swipes her wand through the air just past the ward's border. "*Revelio*."

The portkey makes itself known instantly, hidden in such a way she's certain they wanted it found. A stone lawn ornament in the shape of a gargoye.

The impatience in Pansy's eyes is wild and panicked. She reaches for it instantly, no hesitation — the same way she tortured the guard — but Hermione grabs her wrist.

"Just one last thing."

Mother and Father set the precedent for what I thought would be my future. Their marriage was the sort I was most likely to have. Very little by way of affection. Hardly a touch, only when necessary. Never in my life have I seen my father kiss my mother. Never on the lips. Always just a cold kiss on the cheek, if anything at all. There's a permanent boundary between them. It's more of a contract than a marriage, really.

I can't fathom a moment in which my father would watch my mother the way I watch Grangers now. I see every detail, every twitch, every curl out of place. I watch her eyes give her away — you can see right through them. See her thoughts racing. I know those eyes. I know those hands. Those lips. Those ankles and feet.

I never expected to know someone.

More than that, I never expected anyone to know me — and certainly not to know me better.

She's infuriating in her perception. The way she peels me back and finds what she's looking for.

And fuck if I wouldn't let her threaten me to the ends of the Earth.

I —

Hermione's next breath lodges in her throat, trapped like the tears in her eyes at the splotch of ink on the page where he stopped writing.

The scribble below it is so unlike him. Such a departure from his sloping, lazy script. Thin and threadbare and written so fast it's nearly illegible.

*If you love me don't come for me.*

further off balance. "How could you let such a stupid, scared, spineless little boy make you feel inferior? You? You. There's no excuse."

She breathes out slowly into the silence that follows, staring over his shoulder at the bedsheet. But before she's even halfway constructed an adequate response, she's beaten to it.

"Rubbish apology, mate."

"Fuck you," Draco tosses offhandedly at Zabini's bunk.

"It's an awful apology," she echoes, even as the corner of her lip quirks up. "You should work on it."

"He won't."

"Fuck you *and* your mother." But just as he turns, likely to lob something at Blaise's bed curtains, Hermione slides off his lap. It steals back his focus, and she can't deny the way her throat closes up a bit when she sees him grapple for her hand.

"Where do you think you're going?"

She allows herself to smile at him — to steal one more kiss before she sets about fixing all the damage he's just done. "I'll be an hour. Two, at the most."

Draco makes a show of rolling his eyes, sliding back into his languid position against the headboard. But she's just started retucking her blouse when the shock of purple makes her go still.

She's not sure how he got it back.

He props the journal on his kneecap and sets about his lazy scrawl, pretending not to notice the way she's staring at him.

"How did you —"

"Apparently it's no longer evidence." He looks up at her, face deceptively blank. Threads his fingers through the mussed hair she's responsible for and drags it back out of his face. "In their eyes, I have no more excuses not to send in entries. They gave it back."

"Oh." She turns away. Finishes with the blouse and then starts to hunt around for her stockings, all the while trying to fill the silence. "You know, I still have no idea how it got entered into evidence in the first place. I had it last, and I

*certainly* wasn't planning on using it."

"Mm," he hums casually. "Suppose Smith is less of a tit than I thought after all."

She stops again and glances up at him, halfway crouched by the foot of the bed where her stockings lay tangled up. "What?"

"Well, to be honest, I thought he'd flick it up. Thought even an intelligent person would have trouble nicking something off you." Draco jolts a brow at her over the journal's corner. "You should keep a better eye on your things, Granger."

She can't help the way she blinks vacantly for a moment. The slowness of her spine as she straightens up. And when her voice does come out, it's softer than she'd like.

"You...had him take it?" She clears her throat. "Had — had *Zacharias* take it?"

He just shrugs, still writing. "Figured it was a safe bet. Someone who already hated you."

It takes her a few seconds to realize she's drawn her wand. She thinks she might notice in the same instant he does, the look in his eyes shifting just a fraction as he finds the tip of it aimed at his nose.

And there's something in his manner that's infuriating to her. In the calm that radiates from him, the steadiness in his breathing. Even she's not sure she could actually hex him in this moment, but a part of her wants him to be afraid of her. Just a little.

"Any idea what you plan to do with that?" he asks in that unbearably dull tone.

"I could swell your eyes shut," she offers quietly. "Or I could turn your muscles to lead. I could do any number of things to you. I could unravel every memory in your brain if I wanted to."

He slides the journal further down his knee so he can see her fully, and still his face doesn't change. She can feel her teeth grinding.

"Seems a bit excessive."

"Are you hurt?" Hermione manages at last.

"Where did they take them?" asks Pansy in the same moment.

The girl blinks tears at them for a few long seconds, then hiccups, "Out the — out the way they came."

"All of them?"

The girl shakes her head and weeps some more. "I don't know. I don't know."

Hermione's on her feet in an instant, racing across the common room, glass crunching under her feet. She finds more First and Second Years scattered about, huddled together in corners or hidden behind sofas. They glance at her with too much hope in their faces, but she has no eyes for them. Only for the winding stairs to the boys' dormitory.

She calls out his name more than once, voice echoing back in the emptiness, because she refuses to acknowledge what she knows.

The dormitory is worse than the common room.

Feathers have exploded across the floor, pillows shredded. Most of the ebony four-posters are cracked or lopsided in some way.

And the one she runs to — the one that matters most — is torn and disheveled and empty, so empty.

Her knees want to give out. She wants to fall to the floor at the foot of the bed — curl into herself and weep uselessly. Nothing would feel better in this moment. But it's the flash of purple that stops her.

His journal remains, half hidden by tattered sheets and the goose down of a pillow. She slips it free of the mess with a trembling hand, and it falls open to a dog-eared page. This morning's entry.

*February 23rd, 1999*

*Diary,*

*Let's just say there are certain things I never expected for myself in life. Strange, inconsequential little things — at least I thought — that just weren't in the cards.*

and they've only just reached the archway past the greenhouses. Nothing but their staggered breathing and uneven footfalls disturb the otherwise quiet Hogwarts morning. Classes won't start for an hour.

Classes couldn't matter less.

"What's the quickest way to the Dungeons?" Hermione gasps out. Pansy would know better.

"Through here!"

They cut across a side corridor and down a curved flight of stairs, shadows darting through the torchlight. These may be the first words they've exchanged since Disapparating from the Ministry — nothing needed discussing. She's never felt more certain she and Pansy are on the same page.

"In a hurry this morning, are we?" muses someone near the start of the Dungeons corridor, and Hermione vaguely puts together that it's Slughorn, a mild humor in his voice. How could he know? How could he see that her hands are shaking? That her heart is in her throat?

When they reach Slytherin's disguised entrance and Hermione blurts out, "*Acta non verba*," Pansy barely bats an eyelash. There's no side glance. No question in her eyes. And the two of them seem to collectively hold their breath in the moment before they pass through the wall.

Hermione almost trips — her foot catches on the crumpled form of a First Year. She's curled into a ball right beside the entrance, crying and threading her fingers into her hair.

And just beyond her lies the Slytherin common room, in shambles.

The walls are stained with black splorches from hexes gone astray. Side tables and chairs have been upended, lamps shattered. Papers are scattered about, and lost wands litter the floor. The tears in the dark curtains have the glow of the Black Lake casting eerie, jagged shadows over everything.

"They made me," the girl on the floor whimpers.

Pansy, to her credit, is much quicker to drop to the girl's side than Hermione. "They made me," she snuffles again, frightened eyes flashing between the two of them. "They forced me to give them the password."

She extends her wand until it's half an inch closer to him.

"After all of that? After everything you saw me putting into it, you were going to sabotage me? Sabotage yourself?" Her wrist is trembling.

Malfoy's expression darkens just a fraction. "I told you to leave it alone. But you wouldn't listen."

"If I hadn't, you'd be *dead*."

"Better me than you," he says simply. Like it's a matter of fact, as basic as the meaning of a rune or the ingredient in a potion.

Her wand arm falters for just a moment before she can stabilize it. "You...I — nothing *happened* to me. I'm — I'm here now, I'm standing right in front of you —"

"Why do you think I want you to stay? I can protect you when you're right in front of me."

The sudden prick of tears behind her eyes is sharp and painful. She resolutely ignores it. Has a point to make.

"*Malfoy*—"

"Granger."

She huffs and presses her wand another inch closer, the tip of it not far from his skin. "Let's make something clear, yes?"

His brow raises slowly in challenge as he folds both hands on top of his knee.

"I am in your life, now. You said I had to earn you, and I think I finally have. I am more than happy to be pulled into your tide."

He smirks the way he always does when he's uncomfortable. "Poetic."

"Be quiet." She waves her wand in his face. "Listen for once in your life. If you want me to stay, you will never undermine me again. You don't get to gamble with your life, or mine, or anyone else's ever again."

He scoffs, of all things, so she takes that last step forward and presses the tip of her wand into the soft flesh beneath his chin. The way she did what seems like a lifetime ago, in that destroyed lavatory.

Malfoy goes silent.

"You told me once that you saw me as a threat," she murmurs, searching his

guarded eyes. “I hope that’s still true.”

He blinks once, slowly. And his tone is much changed when he answers, “It will always be true.”

A rush of strength and pride floods through her at the words. She steps back — lowers her wand and says, “Good,” before turning away. “I’ll be back soon.”



It will never be easy to interpret Pansy, but if the way she keeps tugging on strands of her hair and the way her hands keep twisting in the hem of her skirt are anything to go by, she’s nervous about the way she looks.

“You —” Hermione clears her throat. “You look good.”

Pansy scoffs loudly, immediately making her hands still and glaring at the gold bars of the Ministry lift. “Fuck off, Granger. I don’t need your approval.”

“You realize he’ll probably be covered in dirt —”

“I said *fuck off*.”

Hermione tucks her lips in and nods. “Right then.” Adds a moment later, under her breath, “It’s a nice skirt, though.”

“I know it is.”

“Right.”

The remaining thirty seconds in the lift pass in awkward silence, leaving Hermione to think only on that same feeling she’s had since she knocked on the door to Pansy’s dormitory. The feeling that she’s intruding — on something private and personal. Something uncertain. Intruding, even when she has to be here. She won’t go into the cells with her. She’s decided that already. She’ll wait at the doors, with the guard, for as long as she has to wait. And then she’ll escort Pansy back out. That’ll be the way of it.

It doesn’t matter how curious she is. The guard is that same greasy man she’s encountered almost every time she visited the holding cells in the past, and he doesn’t seem a bit surprised to see her.

“Good morning,” she says, though they are far from friendly. The guard flashes his blackened teeth. “Pansy Parkinson here to see Theodore Nott.” His

her grip on the guard and grinds out, “*Where?*”

And she’s never been more tempted to use an Unforgivable in her life than when he laughs again. Cackles, more like.

“They didn’t tell me. I only know they took the rest straight from the castle. Figured out a way.” His grin is vicious. “All I had to do was knock the Nott boy unconscious.”

What happens next happens so fast she barely registers it, too caught up in his words. One moment, the guard is in her hold and the next he’s on the ground. Crumpled like a wilted weed on the stone floor, writhing and curling into himself.

“*Crucio*,” Pansy hisses again, voice once more cold and detached as another scarlet flash explodes from her wand. The guard’s scream is loud and mangled, and Hermione can only gape down at him — and then to her side, at Pansy.

There is true hatred in her eyes, in that moment. Hermione thought she’d seen it before, but she’s never seen Pansy hate like this. No hesitation. No remorse. No intention whatsoever to stop.

And Hermione knows without a shadow of a doubt, if she hadn’t pulled her away — “*Now — now! We have to go, now!*” — Pansy would’ve gladly tortured the man to death.



Somewhere along the streets of Hogsmeade that morning, an elderly wizard gripes about, telling everyone who crosses his path that he was knocked to the ground and stepped on by “*Hermione Bloody Granger, can you believe it? Not even a ‘beg your pardon!’*”

In the end, it’s only half true. Hermione knocked him down, but it was Pansy who stepped on him — and not a soul in that village could’ve known why they were running. At best, they might’ve seen the desperate panic on their faces, but they couldn’t have known what it is to run like lives depend on it.

And they do. Right now, they do.

Hermione can taste blood in the back of throat from sprinting at this rate,

stumbles forward, dizzy, not realizing at first that it's Pansy's hand that steadies her.

"What is it? What did you see?" Pansy demands instantly, but as soon as Hermione finds her footing, she's lurching forward and seizing the guard by the neck of his robes.

"*Tell me,*" she snaps, jabbing her wand into the hollow of his throat. "The truth. Tell me what Dawlish wanted you to say."

The guard mutters to himself and shifts in her grip, face drawn in tight with disdain. She gives him a rough shake, digging the wand tip in.

"Do you know I once kept a woman in a jar for a year?" she hisses, doing her best to channel all of her fury into her eyes. "Trapped as a cockroach. I could do worse to you."

His expression cracks — fumbles.

"*Tell me!*"

"He's gone!" he hisses, baring his stained teeth. "Taken. Soon they all will be."

"All?" Hermione echoes hoarsely, just as Pansy cuts in.

"Taken *where?*"

And now the guard's grimace warps into a smile. "Famous ones like you," he says, gasping against the press of her wand, "you all think you're invincible. Think just by opening your mouth you'll get whatever you want 'cause you're so much better than the rest of us. But the world doesn't work like that. Not even for Harry Potter's little friends. Everything you did, you did for nothing."

Hermione shakes him again, forcing him to finish.

He wheezes a laugh. "By now, I expect they're all gone, and by tomorrow they'll be dead. Every one you thought you saved with your simpering tales, your silly lies."

"What is he talking about?" Pansy bleats, and all the hard edges of her tone have melted away, replaced by panic. By fear.

Hermione's own fear manifests itself differently. It closes up her lungs like a vise, and for a long moment she's not sure she can speak at all. But she tightens

dull eyes shift to look Pansy up and down, and Hermione can feel her go tense beside her. She clears her throat. "Quickly, if you please."

He doesn't take his eyes away. "Isn't this one on probation?"

"Yes," Hermione snaps, unable to hide the twinge of irritation. "Which is why I am escorting her. Will you let her pass?"

Slowly — like he's got all the time in the world — the guard slides his gaze back to her. "Who's it she's meant to see again?"

She gathers a calming breath and clears her throat again. "Theodore Nott."

And the first sign that something's wrong is in the practiced furrow of the guard's brows. The rehearsed confusion that passes over his face.

Pansy senses it, too, before he says a word. Goes downright rigid at Hermione's side as the guard reaches up to scratch the side of his greasy head. "Nott... he echoes languidly. "Nott. Mm...no. Can't say we have anyone by that name."

Her nails dig into her palms. "Excuse me?"

"I said we don't have anyone by that name. Not anymore."



February 23rd, 1999

IF SHE KNOWS ANYTHING ABOUT WAR, IT'S THE WAY IT PEELS BACK SKIN. Exposes nerve endings. Those months she spent running, fighting — they've had a measured effect on her instincts. She's seen it, taking her reaction time from ten, maybe fifteen seconds to nearly zero. Which is why she should've already drawn her wand.

But she forgets that Pansy has seen war too.

And in that millisecond it takes Hermione to assess the situation, Pansy pins the guard to the bars behind him, dark rowan of her wand jabbing into the fleshy wrinkles of his throat.

*"Where is he?"* she hisses, voice like a knife's edge.

Hermione doesn't move to stop her. Not yet.

The bars are still rattling from the impact, and the guard's beady eyes have popped wide. But an uneasy, nervous smile splits his face as his eyes shift between Pansy's. "You think you can threaten me, girly? I know all about you. I know you're not allowed to use that wand."

Pansy digs the wand so deeply into his throat, it looks like a new eye socket, and his gagging noise is loud — foul.

"I will bleed and gut you right here, you filthy Squib. Try me."

Still, Hermione has no thoughts of intervening. It's only when the guard gives a wheezing chuckle and Pansy rears back, all manner of curses on her lips, that she steps forward and stays her hand.

*"Don't. Don't. We may need him."*

*"Granger —"* she growls, furious gaze still trained on the guard, but Hermione speaks quickly.

*George and Elvi*

"Let me. I can — I know what to do, let me."

Pansy's look of doubt is vastly overshadowed by the stark fear in her eyes. It's a look that says she doesn't have time to second-guess. Doesn't have time to revert back to old ways, old prejudices. Gryffindor this or Gryffindor that. And when she steps away from the guard, leaving him spluttering, Hermione feels that she's trusting her not to be gentle.

She won't be.

*"Legilimens,"* she snaps the moment her wand is out, and the dizzying rush of being pulled into memory reminds her how long it's been since she practiced. The world passes by in faded wisps of grey for long, drowsy moments as the magic settles, faint figures racing across her vision until time slows around the moment in question. The one she's searching for.

The guard is still at his post, only in different clothes — and he's not alone. Hermione grows tight and tense at the sight of Dawlish in his Auror robes, hunched as he passes a folded scrap of parchment to the guard.

*"Tonight,"* he says, voice an echo. *"You know where to leave him. When the trial suspension expires, you'll alert the Wizengamot that the Nott boy has escaped."*

The guard strokes his dirty chin. *"I'm supposed to send reports of prisoner status upstairs every morning. You would be asking me to lie on official forms—"*

*"For which you will be compensated,"* grunts Dawlish.

The pause that follows is excruciating. The guard's lip curls slowly into a grin. *"Say I do, then. What about the girl?"*

Dawlish's hooded eyes narrow a fraction, the way they did when he met her gaze during the trials. *"What about her?"*

*"Well, what if she comes poking about? Barely gone a day without having to open one cell or another for that hint."* The guard picks his teeth. *"What do I do with her?"*

Dawlish seems to consider it for a moment. Then, *"Tell her the truth."*

Not seconds later, Dawlish is turning on his heel, and her spell collapses on itself. Those grey wisps fly past and force her back into her own form. She