

She turns in a slow, bewildered circle, finding nothing beyond more hills. More grass. Completely secluded.

By the time she's gone full circle, facing the cottage again, the front door is open and he's standing there.

He must've heard her apparate.

And it's then that she realizes — two years. *Two years*, and she's never given a single thought to what she should say. It's a testament to just how large a part of her didn't believe she'd ever succeed.

He stares at her from the doorstep, and she stares back, nothing but the wind whistling between them.

He's a shock to the senses. Tall and angular as always, and yet — it's as though he's in color for the first time. Health in his cheeks and in the natural tan spread out over him. It speaks to hours in the sun, just as the subtle, corded lines peeking out from the sleeves and collar of his shirt speak to strength. His hair is longer, curling around the edges of his ears. Hanging in his eyes. A warmer blond now.

He looks alive.

And half of her wants to disappear. Disapparate. Right then and there. Before she destroys something.

But then he speaks, "...Hermione?" And his voice is rich and warm and *missing* — missing from her life for too goddamned long.

She reaches for her wand without thinking, pointing it straight between his eyes.

"I should hex you senseless."

Those. *Those* are her first words to him, fucking hell.

Draco doesn't move an inch, gray eyes slowly sliding from where they've locked on hers to the tip of her wand, then back again.

He doesn't speak.

And now she can't seem to stop.

"*You* — you made a choice that wasn't yours to make. When I didn't have a say. When I couldn't speak for myself. You took that from me and you—"

He opens his mouth.

dissipate. She can feel very little now. Woozy and lightheaded, barely clinging to consciousness, her mind starts to drift.

Weak, she thinks. Such an ugly word. It's not the word she sees when she thinks of his face. His true face. His eyes. The ones she knows.

The war is in his face. Regret and pain and uncertainty in the set of his jaw. Imperfection is woven into the gray of his eyes and fear is in the lines of his brow. All of it she's seen and known. All of it and more.

But there is no weakness in his face. None whatsoever — she's almost certain of it.

And the last part of her alive wants to see it one more time, just to be sure.

She lifts a limp, bloodless hand from its grip on his wrist and lifts it blindly above her. Uses the last of her strength to blink away those tears so she can meet his gaze. Numb fingers find the cold, smooth plane of his cheek, resting there. Memorizing the way it fits against the curve of her palm.

She parts her dry lips, and there's no tone to her words. Only a whisper.

"You are *not* weak."

She knows it without a shadow of a doubt.

Her vision goes dark and her hand falls away. The cool of the marble against her back becomes a distant memory. But in the moment she's ready to let go — of air, of life, of everything — his stone grip on her throat vanishes.

"...Hermione?"

Give in, the darkness urges her. *Let go*.

"No. *No* — no, no, Hermione! *No!*"

She knows that voice.

Let go.

"No! *No!* Hermione, look at me! *Look at me!*"

She knows it.

"*Please!*"

Forever, she'll wonder if she really had the choice to take that breath. To suck the air down into her throat and chase away the dark. In the moment, it doesn't feel like a choice. It feels like he chooses for her.

And her lungs take to it like dry sand to water.

Her chest jerks and her eyes snap wide and she nearly collides with him in her effort to sit up. To chase air. To *breathe*.

The sound he makes is unlike him. Wounded and animal, completely uncontrolled. She doesn't have the chance to see his face. One moment it's buried against her heaving chest and the next it's turned away, his hand grappling for something — skimming desperately across the marble floor.

He finds her wand just as Dawlish puts together what's happened. His growl of frustration is cut short.

“Anada Kedavra.”

It's only when Dawlish falls down lifeless in front of them — only as he's slowly lowering his arm, her wand clutched in his shaking fingers, that she recognizes the voice as Draco's.

Her knees wobble beneath her, and only Theo prevents her from meeting the hard tile floor.

His shadowy form — so raw, so familiar, so permanently imprinted on her eyes — kneels over something not quite in focus, hands working over it. She can't see his face at the angle. Not until he stands and wipes his palms on the sides of what might be jeans — she isn't sure.

The mottled smoke grows clearer then, just before he turns where she can see him. Turns away from — a garden, yes it's a garden. She huffs out a strangled, disbelieving breath, losing all control of her lungs a moment later when his face comes into view.

It all comes rushing to the forefront. Every repressed, buried thing. It narrowly knocks the wind out of her.

And she can't manage a single breath — not a movement, not a sound. Can only watch as he tosses a spade carelessly aside and starts to walk away. The mirage follows him, trailing after as he pulls open a door to what must be his home. He massages the back of his neck and sighs, moving through rooms until he reaches a small kitchen. She's watching him fill a kettle with water when Theo finally speaks.

“Go on, then.”

Ripping her gaze away, she meets his eyes — and he must see all the shock and relief and trepidation mixed across her face.

He nudges her with an elbow, and his tone is casual in a way she didn't know she needed it to be.

“I'll see you when I see you.”

The words are what it takes to make her reach out and close her fist.

The crack of apparation is near deafening to her ears, and it takes everything in her not to topple over the way she did that morning — this time from wind. Salt and cool mist whip against her face, and when she manages to open her eyes she's facing the sea. Her curls fly about her face as she takes in the rolling, yellow-green hills leading up from its shore, ebbing and flowing at sharp angles all the way up to the precipice that the modest cottage sits on.

Just as she did, on that cliffside.

It's an important validation — unspoken until this point. But ever since the first failed brew, a part of her has wondered if what she's doing is wrong. Cruel. If, by some miracle she finds him, he'll turn her away.

It's what's best.

She blinks furiously, fighting the tears as they well up in her eyes.

But Theo just says, "Come on, Gryffindor." And he peels her fingers back. That fractured crystal gleams one last time as it strikes the potion surface, and the milky white tints blue as it sinks away.

She wants to mourn for it.

She doesn't have the time.

Theo finds a teacup balanced haphazardly on the corner of a stack of books. He dumps the long cold tea into the pot of one of her fake plants, then returns to her side and tucks it into her hand.

"Do you...want me to go with you?" he asks.

She shakes her head mutely, still blinking the tears back. But she squeezes his hand as she takes the cup.

"Bottoms up, then."

It's as bitter as it's ever been — she's always thought it tastes like poison. And for a moment she tricks herself into thinking something's gone wrong, clutching at her stomach when it flutters dangerously.

It turns out it's only butterflies. She doesn't think she's felt those in years.

But they spread their wings and wreak havoc and vengeance upon her at the sight of those wisps gathering into shapes around the cluttered room.

Hermione reaches for Theo immediately, shackling his wrist and holding her breath, unable to tear her eyes away as the smoke starts to settle. She makes a sound she can't quite define, because she's been wondering something else from that first day too. Something that's threatened to cripple her more than once over the years. The chance that he might be gone. Really gone.

That he might've done something unforgivable. Unfixable.

And yet — there he is.



February 23rd, 1999

THEIR EYES BARELY HAVE THE CHANCE TO MEET BEFORE THE WORLD CATCHES UP WITH THEM — A FLASH, FLEETING AND WROUGHT WITH HOPELESSNESS — AND THEN HANDS CLASP HIS SHOULDERS AND HIS GAZE JERKS ASIDE, QUICK AND GUN-SHY. The hands are pale, fingers long and elegant. Gentle.

Narcissa.

Hermione's still clutched in his grasp, half-dangling from his shaking arms as she speaks to him.

"Draco. *Draco.*" Her voice is firm, and yet Hermione can somehow find the tenderness in it. "She'll be in shock. Get her to her feet. Give her air. We have very little time."

Hermione's eyes sway back to Draco, and her body gives an instinctive, involuntary jerk in his hold. She has seen him cry before. And yet, this —

"*Mother...*" he bleats, a stutter of breath through trembling lips, desperate and helpless. "I — h-help. Help — help me." His fingers flex against Hermione's arms, releasing and then gripping again every few seconds. Like he's not so certain she's there. Solid. In his grasp.

"Do as I say," Narcissa commands in a low voice. "Help her up."

A brief choking sound is his only response before he's nodding, tears carving wet tracks down his cheeks. His face doesn't wrinkle, she realizes. He cries flatly. Openly. As though he couldn't stop it if he wanted to.

"Draco," his mother whispers.

He grips firmly, and the backs of her legs lift from the marble, blood rushing down from her head as the soles of her shoes find pressure against the floor. She sways, and both sets of hands are there to steady her.

She manages one full, even blink. Her foot knocks against something stiff. Heavy.

Dawlish.

"Now step back," says Narcissa. "Step back. Let her breathe. Here — here." Hermione sees her stretch her arm out insistently. "Give me that. Go and see to Theo."

In the next moment, familiar, textured wood is pressed against Hermione's limp fingers. Vine. Ten and three-quarter inches. Dragon heartstring.

"Miss Granger," Narcissa says, swimming into focus in front of her. Her gaze is calm and unwavering. "Take your wand."

"I...w-what?" she stutters, tongue like lead in her mouth. Her legs are far from stable.

Narcissa just says it again. "Take your wand. This is not over." She takes Hermione's hand in her cold fingers and forces it to close around the base. "You have been through this before, yes?" No pity in her voice. Only urgency. Certainty. "You know it will pass. You know how to move forward."

The image of Shell Cottage swims behind Hermione's eyelids when she blinks next.

"Force it," Narcissa demands, and she opens her eyes again. "Recover. *Now*. Make yourself. Dawlish has at least two dozen more men downstairs. They are coming — they'll be here in moments — and even *with* you, we're outnumbered."

Hermione's thumb slides along the wooden grooves she knows like her own skin.

"Are you ready?"

She swallows, flexing her toes — ensuring her grip on the floor. With her next blink, the fog in her vision clears.

"Are you ready?" Narcissa repeats, taking her other wrist in hand and giving her a jolt.

Hermione clutches her wand tight. Nods once.

"Good."

her so.

Just as they told her this potion would never work.

And yet here she is, staring at it. Complete. Functional. *Real*.

They designed it to use something the sought-after had made. For nearly two years now, Theo has been making her charmed paper cranes and swans and stars for every test run. A fresh box of them sits on the floor of her kitchen even now. Once used, the object is destroyed. A kink they could never work out.

Which is why Theo asks, "Are you sure?" later that afternoon, watching as she unhooks the broken chandelier pendant from around her neck. He's sitting at the foot of her bed, scribbling in his journal again — not the green one from so long ago. Something personal. Just for him. She asked once what he wrote — "*Just nonsense*," — and then she never asked again.

She's nearly ready now. She struggled a little in front of her mirror, feeling foolish getting all 'dolled up,' as Theo called it. There's still the chance it won't work. But she's gone two years not giving half a damn whether her hair is tangled or her clothes are clean.

And the thought of his eyes on her — in that stare, pathetic and beaten-down — is unbearable.

Part of her admits that she also needed an excuse. Something to kill time. Now that the moment's upon her — two years and one month in the making — she feels somehow unprepared.

"Yes," she says despite it all, staring at the crystal shard in her palm. She'll never see it again, once it sinks into the cauldron. If this goes wrong, she loses one of the only pieces of him she has left.

"Are you scared?" Theo asks several minutes later in a quiet voice, standing beside her as she watches her reflection bubble in the potion's white froth. She holds the pendant above it, dangling like a final lifeline.

"Terrified," she murmurs.

Theo must see her hand shaking. He steps forward and wraps his hand around hers, holding her fist tight around the chain for a moment as he says, "I think he'd want it like this."

and kissing his temple, suddenly certain of something, though not certain what. In his ear, she murmured, “And I’m not her.”

At this, Theo whimpered and let his muscles go slack.

It never happened again.

They slept that way — naked and tangled up, damp with tears — and by the next morning she knew what she needed to do. He helped her dress, timid and ashamed until she took his face in her hands, gave him a small shake and whispered, “Thank you.” For kisses she desperately needed. For someone to sleep next to — to hold — just once.

And then she mucked up the courage to ask for his help.

“Hermione, I think that’s illegal.”

“Don’t do this to yourself.”

“It’s a dead end.”

“You have to let him go.”

It’s what they all told her — so many times over the past two years, she’s lost track — but not Theo. Never him.

That morning as they boarded the Hogwarts Express for the last time, she told him what she intended to do, and he told her the cauldron she wanted to use would be too small. Theo — brilliant and tenacious. Second in their class all those years before for a reason.

She thought for a long time that he put in all the time and energy as a favor.

One day, a year and many failures in, he told her he needed a purpose. Something worth doing.

Every book they read told them a potion like that didn’t and couldn’t exist, but Theo just said, “Everything can’t and doesn’t exist until it does.”

So they agreed to force it into existence. Their own secret, forbidden creation, cautiously dubbed *Seek and Find*. A potion, when drunk, that allows the brewer to locate and furthermore apparate to whatever they wish to find. Or in this case, whomever.

She wasted so many weeks, fresh out of St. Mungo’s, searching for him blindly on foot. Knowing all the while she would never find him. Everyone told

Narcissa steps back, and she finds she can take in the state of the room for the first time, even with the blood still singing in her veins.

The Aurors that went after Pansy are scattered across the dark marble floor, stunned or dead — Hermione isn’t sure. Their bodies are sprawled every which way, and Theo, on his feet despite what looks to be immense pain, is struggling to navigate the many tangled arms and legs. He crouches down twice, stealing wands.

“Draco,” he calls out, tossing one of them across the room. Hermione’s eyes follow it like a fired shot, finding Draco just as he pulls it from the air. His eyes are straight down, locked on the floor a few meters in front of his feet. Uncused, and yet not like before.

“Draco,” she manages in a hoarse voice.

His whole body tenses up at the sound. He doesn’t look.

An itch starts, centered in her chest — a low thrum of panic that builds fast and sure.

“Draco,” she forces out, louder now.

But there’s a shout from the hall leading up to the dining room, and his gaze shifts there instead as he sinks into a defensive position, stolen wand out.

Hermione is slow to echo the movement, trying to look away and clear her head. Trying to catch up. *Focus*.

Countless footsteps grow closer, voices growing louder, and the last thing she comprehends before all hell breaks loose is Pansy.

Disheveled and blood-spattered, she’s placed herself in front of Theo — far forward enough that perhaps he won’t see it as such. But Hermione sees her for what she is. A wall. A divide. A promise to be the final word in keeping him from harm.

Seeing it triples the ache in her chest, and just before Dawlish’s Aurors storm the room, Hermione’s eyes flit back to Draco. She should do the same. She — she wants nothing more, not one thing more in this world than to spare him. From any of it. All of it.

She takes one shaking step in his direction, and spells start to fly.

Narcissa was right.

Her wand — somehow it's what she needed to yank herself from the haze of mind-numbing pain. Fight or flight. Her instincts have a clear favorite, and as she raises her wand everything else falls away.

It's just color and light.

She stuns the first Auror who crosses her line of sight without uttering a word, somehow both satisfied and urged on by the sound of his body hitting the floor.

The next two fall just as easily, but the fourth catches her in the elbow with a stinging jinx, and she wastes precious moments switching her wand to her left arm.

She expects to be stunned, at the very least, in that stretch of seconds. But upon next glance, wand out firmly once more, she finds the Auror undeniably dead — crumpled into himself.

Her eyes snap to Draco, a blur as he skims past her, not stopping. Every spell he casts is green.

Hermione has to force herself to remain in the moment, twisting to help Narcissa fight free of a full-body bind. But even as she disarms and stuns an Auror who tries to attack from the side, she wonders at it.

At what it takes. What it must feel like to reach a level where there are no holds barred. No hesitations. Where all that's left is to kill.

She's never killed anyone. Never cast the curse, no matter how many times its awkward syllables have whispered curiously across her tongue.

And for all of two seconds, as she rights herself at Narcissa's side and turns to assess the battle, she thinks perhaps she may never reach that level.

But then she sees a spark of red strike Draco in the back.

A cut cry leaps from his mouth as he falls, the torture curse rippling across his limbs as the Auror draws nearer. Pansy is locked in a stunning duel to his left, Theo reduced to physical combat on his right. Narcissa is still working at the remnants of her binds.

There is no one but her to help him.

On the last night of term, dodging the Feast and blissfully alone, Hermione convinced Theo to split a bottle with her.

Three quarters to the bottom and all talked out about loss and pain and the fucking stupid, unbearable world they lived in, Theo had turned and looked at her. She'll never forget that look — a bleak and shattered amalgam of trust and hope and terror, an unspoken plea hiding behind it all.

He'd blinked and she'd blinked, clearing away the fog of Firewhiskey, and then his mouth was on hers.

A better person might lie. Might say it felt immediately wrong and out of place. Like kissing a brother or a best friend. The way kissing Ron had always felt.

She tries not to lie anymore, even if the truth guts her.

And for a moment there, it felt fucking incredible — and she refused to compare it to anything. Theo kissed gently and with great care, unfettered by the alcohol. Tender where others might be sloppy. His hands, the way they cupped her jaw as he nipped at her lips — they made her feel like something precious. Breakable.

It would also be a lie to say she stopped it first.

She let him tilt her head back and mouth a steady path along the column of her throat, moaning as he did it and weaving her fingers through hair that was thicker and more coarse than she expected. She let him carry her all the way up to the dormitory, drunk on something other than Firewhiskey. Let him strip her to almost nothing and lay her down. Let him cast the fucking contraceptive charm and line himself up — they were that fucking close.

It was only in the exact moment he broke that she realized she was waiting for it.

His elbows gave out and he collapsed on top of her, suddenly wracked by uncontrollable sobs. Wide-eyed and relieved and terrified, she'd wrapped her arms around him and cradled him to her as he shook and cried into the crook of her neck, gasping out over and over, "I'm not him. I'm not him. *I'm not him.*"

Hermione tilted her head sideways, letting her own tears roll off her cheeks

likes to be watched as they cry. “Fierce and headstrong, just like her.” Most people would’ve called it bad weather, especially for a funeral. Violent gusts whipping up against them, chasing away black umbrellas. Angry clouds looming above. In the moment, it felt perfect. “She’d want it like this.”

Theo had choked on a sob at that, shoulders jerking with it — but he let her fingers work over his, relaxing his grip until Pansy’s ashes started to fall between the gaps, whisked away by that invisible current in an instant.

The two of them stayed on that cliffside until well after dark, the Parkinson family and the small gathering that accompanied them — some friends, some less than friends — long gone. She held his hand until it was numb, and he cried until his eyes swelled practically shut.

From then on, they were nearly inseparable. No one else understood, not in the way he did. Not in the way she did.

Everyone else tried to talk her out of it.

In the weeks and months that came after that letter, she tried to cope the way most people do. She broke a lot of things. Drank herself into stupors. Failed two of her N.E.W.T.S. and received an Incomplete in Muggle Studies. Theo was always there with the Firewhiskey, holding her hair as she got sick on the Slytherin common room floor and then tucking her into his own four-poster. She became something pathetic and revolting in that final term, the days crippled and dragging, strung together by hangovers and little else.

She felt guilty when it came to Theo. He, with the greater loss. Theo had more of an excuse than anyone to turn to drink, and yet instead he curled into himself. Fell into fugue states and bouts of forgetfulness. More than once, she found him standing in an empty corridor, staring at his feet. Lost. She’s told he would’ve failed all his courses, if not for McGonagall’s good word.

Harry, Ron and Ginny did what they could. She will always respect them for the space they gave her in that time. She knew she was a sinking ship — Theo a wreck upon the rocks. What good was it to drag anyone down with them?

But it was untenable. An impossible lifestyle to maintain. Hardly a life at all. Something had to break, and by god it did.

And seeing his face, torn and twisted in agony, his shaking fingers grasping desperately at nothing — she suddenly knows a great deal more than she did moments ago.

“*Crucio*,” she casts and does not blink, watching the Aurors go stiff before he collapses and starts to writhe. She feels the power of it radiating from her wand. A pull like a magnet, captivating, indescribable.

She takes a few steps, closing their distance and standing over him, all the while allowing the curse to linger. He screams and bucks and begs for death, and the words are at her lips — moments, *milliseconds* from fighting free —

“No!”

A hand shackles her wrist, so familiar in texture and weight, and Draco drags her arm to the side, throwing off her aim as he pulls himself up from the floor.

“No,” he snaps again, meeting her eyes for once — and *there*, there’s that fury she was waiting for. Livid and electric.

He doesn’t look at the Aurors behind him on the ground. Doesn’t break from her gaze as he casts the killing curse in her stead. The man’s screaming dies off sharply.

“Don’t you *dare*,” Draco says, pinning her with his eyes — refusing to free her wrist. His tears from minutes before aren’t quite dry on his face, and yet there’s more anger in his expression than she thinks she’s ever seen. “Don’t *ever*.”

Hermione opens and shuts her mouth once — twice — at a loss, staring wide-eyed up into his ragged face. And then a moment later he’s gone. Back into the fray.

She can still feel the pressure of his grip fading from her wrist.

Less than five of Dawlish’s Aurors remain, and when at last she can make herself move again, she makes quick work of the one trying to scale the mantle for higher ground. He falls hard on his back, frozen.

Narcissa fells another with a powerful *Incarcerous*, and as Hermione watches the Aurors struggle against the ropes, she’s thinking they might actually manage this. Against all odds.

She diverts her attention to the remaining few, rushing forth to help Theo,

busy sparring with an Auror who's quite quick with his hexes. When it's two against one, he's easier to contain — but there's a reason he's one of the last standing. His skills are beyond theirs. Years of training under his belt, evident in his stance, his spellwork, the way he holds his wand.

All too soon, Hermione overcompensates — steps awkwardly as she deflects a knockback jinx — and the Auror's *Levicorpus* hits her square in the chest. She's catapulted back at least a dozen feet, landing hard on unforgiving marble. The breath gets forced from her lungs, and it takes her too many seconds just to manage to sit up.

From there, gasping and clutching at her chest, she watches it happen.

Theo falters under the full force of the Auror's skill, staggering back as he blocks, blocks again — dodges. He's losing. Failing fast. And Hermione witnesses the exact moment that should equal his end — the fraction of a second in which he can't manage to block in time.

But Pansy comes out of nowhere.

The killing curse explodes from the tip of her wand as she throws herself between them — and in that same instant, the spell that's meant for Theo strikes her instead. A flash of furious violet.

Hermione has never read about it. Never heard the syllables uttered until now. But she knows enough of Latin to feel her stomach drop.

"Respirae sanguinae!" the man had shouted. His last words before she took his life.

Breathe blood.

Pansy staggers and sways, looking almost confused in the dull silence that follows. Hermione scrambles to her feet. Theo calls out her name. Her black hair flutters out as she tilts her head in his direction — and a moment later a spurt of dark crimson explodes from her lips.

She buckles. Her wand clatters to the floor, and shortly after she follows it down.

By the time Hermione reaches them — no concept of the battlefield around them, no knowing if they've won or lost, if it's even over — Theo already has

"What was it?" Theo asks, staring down into the milky potion, still bubbling away. He hasn't bothered to dress or comb his hair, and he's still barefoot.

Hermione tucks her curls back into a bun, circling the cauldron. "The flowers. All of the base ingredients were correct. The Angel's Trumpet and Baneberry for trace detection. The Knotgrass from Polyjuice and the Thaumatrogoria from the Potion of All Potential. But the rose and white orchid were too impersonal."

Theo's eyes flash at that. Adding the flowers had been his idea — and he'd been right, save a small detail.

"I think the brewer has to manifest what they want out of it. I had to make it personal."

He approaches the dining room table she's turned into an overlarge cutting board. "What did you use?"

She moves to his side, gesturing to them in turn. "Valerian, for forgetfulness. Cyclamen, for separation. Dogwood, for constancy and...undiminished love," she says the last in a quiet voice. "I'd been using those three for weeks. But they seemed too straightforward. Too simple." She moves her hand to rest on the soft white petals of the fourth flower in the line of ingredients. "So I added snowdrop, for hope. And Tansy, for—"

"Hate," Theo finishes for her, tone unreadable. "A declaration of war." She nods in silence, chewing her bottom lip.

"I would've worried the effect would be too strong."

She nods again, "I did. But then I thought about it and I realized I..." she trails off, pinching the flower's soft yellow cluster of petals and grinding them to dust. "Well, I hate him half the time. When I think of him, part of me is always furious."

Theo hums in the back of his throat. "It's brilliant."

He's possibly the only one who thinks so.

From those first weeks, and every moment since, he's been at her side. From the moment she took his hand on that cliffside, shaking so violently he couldn't seem to let go of the ashes clutched in his palm.

"Look at the wind," she'd said, keeping her eyes low to spare him. No one

Frozen. Staring.

At a certain point, it had started to feel impossible. A damned endeavor, a futile habit. So futile, she almost doesn't want to test it. The part that matters most. She has to work herself up to it.

Fingers trembling, she blows out one more nervous breath and reaches toward the wisps. Toward the apparition of Theo, still peaceful and undisturbed. If she's somehow miraculously gotten this right, he won't be for long.

The conjured smoke is cold to the touch — a teasing whisper against her skin — and when she curls her fingers and makes a fist, the world around her evaporates. With a small shriek and a rush of air, she's lying face first on the carpet of Theo's study.

He's up in an instant with a gasp, journal falling to the floor. He clutches his chest and stares at her, eyes wide and bleary.

"T-Theo..." she splutters, lifting herself onto her hands and knees.

"Hermione — what...what happened?"

"Theo." She's almost panting now, bewildered excitement catching up with her. "Theo, it works. It *works*."

There's a gap — a confused pause as he fully wakes up, fully comprehends, their eyes locked. And then he's off the sofa, scrambling to pull her the rest of the way up from the floor. He gathers her against him, warm and familiar and smelling like he always does. His chin drops to the crown of her head, and she feels his chest deflate as he lets out the breath they've been collectively holding for the past two years.

"Thank fuck."



They apparate back to her flat in London.

The mess has been piling up for a long while now, discarded bottles and shriveled herbs strewn about, books dogeared and stacked on every surface. Only the cauldron sits in relative cleanliness, away from the clutter. She couldn't risk contaminating it.

her in his arms. She sinks to her knees beside them, wordless, watching the even-keeled boy she's known these many years completely fall apart.

"Pans — Pans, you're okay. Y-You're...you're okay. Come on." He cradles her to him, eyes wet and disbelieving as he strokes bloody fingers through her dark hair. "I've got you. I've got you. No. No, no. You're okay. You'll see. You're okay."

The curse is merciless. She coughs up seemingly infinite quantities of blood, gasping for breath in between — blood from internal organs, from burst veins. There's no way of knowing. Theo's shirt is soaked with it in an instant, the way he holds her to his chest. Hermione sees her shaking fingers clutching at his sleeves, desperate.

Theo looks to Hermione, then, and she's not ready. "This — she's — you can fix this. You can fix this. She's alright."

Helpless — *useless* — Hermione feels her lip tremble as she stares back at him. Tears blur her vision, flying off her cheeks as she shakes her head. She knows the look of a fatal curse. It's going to take her. And quickly. "I...I can't. There's — Theo, there's nothing—"

"No. No," he snaps, looking away. He's stroking her face now, numb to the blood she drools onto his hand. "She's alright. She's okay. Pansy, sweetheart — look at me."

He doesn't need to say it. Her dark eyes, lovely even now, never leave his face. Not when Hermione reaches out, unable to swallow back a whimper as she takes one of her hands. Not when Draco's shadow falls over them. He's panting, exhausted from battle. "Fuck...Pansy, *no*," he breathes as he realizes the gravity of it, voice low — barely a whisper.

Theo still hears him.

"*Don't*," he growls, furious. "She's *fine*! She's — she's fine. You're fine. Pans — Pans, tell them. Tell them you're fine. You'll be alright."

Pansy's soft chokes have become staggered. Few and far between as her chest shudders, eyes wide and unblinking. She's pale as death. There's hardly any blood left in her.

"Pansy. Pansy, no." The defiant hope in Theo's voice is dying. "Please. I'm

here. Stay with me. I'm right here."

Draco takes one of Theo's shoulders in hand, even as Theo tries to shake it off. He meets Hermione's eyes — just once — over the hunched form of his friend, and the wall between them momentarily breaks to make way for a shared grief.

Pansy coughs once more. Manages to close her bloodstained lips, throat bobbing compulsively as she swallows.

"You..." she whispers to Theo, voice in shreds. "You l-look nice...in blue."

His broken expression fractures further, confused and scattered. He's not wearing blue. "...What, sweetheart?"

People become delirious, near the end. Hermione hates that she knows that.

"S-So...so handsome in blue..."

Theo chokes back a sob, tears falling from his lashes to the crown of her head.

"Thank you."

She's slipping away fast. Has moments left, maybe. Hermione can see it.

And in a moment of weakness — of desperation — she leans forward, putting her lips at Pansy's ear. Speaking to her and only her.

"You saved him," she whispers. "You kept your promise." And she gives Pansy's hand a squeeze before leaning back, blinking away tears.

But it is truly something to see Pansy smile through it all — a sudden, gentle smile, unlike any expression Hermione's seen on her face before. She tilts her head with the last of her strength to meet her eyes. And her bloody teeth, her gaunt face — they seem to fade to background noise in the midst of it. In that moment, she is beautiful and nothing else.

She looks once more to Theo, then — her chosen last sight. Peace floods through her features. Her smile lingers a moment longer. And then she sags in his arms, chest sinking, eyes falling shut. A final breath leaves her lips. Soft. Unfettered.

And she's gone.

Hermione looks away. Has to. Anywhere else.

But the sound Theo makes will stay with her for the rest of her days.



April 4th, 2001

SHE HAS POISONED HERSELF AT LEAST A HUNDRED TIMES, AND BY NOW SHE KNOWS WHAT TO EXPECT.

If it's wrong — and it's *always* wrong — then within the first minute or so, the walls of her stomach will start to burn, sharp stabbing pains following shortly after. Her hands will start to shake and the blood will rush to her head, and if she's not quick about it, she'll pass out.

She's gone through more bezoars than she can count. Certain attempts have been so disastrous she's needed more than one just to soak up the toxins.

But today —

She exhales slowly, glancing down at her hands. No shaking, no visible tremors whatsoever. She presses one softly against her stomach, waiting for that inevitable shock of pain. To cramp or double over. It should've happened by now.

And when her hands do start to shake, a good five minutes later, she knows it's not from poison.

The effect is gradual. A fade of shadows and colors before her eyes — wisps not unlike the smoke of a Patronus charm casting themselves about the room. Shapes take form soon after. A familiar leather armchair she knows well. Drapes drawn across a window. And Theodore Nott, asleep on his sofa.

The cup she drank from slips out of her hand and shatters on the floor, remnants of the potion leaking across the tile.

He's clear as day — only slightly transparent. She can see his chest rise and fall, slow and even. Can see the clean line of the arm he's got thrown over his eyes. The journal left open on his chest.

Her heart starts to pound, and for a long moment she just stands there.

tell anyone, but I've always secretly wanted to do that. And there's that flimsy hot chocolate, as well. I have that to look forward to.

And you, Hermione — you have the whole world at your feet.

This life is yours for the taking. Find what you want and take it for the both of us.

I'll be rooting for you.

Draco

The letter slips from her numb fingers and floats to the hospital floor.



February 26th, 1999

DAPPLED LIGHT ACROSS HER EYELIDS — HAZY AND GRAY. It's the first thing she's aware of, and the rest comes slowly.

There's pain. An old sort of pain, though. Lingering aches and throbs, some possibly already half-healed. It's forgettable and easy to push aside. The exhaustion is much more pressing. It feels like it takes ages just to muster the strength to lift her lids.

She knows a hospital ceiling when she sees one.

Not Hogwarts. She'd recognize that weathered flagstone immediately. No, this is much more clinical. White and sterile.

St. Mungo's.

Swallowing around a dry throat, she shifts as much as her lead-like limbs can manage, frantically trying to chase memories — even fragments of memories of how she got here. But there's nothing after —

“Hermione?”

A warm, callused hand clasps around hers, and color spreads out over the whiteness as a figure leans over her. She blinks slowly up at him, forcing him to come into focus.

“...Ron?”

The creases all over his face flatten out at the ragged tone of her voice, and he speaks with a winded smile and a gasp. “Bloody hell, we’ve been so worried!” The hand not holding hers starts to stroke the hair away from her face. “How are you? How are you feeling? Is there pain? I can get the—”

“Ron.” It's less of a croak now. More substance to it. She blinks again to fully clear the fog from the borders of her vision. “Please. What happened?”

"Erm — yeah, uh — one thing at a time, Hermione — okay? I think you should talk to a Healer first. Get some food in you, or—"

She grips his hand tight and speaks over him. "Ron, how did I get here?"

The way the smile falls from his face makes her stomach ache. She swallows again, gathering a steady breath.

"What do you remember?" he asks. Even at the best of times, Ron isn't usually so gentle. It's almost terrifying in a way.

She tries to keep the fear out of her voice. "Pansy..." she murmurs.

Ron's brows meet in the middle, and Hermione watches him search for the right words. A good moment or so.

"I'm...so sorry. I know she was — well, sort of your friend."

Hermione's chest throbs, and her gaze drops away from his as it floods back to her; Pansy and her bloody lips, her pale face and searching eyes.

"She *was* my friend," she echoes quietly, both a correction and a confirmation.

Ron is right to move off of the subject as quickly as he does. "That's the last thing? Nothing after that?"

She shakes her head, working to keep the fear out of her eyes too. "What day is it?"

The oddest memory surfaces at the question. Of Theo, so many months ago — mocking her for asking something similar. Calling her dramatic.

Christ, *Theo*...

Ron takes a deep breath. "It's the 26th. You've been out for three days."

She sucks back a gasp. "Three...three days?"

He nods gravely and clears his throat. "Harry — he got your Patronus," he says, shifting in his chair at the bedside. "It sort of exploded in front of all of us at breakfast. Gave him a right scare. Me, as well." His fingers flex and then scramble to squeeze her hand again, a movement sort of desperate and unexpected. "Hermione, you have to believe me. Harry — he's going to beat himself up about it for ages if you don't, and I swear to you — I swear it, he didn't waste any time."

a fresh start. I am to leave the country. I will never see my mother or my father again.

And I will never see you again.

I know — somewhere — a part of you can understand.

I know you can. You will. Because it means I can wake up without wanting to kill myself. And it means you'll never be at risk again — not from me.

I don't know what's left to say. You already know I love you. I promise not to say it again.

But I can say thank you.

For a little while there, I had you. I had something to look forward to. To want. To chase. I had those curls wrapped around my fingers and those lips between my teeth. I had someone to worry about, other than myself. I had someone that gave as good as she got. That withstood me. Wanted me regardless. And Merlin, that felt fucking good.

Thank you. I'm glad to have had that, for a little while.

But I have things to look forward to now too, I suppose. I have to learn how to drive. How to cook and boil water. I get to ride in an airplane. Please don't

yesterday.

From this moment on, I am no longer a Muggle. And I am no longer a wizard.

I am a Muggle.

I hope to Merlin — well, to God, now — that you of all people will understand. You reach a point where you know the therapy won't work anymore. Certain wounds don't heal. You, Hermione — you're not going to heal.

If I don't do this, I'm never going to spend another second of my life at peace. There's never going to be a moment I don't see you lying there — fucking bloodless — with my hands around your neck. With that look in your eyes. I can't live like that. Please, don't ask me to live like that.

The terms of this — well, I guess it's a bit like a plea deal. If I let this part of my life go, I have to let everything else go too. Shackleton says Muggles call it Witness Protection.

To sum it up, I am leaving my name and my identity behind. I forfeit my inheritance, save a small portion that will be converted to Muggle currency — for

She squints at him, turning a little to face him better despite the pain. "What do you mean?"

"He sent for the Order, like you asked — and then we tried to follow you. No hesitation, I swear. We didn't wait. Me, Harry, Ginny, Neville, Luna — the lot of us. We followed your Patronus to the Grounds."

Her surprise she can't mask. "You...tried to come?"

He gives a sort of nervous scoff. "Yeah, 'Mione. Of course. Can be a git sometimes, but not about things like your life."

She squeezes his hand again, instinctively, but doesn't say more. Needs him to keep going. Needs to line the pieces up.

"I think we would've made it too. Soon enough, anyway, to save...your friend. To stop what happened to you." A shadow crosses his face. A brief, but blinding fury lighting in his eyes before he can stomp it out. Then, "It was the portkey. My guess is Dawlish jinxed it. Stupified the lot of us and dropped us Merlin knows where." He rubs the back of his neck. "Harry says he thinks it was like the one from Fourth Year. From the Tournament. Jinxed to work every other time. But it took us ages just to get our bearings. By the time we got to you, Parkinson was..." he trails off.

She clutches hard at his fingers, somehow certain he has worse news. Part of her doesn't want to ask, but she can't stop herself.

"The others..." she says, waiting until Ron's eyes meet hers. "Where's Draco? Theo? What happened with—"

"They're alive, Hermione," he says quickly, before she can work herself up. "It's just that—"

"What?"

He winces.

"Ron, tell me."

Twisting, he reaches behind his shoulder for something on the side table. "You need to eat, alright?" There's a plastic cup of tapioca and a spoon in his hand when he turns back around. Somehow the least appealing thing in the world right now. "Let me help you eat this, and then I'll tell you."

“Ron—”
“Please.”

She bites her tongue. Thinks about him risking his own life after everything she’s put him through this year.

Reluctantly, she lets him feed it to her, finally catching a glimpse of the position she’s being treated with as she sits up to help him with the angle. It looks like Calming Draught, seeping into the veins of her forearm from a charmed drip on her left.

It’s probably the only reason she hasn’t flown into a blind panic.

She gets the rest of the story around bland spoonfuls of pudding, hanging on Ron’s every word.

“The Healers think it was the adrenaline that kept you conscious. When we got to you — swallow the whole bite, Hermione, come on...good. When we got to you, you weren’t really...all there, if you know what I mean. Parkinson was there on the floor, and a bunch of the Slytherins you went looking for were kind of scattered around the room. There was no one left to fight — you did a right fine job. I mean it. Those were trained Aurors. Open up, you’re going to eat the whole thing.”

He feeds her another spoonful, two-thirds of the cup gone. She doesn’t have the strength to resist.

“But for a minute there, I thought we might’ve lost you too. Malfoy and Zabini were trying to keep Nott calm — I didn’t really know about the whole situation at the time. I knew he and Parkinson were friends, but — well, now I know. Anyway, you were there too. But you were sort of staring off at nothing. Sitting on the floor. When Malfoy tried to stand you up, I guess it all caught up with you.”

“...All?” she manages.

“You broke three ribs, Hermione. *Merlin*. That, added to the *Cruciatius*...” He struggles to get the word out, glancing away for a fraction of a second, then back again. “You burst a lot of blood vessels — suffered at least two seizures in under ten minutes. And one of your ribs punctured your lung. The Healers said

herself to start, and the look she finds in her eyes is the first she can truly riddle out.

Pity.
And oh, how she *hates* pity.

Squaring her jaw, she jerks her eyes down again and yanks the parchment flat.

Hermione,

I didn’t want this to be the first thing you saw when you woke up. I hope Weasley made you eat something. Hope you’re taking your medicine like you’re supposed to be. But, then again, it’s you.

If I know you as well as I think I do, you’re probably reading this earlier than you should be. There’s nothing for it.

So before you know anything else, know that you can’t change my mind. I’ve made my decision. This is what I need to do. It’s already worked out, and it’s for the best. For both of us.

I’ve spoken with the Minister, and with McGonagall, and as of this morning I’ve surrendered my wand to the Ministry. I’ve signed a binding contract that states I’ll never engage in wandless magic, brew potions or attempt to apparate. In exchange, I won’t have to return to Hogwarts, and I won’t stand trial for my actions

yet even so frail, she looks elegant. Well-bred.

Only someone who knew her well would know she'd been crying.

Hermione's so preoccupied staring at her that she almost doesn't notice the Auror standing guard in the corner.

"Is that completely necessary?" she snaps at him without thinking.

The Auror is one of Shacklebolt's. Not part of Dawlish's inner crowd. She'd recognize him otherwise. Still, though, he says, "She remains under house arrest."

"Even in her condition?"

He adjusts his stance, awkward and yet steadfast. "Even then."

Hermione can't hold in a scoff of distaste, shuffling the last few steps until she reaches the side of the bed. She winces as she takes a seat in the chair next to it.

"Miss Granger," Narcissa appraises her calmly.

Hermione gives a curt nod. "Mrs. Malfoy."

A polite girl might ask how she's faring. If she's in any pain. Might make small talk or try to take her mind off things. But she is not a polite girl. Not anymore. She cuts through the excess like she's got a sharp knife.

"Where is he?"

To her credit, Narcissa doesn't play any games. Doesn't feign confusion or ignorance. Instead, she twists delicately against the pillows propped behind her back, thin fingers plucking a folded sheet off parchment off the bedside table.

Hermione's stomach lurches, mind racing at the possibilities — a letter? A legal document? Something — something *worse*?

But Narcissa hesitates before handing it over.

"You should know," she says, tone unreadable. "It's what's best."

Hermione feels her limbs lock up, heart thudding. "*What* is?"

She almost rips the parchment taking it out of Narcissa's hand, and then again just trying to unfold it. Draco's handwriting — so unmistakable at this point — makes the breath catch in her throat.

She doesn't want to read it. Risks a glance up at Narcissa before allowing

you should've been long dead by the time we got you here. And the *bruises* all over you...bloody hell."

She follows the angle of his gaze, limp arm lifting from her side so she can trace her fingers across the expanse of her throat. Sensitive. It explains the soreness. The difficulty she's having just trying to speak.

Ron's voice cracks around his next words. "I...I can't believe he did that to you."

It's almost a relief — the quick spike of anger she feels at that. "*He* didn't."

"Hermione, don't defend—"

"What else?" she cuts him off sharply. "I know you're holding something back. What is it? What's the worst of it?"

Ron swallows whatever he planned to say, expression unreadable.

"They...they don't believe them, do they?" she stammers. "The Death Eater robes — the bodies. They think Dawlish's set-up is true." The words come faster and faster. "They're going to arrest them again. God, they already have, haven't they—"

"*Hermione*." Ron slides his chair forward with a loud, metallic squeak, standing to press her back against the pillows when she tries to sit up and spilling what's left of the tapioaca on the sheets. "Breathe. Just breathe." He takes her hand in both of his, then, thumb massaging soothing circles. "They know everything. They used a Pensieve. No one's getting arrested."

"She's awake?"

Hermione's panicked eyes flit to the doorway, and there's Harry. He looks unwashed and sleep-deprived — and from what she can see of Ginny, hidden halfway behind his broad shoulder, she's much the same.

She wants to say their names. Say 'thank you.' But all that comes out is, "*Please*."

Harry's eyes flood with concern, just as Ron rushes to fill them in.

"She doesn't remember much. I've told her about the portkey. Gotten her all the way up to—"

"*Please*," she interrupts again. "Where are they?"

Harry steps into the room, and she doesn't like the slump of his shoulders. The uncomfortable way he holds himself. He pulls up a chair to her other side, Ginny moving to stand behind him and resting her hand on his shoulder.

"Most of them are back at Hogwarts," he says. "The ones they put in the Malfoy dungeons were unharmed. Just shaken up. From the looks of it, Dawlish was waiting for...well, for you, mostly. Looks like he wanted you there before he staged anything more drastic."

She opens her mouth, but he sets his palm on her knee through the sheets to stop her. Continues on.

"Narcissa Malfoy was beaten badly. She's down the hall, recovering. I checked on her this morning. Zabini's here. Nothing worse than a black eye — he's not a patient. He's here for Nott."

"How is he?" she blurts, shifting. Still trying to sit up, despite Ron's efforts. "How's Theo?"

"He's..." Harry searches for the right word, adjusting his glasses, "...stable. They have a Grief Healer watching over him in the psychiatric ward." His eyes are soft — cautious. "I won't lie and say he's well."

Hermione manages at last to fight free of Ron's grip and sit up. She ignores the way her body throbs at the movement. "I should go see him. I will, after —"

There's a collective wince amongst the three of them, so syncope'd it's almost timed. Jarring and obvious.

Her pulse starts to thud in her temples.

"Draco," she prompts, barely a whisper. "Where is he?"

Ginny moves, then — steps out from behind Harry and comes to sit on the cot by her hip, speaking for the first time. "We...don't know," she murmurs, voice so soft and gentle it barely breaks the silence. "I'm sorry, Hermione — but no one does."

It takes a good five or six seconds for the words to sink in, and then she's trying to yank free of the sheets. Trying to thrust her legs aside and stand.

Three sets of hands have to wrestle her back down onto the cot, and all the

while she's spluttering, "What — what do you mean no one knows? What are — what you *saying*? Where is he? What happened?"

"Hermione — *Hermione*, stop. Listen." Ginny presses a cold hand flat against her collarbone, practically forcing her heaving breaths to slow. "*Listen to me*. I know. I know you're upset. But we don't know anything more than you." She presses harder, aggressively soothing, even as Hermione's pulse starts to skip every other beat. "Breathe. Breathe. You need to calm down first. Calm down, and we can take you to see Narcissa."

Confusion momentarily blocks out the panic.

"...Narcissa?" She echoes, still weakly struggling to free her wrists as her gaze flits between the three of them. "N — why Narcissa? Does she know where he —"

"No," Harry says, curt and yet gentle. "No, she doesn't know where he is. I already tried. But she was the last person he spoke to." His hand on her arm stops restraining. Just holds her, trying to soothe what can't be soothed.

Hermione shakes her head mutely at him, eyes wide and confused. "I don't unders —"

"She doesn't know where — I just...I think she knows why."



The Healers try to insist on levitation charms, to protect her ribs and lung from further aggravation. But she wants to walk on her own two feet — even if she looks pathetic, the way she hobbles across the threshold of Narcissa Malfoy's room. Harry and Ron hover in the doorway, and part of her wonders if they somehow still think Narcissa poses a threat.

The sight of her is jarring.

She didn't look so worse for wear at the Manor — but then again, maybe that was adrenaline holding her up, too. Or maybe Hermione just wasn't seeing straight.

Narcissa watches her from her cot, eyes like a hawk — completely lucid, despite the paleness of her skin. The black and blue bruises all over her face. And