

"*Don't speak.* Don't. Let me get this out." She brandishes the wand at him, voice growing louder and higher in pitch. "I — I *waited for you.* For two years. *Two fucking years.* I stayed in London where you could find me and I waited for you to realize what a colossal fucking mistake you made. To come back and — and *face* it. Fix it."

"Hermione—"

"Theo has to face it. I have to face it. Blaise and Harry and Ginny and Neville and Ron. *Every day* we all have to face it. But you? *No.* And then I have to — I have to find you here, looking—" Her voice breaks. "Looking the way you do. Having the fucking *nerve* to look so — so healthy and alive and—"

"Hermione—"

"*Shut up,*" she snaps, voice breaking again. It wasn't supposed to go this way.

"I can't — I can't believe you'd —"

"Do you want to come inside?"

"*No—*"

His tone is softer than she expected, even in the sharp way he cuts her off. "Come in the house, Hermione." And he steps aside in the doorway.

"I — I don't want to," she stammers, even as her wand arm falters and she takes a step toward him.

He just widens the gap, holding the door open.

Her heart swells in two directions. She's overwhelmed by the possibility that somehow, somehow — all this time — she's caused nothing but harm, and that by crossing that threshold she might shatter whatever fragile happiness he's managed to create for himself.

But looking at him — it's like salve on a furious burn. One that's been festering for too long. It's the first relief she's felt in ages.

It's not really a choice at all.

Cautiously, she lowers her wand and stows it away, movements timid and uncertain as she follows him into the house and shuts the door behind her.

It's even more modest on the inside. More practical and minimal than she could've ever expected. A small country cottage, relatively clean — visible wear

and rear in the state of the ceiling and floor in some spots.

She trails after him into the kitchen in silence.

“I was going to put a pot on,” he says with his back to her, voice flat.

“Okay.”

“If you want a—”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

She stares as he finishes filling the kettle, somehow enamored by the way he looks completing such a menial task. His hands — those fucking *hands* — are stained brown with soil, the dirt under his fingernails so out of place and human. She tries to hide the way she sucks in a breath when he strikes a match for the stove burner, eyes drawn to his mouth as he blows it out.

He turns to face her again when it’s done, and she averts her gaze.

“You seem...” she sniffs and quickly wipes her nose, wrapping her arms around herself, “you seem absurdly calm about all this.”

Draco shifts his stance. Leans carefully back against the kitchen table and huffs quietly, almost to himself. “I’m not calm. The last thing I am is calm.”

It’s a small comfort to hear him say it. “Well you seem—”

“I’m not.”

Her eyes flit up and meet his. It’s hard to control the urge to touch him. To stride forward and slide her palms over the planes of his cheeks and feel their warmth. To run the pads of her fingers down his lips to see if they’re as soft as they used to be.

Her face darkens with blood, she can feel it.

“How did you find me?” he asks at last, expression tightly controlled.

She shakes her head. “It doesn’t matter.” In the tense silence that follows, she adds, “But you certainly didn’t make it easy for me, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I know.”

“You *don’t* know.”

He lifts an eyebrow, the only part of his face she can read. “Would you like to go back to threatening me? I know that always makes you feel better—”

“Don’t you fucking *mack* me,” she spits, going rigid and narrowing her eyes. It devolves quickly from there.

“Language, Granger.”

“Oh, I’m back to being Granger now am I, *Malfoy?*”

“When you act that way, yeah.”

“You don’t get to tell me how to act after what you put me through—”

“Did you even *read* that letter? It wasn’t just about you—”

“No. *No*. It is about me! Don’t say it isn’t about me. It’s about both of us! It’s about you taking control away from me!”

Their voices rise — ricochet off the small stone walls.

“You want to talk about *control*? I have *never* had control. Not *one day* in my entire fucking life!” He takes a step toward her, expression cracking — breathing anger and life.

“So this is your way of taking it back?” She steps in to match him, shouting up into his face — reminded suddenly how he towers over her. “Punishing me?”

“It wasn’t a fucking *punishment*!”

“What would you call it then? Leaving me! *Abandoning* me for two fucking years? Letting me wake up in a hospital bed *alone*—”

“You weren’t alone!”

“I was in the way that mattered!”

They’re too close together. She blames that for it, when she gets swept up in the moment — so familiar and easy, sparring with him — so necessary. She makes that age old mistake and thrusts out both palms, shoving him backward.

It’s the first time she touches him. Her skin prickles at the contact, and she’s momentarily caught off guard — unprepared for his retaliation.

Draco’s hands whip out and shackle her wrists, yanking them up to frame either side of her face, and he gives her a startling jolt, knocking her off balance.

“We’re back to this?” he growls, hot breath gusting up against her skin. “Already? In *five fucking minutes?*”

“Go to hell,” she spits — an instinct — jutting her chin forward to get in his face.

They notice in the same instant, both breaking off into harsh silence. Their eyes flit down in tandem, taking in the hair's breadth of space between their lips. Her lids feel abruptly heavy, breath hitching just as he blasts out a shuddering exhale.

### Peppermint.

And suddenly his bruising pressure on her wrists feels like the only thing anchoring her to reality. She narrows her eyes, just a fraction further, glaring at him even as the bridge of her nose brushes against his.

"Do it or I will," she hisses.

Anyone else might not know what she's asking — a threat to most ears. And it is a threat. It is.

She can see in his eyes that he knows that too. In that fraction of a second before his mouth lands on hers and the rest of the world ceases to exist.

With a surprised and muffled cry, she's knocked back by the force of it — and for a moment she can't match his fervor. Can only think. Feel. She's suddenly reminded how it feels to breathe. *Really* breathe. It makes her pulse stutter in her chest. And then she loses all control.

Her hands scramble for purchase, skidding across the warm slopes of his shoulders, broader now than they've ever felt before. She makes fists in the fabric of his shirt and yanks herself closer, gasping into his mouth when he bites down on her lip.

He groans — a groan like he's furious and frustrated — and his hands are desperate too, blunt fingernails digging into the flesh of her hips as he drags her against him.

"*Fucking* hell," he grinds out when her tongue flicks against his, and from there it all escalates too quickly to track.

One moment he's kissing her — wet and shameless and desperate, her toes curling in her shoes — and then the next—

She chokes on another shocked gasp when he suddenly flips them around, reversing their positions and pushing her back against the edge of the kitchen table. He draws her bottom lip out, sucking hard and dragging his teeth against

He forces himself to nod. Forces his eyes back open. "I promise," he breathes. "I promise. I love you. I promise."

She smiles brightly, then, a ghostly tear cascading down her cheek. "Took you long enough."

He tries to put his hand over hers. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"No." She shakes her head. "No. We both know I forgot to say it too." She huffs a sad laugh. "We're both idiots."

"*Idiots*," he echoes, nodding fiercely.

"But I do love you. And now I want to see you love someone else. I want to judge every stupid little mistake you make and I want to watch you fall in love all over again. Alright?"

"Alright."

"Promise me?"

"I swear."

"Good." She flashes him a final smile, utterly incandescent. "Then it was all worth it." And she lets her palms fall away from his face in the same moment the stone falls from his trembling hand. "Behave yourself, yeah?" she asks, voice faint — trailing off.

A moment later she vanishes.

Swallowing back a sob, Theo turns to look at Hermione.

It takes him almost half a minute to manage the words.

But then he whispers, "*Thank you.*"

Draco squeezes her hand. That final lingering weight on her shoulders falls away.

She breathes in.



quite a thing to watch that smile soften so drastically. Melt like ice over a flame. “And you,” she says, taking a step toward him. The morning sun passes straight through her as it flickers across the tree line. “How are you?”

He can only shake his head, another sob fighting its way out. He reaches out for her before it occurs to him, then quickly tucks that hand away again.

Pansy’s smile fractures. “It doesn’t work like that.”

“I know,” he nods, wiping his nose. Struggling so hard to keep his composure. “I know.”

Despite this, Pansy takes another step closer and reaches out herself. Let’s the ghost of her hand play at brushing the hair out of his eyes. “I watch you all the time,” she says, and his breath hitches. “I *hate* seeing you like this.”

“Pansy...”

“Listen to me, alright? We don’t have long.”

He nods. Can’t stop nodding, rubbing at his eyes.

Pansy reaches out both hands now. Places them on either side of his face, and Hermione wonders if he feels the energy of it. Feels her somehow. From the sound he makes, she has to believe he does.

“I would not have gone out for *anyone* less worthy.”

He lurches forward. Almost buckles in half, it makes him cry so hard.

“*Shh...*,” she soothes. “Hush and listen to me, Theo. Listen to me.”

Still nodding, he forces himself to straighten back up. Forces himself to look at her, the tears streaming down.

“Don’t you waste it.”

His eyes fall shut. Hermione watches a lone tear fall from his chin all the way down to the forest floor below. His hand shakes around the Resurrection Stone. Pansy’s thumb moves across his cheek as though she can truly stroke it. “I want to see you happy. I want to see you loved. Do you hear me?”

It’s both a nod and a shake of his head at once. Like he can’t fathom the idea.

“Promise me,” she says.

“I...”

“*Promise me.*”

it, and a moment later he’s yanking at her hips — twisting her to face the other direction.

Her back to him now, he presses hard between her shoulder blades, forcing her down until she’s bent over the table. Her wrist skids across a plate as she tries to brace herself, knocking it off the edge. It shatters on the floor.

She can feel his hands shaking as he shoves up the hem of her dress — can hear the clink of his belt buckle as he yanks at it, one callused palm gliding up the back of her thigh towards —

The kettle starts to scream, and reality comes crashing down around them.

She hears his feet scuff on the floor as he staggers back — hears the muttered “*fuck*” he lets out under his breath.

The kettle’s shrill whistle dies away as it’s yanked off the burner, and she’s still bent over the table. Panting. Momentarily frozen.

When she can manage it, she rises up on shaky elbows, dress fluttering against her thighs as it falls back into place. And when she turns around, she finds him staring at her.

He raises his hands like he’s at gun point, eyes wide and disbelieving, an incredulous huff bursting from his lips. He shakes his head. Clenches those hands into fists and mashes them against his eyes with a groan, turning to face away from her and bracing his hands on the counter.

“I just —” he forces out. “I don’t know what fucking instinct that is, I — *bleeding hell*, you make me act fucking *mad*.”

What she feels she doesn’t expect to feel; an abrupt and overwhelmingly grounding sense of calm. A resolve.

Smoothing out her dress, she sweeps the hair out of her face and takes a slow, steady step toward him.

“Look at me,” she says in a quiet voice when she’s standing right behind him, watching his shoulders tense at her voice, his knuckles going white against the counter.

“Give me a minute to —”

“No,” she raises her voice just a fraction. “Look at me.”

Hesitantly, he turns — jaw tight, body rigid.

But her nerve is suddenly fixed. Rooted deep, unwavering. Perhaps all she needed was a taste of him, after all this time.

"Listen to me very carefully," she says, closing the foot of distance so she can reach out and rest her hand on his chest. On the V-shaped collar of his shirt. There's a set of three buttons that won't do much besides widen the visible expanse of his chest, but she undoes them anyway — pleasantly surprised at the dexterity of her fingers as she listens to his breath hitch.

"What are you—"

"I am so sick and tired of you making decisions for the both of us," she talks over him, still not meeting his eyes. She's distracted by the view of his chest, gaze going a little unfocused as she trails her fingers down the remainder of his shirt towards his open belt buckle. "No one makes my choices for me. You should know that by now. *No one.*" She drags down on the zipper, the sound as its teeth release loud in the otherwise heavy silence. "Are you listening?"

She lifts her eyes to his, quirkling an eyebrow. She's in control now — and *fuck*, if it doesn't feel good.

A deep flush has spread out across his face, his lips parted as he stares at her.

"Do you really think I don't want that?" she asks, tone mild even as she snakes her hand between the waistband of his underwear and the rich heat of his skin.

His grip tightens on the counter, eyes momentarily squeezing shut and jaw twitching as she wraps her fingers around him. He's warm and smooth as velvet, just like she remembers, and he's harder than she expected. She can feel him swelling steadily in her soft grip.

"W-Want..." he manages after a moment, forcing his eyes open though it seems to take great effort. "Want what?"

"You," she answers, slowly dragging her hand up and down the length of him. Once. Twice. "Do you think I would let you do the things you do? The things you've *done*?" She pauses to squeeze, delighting in the way his whole body jerks. "Do you really think I would let you bend me over a table like that if I

And then Theo's choked gasp cuts through the quieter.

"Hello, you."

Pansy's there. An arm's length from him. Just a shadow of her — a gray shade, a sheen.

But she's there.

Hermione's hand flies to her mouth to stifle a sob, and Draco's hand covers hers almost instinctively.

"Pansy..." Theo stammers. It's barely a whisper.

She smiles at him. That same sly, playful smirk she's always had, and she looks so beautiful, even as a shadow. Her glossy black hair flows down over her shoulders like it's weightless, her eyes so bright and alive.

"Still handsome as ever," she says. Her voice is as clear as a bell — and yet also somehow no more than an echo.

Theo is crying. Choking on it — trying in vain to hold it back, his fist pressed against his lips and a tearful, disbelieving smile in his eyes as his chest heaves with sobs.

"Not happy to see me?" Pansy teases, cocking her head to the side with a little laugh, and Hermione sees the faint glint of tears in her own eyes, too.

"Happier than you could ever know," he says when he can manage it, sniffing. Trying to gather a steady breath.

"Took you long enough, Potter," Pansy calls, and suddenly she's looking their way.

Harry laughs quietly. Speaks under his breath. "She doesn't change, does she?"

"No," says Hermione, a smile fighting free as Pansy meets her eyes.

"Still haven't learned how to fix your hair, have you?" she asks, crossing those shadowy arms in front of her and jutting out a hip the way she always used to.

Hermione laughs too. Shakes her head.

Pansy shifts her gaze to Draco. "You. Still an ass?"

"Oh, of course." His tone is arrogant as ever, but when Hermione glances sideways at him, he's wiping roughly at his cheeks. "Still a bitch?"

"Of course." She smiles wryly at him, then looks back to Theo — and it's

Theo makes a quiet noise in the back of his throat. Swallows and coughs, as though to cover it up. “But...it’s real?”

Harry, having stopped just ahead, turns to face him. He gives Theo a solemn nod. “It’s real.” He slips his wand into his pocket then, bending down and sifting a hand through those pine needles. A moment later, he straightens up and takes several steps back. “I shouldn’t touch it,” he says, gesturing to the spot.

Hermione glances sideways at Theo again. Says, “Go on, then,” in a gentle voice before trying to extricate her hand.

He doesn’t let go. Squeezes tighter.

“Are you...”

He nods, throat bobbing as he swallows compulsively. “I’m fine. Fine. I...I just...”

“Do you want us to give you some privacy—”

He’s already shaking his head before she can finish the sentence. “Don’t leave. Please don’t leave.”

It gets impossibly harder to fight back tears. “Okay.”

Only then does he let go of her hand, hesitating another moment before taking a step forward. She moves off to the side — over towards Draco and Harry, giving him a decent amount of space.

He glances over at them when he reaches the spot where the stone is. “Do I need to — to do anything special, or...?”

Harry shakes his head. “Just hold onto it and think of her.”

He makes that noise again. Can’t seem to help it, clearing his throat when it fights its way out. “How long will I have?”

“Not long.”

He nods. Steels himself. She sees the large cloud of steam escape when he breathes out.

And then he bends down and picks it up.

About twenty seconds pass in silence. The air seems to settle low around them, cold. Almost electric. Alive with something. The hair stands up on the back of her neck, a chill riding up her spine.

didn’t want it as badly as you do; What do you take me for?”

A groan he’s been trying to hold back fights its way out as she sweeps her thumb over the swollen head, gathering up the moisture steadily leaking from the tip.

“That’s your mistake. Your one fatal flaw,” she says, starting to pump up and down again. “You decide what you can’t have without *asking*.”

He yanks her to him so suddenly that her grip on him fumbles, hand getting trapped between them as his tongue delves into her mouth.

“Don’t stop,” he pants around her bottom lip when her touch falls away, but even then he’s already turning them around — twisting to pin her up against the counter in that way he can’t seem to help.

She blooms under his touch, opening and loosening and going slack for the first time in so long. Her head falls back as he mouths a burning path down from the corner of her lips to the valley above her collarbone, moaning against her all the while like he’s quenching a desperate thirst. Giving in to a filthy habit.

She doesn’t mind being a habit. Not if it feels like this.

“Why did you do it?” she asks without thinking; eyes closed and mouth agape as he tugs down the sleeve of her dress to expose her shoulder. His teeth graze the skin and she shivers, bucking a little against him. “W-Why — why did you go?”

He doesn’t answer at first. Only drags his tongue back along the expanse between her shoulder and her throat. Her legs start to shake.

“Why...when it feels like this?”

“*Because* it feels like this,” he admits unexpectedly, nipping at her pulse point. “It feels like this, and I know I don’t deserve it.”

She scoffs at that, frustrated by the modesty of his hands resting on her hips. She yanks at one and presses it against her breast through the thin material of the dress, feeling his breath catch against her throat. “Well, that’s fucking ridiculous,” she says.

“I think you swear more than I do, now.”

The sarcasm in his tone has a surprising effect on her, a pulse of heat riding

up her spine.

She drags her head up from where it hangs, placing her lips at his ear. “Apologize to me,” she demands.

“For what?” Oh, he’s playing the game now. It’s a clear challenge.

Threading her fingers into his hair — distracting in its new length, so easy to tangle in — she takes his earlobe into her mouth and suckles at it, hips jutting forward instinctively when he moans.

“For making such a bad decision,” she breathes, tracing the shell of his ear with her tongue. “For wasting two years of my life — and yours. Apologize to me.”

His lips pause just beneath her jaw, warm breath giving her gooseflesh. For a long moment, he just stands there, pressed against her, shoulders rising and falling steadily with each exhale. An unexpected spike of anger flares up in her at the hesitation.

Her tone comes out a little vicious. “Unless you’re too *proud*.”

He goes completely still. Pulls back a moment later, pulls away.

Hermione stands her ground — doesn’t say another word, even as his eyes search hers, expression swimming in them indecipherable.

“Proud,” he echoes, low and quiet. “I’m not proud.”

Her breath catches in the seconds that follow, because he sinks to his knees.

She stares down at him, and he gazes up at her, and slowly — so slowly — his guard falls, and she can see what’s behind his eyes. In all the years she’s known him, she’s never once seen him so vulnerable. A position of utter submission. Just kneeling there in front of her, hands on his thighs, eyes pleading and desperate.

“I’m not proud,” he says again, barely audible. And then he lifts one hand, touch featherlight on her bare shin as the rough pads of his fingers skate up to the back of her thigh. He leans forward, eyes still on hers as he rests his forehead just above her knee. “All I have is shame.”

She can’t help herself. She slides her palm against his cheek, breath stuttering again when he leans so hungrily into the touch, his eyes falling shut.

“I’m a coward, Hermione,” he murmurs against her skin. “I run from things.

“Okay,” Harry says when he thinks they’re far enough.

“Oh, *thank fuck*.” Draco claws at the velvet immediately, yanking it off the three of them like it’s poisonous. The crisp air of the Forest floods in around them, welcome and refreshing.

“Everyone alright?” asks Harry, but his gaze is fixed on Theo.

Hermione glances sideways and finds him still as stone. Only the faintest puffs of breath escape from him — feeble little clouds of steam — and his eyes are unfocused. It’s as though he’s in shock.

She laces her fingers through his. Tries to remember what he once said when she felt the same.

“Come on, Slytherin.”

Theo huffs at that. Seems to snap out of it, if only a little. “Courage isn’t one of our attributes.”

“I disagree,” she says.

Draco suddenly appears on his other side, dropping a hand on his shoulder. “Stubbornness is, though. Let’s get a move on, Notr.” He shoves him forward, and for a moment Hermione thinks it’s too much. Too forceful.

But Theo’s stiff posture seems to slacken all at once, and she remembers she’s not the only one who knows him so well.

“It’s just ahead,” says Harry, already halfway up the hill in front of them.

“I’m amazed you remember where it is.”

He tosses a tucked smile at Hermione over his shoulder. “Sometimes wish I could forget, if I’m honest.”

The words send a brief ache through her chest.

Theo squeezes her hand when they reach the top of the hill, pine needles crunching under their shoes. “Can you — can you explain to me again? How it...how does it work?”

She squeezes back, doing her level best to ward off tears at the uncertainty she hears in his voice. She cannot cry. She has no right to cry. Not if he isn’t. “There is an enchantment on the stone. Whoever holds it can temporarily connect with those they’ve lost.”



Draco only laughs again. An easy, relieved sort of laugh. “She’s been telling me that for five months.”

“As she should. Fucking prick.”

Draco shoves him away and points a finger, still smiling even as he says, “Watch it, yeah? I’ve got every excuse to beat the shit out of you.”

Theo’s brow furrows. It takes him a moment. Then, realizing the implication, he shoots Hermione a horrified sideways glance.

In turn, she looks to Draco, narrowing her eyes. “He knows better than to bring that up.”

“Do I?” he asks. It’s playful — but somehow it’s also anything but. And she can’t even express how grateful she is when another knock sounds at the door.

“Call the Muggle cops on me already?” Theo jokes — and god, she can only hope that sense of humor survives through all of this. She swallows again, clenching and unclenching fists at her sides as she returns to the door.

“Hi, Harry.”

He’s in his Auror robes, wand in hand and his father’s invisibility cloak thrown over his arm. She’d recognize that patterned velvet anywhere. He raises both eyebrows, puffing out a streaming breath in the cold. “Everyone ready?”

She senses Theo appearing behind her.


“Potter?” he blurts out, confused.

Gathering her own deep breath, she turns around in the doorway to face him.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to spend a month overthinking it.”

Theo’s gaze flits between hers and Harry’s over her shoulder, tense and confused.

“I’m... I’m not here for tea?”

 Harry doesn’t let them take the cloak off until they’ve walked a good thirty meters into the Forbidden Forest. Theo spends that walk in complete silence — only the occasional nervous breath skating past his lips. She spends it worrying. And Draco spends it complaining about Harry not owning a more spacious invisibility cloak — which is probably the only thing that keeps the tension from boiling over.

I — I’m weak, and I always have been.”

That anger flares in her again, sharper than before. She takes his chin in hand less than gently, urging his eyes to meet hers. “You are *not* weak,” she growls, teeth bared. Furious. “And I don’t ever want to hear you say it again.”

His eyes flash, expression flickering through so many emotions in a matter of seconds. Shattering, igniting, bleeding, breaking apart.

And then something seems to take over, and he’s lifting his head — rising up from where he rests back on his ankles. Both hands find the fronts of her thighs, sliding up slow and deliberate and taking the hem of her dress with them.

His eyes are locked on hers, dark and full of intent now as he lifts the dress up to her waist, fisting one hand in the fabric. The other finds the back of her knee again and drags her legs apart.

She bites down hard on her lip, a sharp pulse fanning out low in her stomach.

“These are nice,” he murmurs, hooking a finger in the thin band of the black lace piece she chose this morning.

“Wishful thinking,” she admits in a whisper — doesn’t mean to say it out loud.

The briefest grin spreads across his face at that, disappearing a moment later as he presses a kiss to her inner thigh, dragging down her underwear while he does it.

“I’m sorry,” he breathes against her skin, teeth grazing close, too close — not close enough. Her hands scramble to grip the counter tight as he tosses the scrap of lace somewhere behind him, mind racing. She didn’t think it would go this way. Didn’t dare to dream. It was just wishful —

His mouth takes to her mercilessly, and her hips buck, a strangled, startled little shriek ripping its way out of her throat. He moans and drags himself closer, burying his face between her thighs as he laves his tongue from the apex to her entrance.

“*Fuck*, you taste the same,” he says against her, and in an instant he becomes ravenous. His jaw twists back and forth like he wants to taste every inch, only pulling away to gasp and come up for air. Pressure and warmth and the smooth

lick of his tongue, the graze of his teeth where she's far too sensitive.

She trembles and writhes and even thrashes once or twice, and all the while he keeps saying it. Soft and reverent, like a prayer.

*"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."*

"Okay," she gasps each time in response. "Okay. God, okay."

Once, he even whispers, "Forgive me," as he hitches her leg up over his shoulder, spreading her wide — opening her up. She comes fast and hard, almost immediately as he slides a finger inside of her, clenching around him and seizing up. Knotting her fingers in his hair.

"O-One...one day," she stammers as she comes down from the high, shaking and fighting him when he doesn't stop. Doesn't pull away. "One day I will. There's a clumsiness to it all. A desperation.

Almost like they're fifteen again. Like they don't share a war between them. Like the world is different.

*"I don't have a condom."*

*"That's okay. It's okay."*

A stumbling up stairs, shoes and shirts and inhibitions scattered and left behind. Questions and conversations strung between the breathless rock of his body against hers.

"Where are we?" she wants to know as he pins her wrists above her head on the pillow.

"Wales."

"How — how long did you look?" he asks as she straddles him, as his hands guide her hips up and down, back and forth.

"Too long."

With his sheets gathered in her fists and his damp chest against her back, weighing her down — with the scent of him everywhere — she can't stop herself from asking.

"Has there been anyone? Any — *Christ*, anyone? Anyone else?"

"No."

He doesn't ask her the same until he's chased her over the edge for the second

wonder what the fuck is going on, and then he'll be nervous, and that'll make you *more* nervous, and then Potter will just get nervous by proxy, and I don't want to be the only sane one here."

She scoffs and swats at him, moving towards the door. "As if you were ever sane to begin with."

Her hand still shakes when she reaches for the knob. She doesn't want to hope for what can never be guaranteed. It's part of the reason Theo knows nothing about it. But she also can't fathom failing him. Not again. Not like that day on the Manor floor, looking into those desperate eyes with nothing to say. No way to help.

That can't happen again.

Swallowing the knot in her throat, she opens the door.

"How is it already so fucking cold in Wales?" asks Theo from the porch, shoulders hunched as he blows warm air into his gloved hands.

She huffs a laugh. Can't help a smile. "Come on in, then." And she steps aside for him, pulling the door the rest of the way open.

Theo steps over the threshold, kicks mud off his boots, then looks up and sees Draco. For the first time in two and a half years.

He's about as eloquent as she was.

*"You bastard."*

Draco crosses his arms, leaning back against the table in that superior way he does and raising an eyebrow. "Takes one to know one."

They stare at one another for a good fifteen seconds in silence, and Hermione's not sure what to make of it.

Draco breaks first, choking on a laugh and pushing off the table, and then a smile spreads its way slowly across Theo's face. She pretends that's all she sees. Not the tears in his eyes. Not the hitch in his breath.

They meet in the middle, an embrace so rough it's almost aggressive — arms hooked around necks and faces tucked into shoulders.

"Fuck you for doing that to her," she hears Theo mutter as he thumps him on the back.

he'd said. "I'm sure you understand why. But I'm meant to oversee a sweep with a team of Aurors before the school year begins. Seek out any potential threats. We could do it then."

She'd barely been able to nod her head, she was crying so hard.

That was a month ago. A month that felt like a year.

And now it's the 1st.

"When does he get here?" Draco reaches up high to put away the last of the dishes in the top cupboard, and she catches herself admiring the long, agile shape of him. She'll probably never be used to seeing him so healthy. Never get over the way it makes something in her chest swell with warmth.

"Theo should be here any minute. Harry, I'm not sure."

Draco scoffs. "Leave it to Potter to show up whenever he pleases."

"You do realize he's violating at least a dozen Auror protocols for this. He's even letting *you* go — which, as I think you know, is more than just a violation, it's illegal."

"It's really the least he could do—"

"Malfoy."

He turns to face her when he hears that tone, tossing away the dishrag and moving to lean against the table in front of her. "*Granger*," he echoes, flashing a devious little grin and reaching out to flick the tip of her nose. "Lighten up, I'm only joking."

She lets out a breath, realizing only then how nervous she is. "What if this goes wrong?"

That finger slips down from her nose to her chin, tilting it up to make her look him in the eyes. "Do they offer positions in worrying?"

A weak smile slips free. He's asked this before.

"Maybe," she says.

"You should look into it."

"I will."

The knock at the door startles them both. No one ever knocks here.

"Don't act so nervous," Draco says when she stands. "If you're nervous, he'll

time — not until he's limp and panting on top of her, nosing at the column of her throat.

She cries when she tells him about Theo. Expects to lose everything. Expects to watch his eyes disappear for the last time behind the slam of a door.

She doesn't expect him to kiss her fiercely, brows drawn in tight, fist in her hair near bruising. Doesn't expect him to slide back inside of her, raw and sore, and ask her to promise him — "*swear to me*" — never to speak of it again.

Sweat-laden and strewn out across his chest, his arm belted around her waist — he's *never* held her this way — she can't help but ask again.

"Why did you leave?"

For too many seconds, he stares up at the ceiling in silence, and she just waits for him. Traces her fingers along the line of his jaw.

"You read the letter." His voice is scratchy. Exhausted. His lips are swollen.

"Yes." She rests her chin on his chest so she can meet his eyes. "And then I burned that letter and spent the next two years of my life trying to undo every word of it." A kiss pressed to his sternum to soften the blow. "So suffice it to say your answer wasn't good enough."

He blinks slowly at her — drowsy and drunk on orgasm. "You want the truth?"

She nods.

"The cold, hard truth?"

She nods firmly.

"I hate the idea of us together. I *hate* it."

Hermione works to keep her face blank, waiting for him to finish. He deserves that much. She can hold her breath a little longer.

Draco tugs on a stray curl, pushing it out of her face. "It's the basic law of things. Good should have good. Bad should have nothing. Light needs more light. Darkness only thinks about itself."

She can't imagine the look on her face, but whatever it is, it makes him raise an eyebrow.

"You think I'm light?" she huffs.

He doesn't respond. He can hold his breath, too.

She stretches against him, swinging her leg over his hip to plant her hands on either side of his head and prop herself up. "This might be difficult for you to remember — what, being *two fucking years ago* — but I've cast my fair share of Unforgiveables." She leans down. Lets her lips hover over his. "I tortured a man and *liked* it. I no longer qualify as light."

She kisses him when he opens his mouth to speak, lingering a moment too long when his tongue flicks against hers.

"And you saved my life. More than once. Why can't you be satisfied?" She drags his lip out between her teeth, meeting his eyes through her lashes before setting it free. "*We* — are a gray area. Be satisfied."

His breath hitches. He reaches out to trace her lips. "I am more than satisfied."

"*Then come back with me.*"

A myriad of emotions crosses his face — conflicted and torn. "I can't."

"Why not? You — well, you sort of exiled yourself, didn't you? Prematurely. I don't think it would be all that difficult to—"

"Hermione, I *won't*."

She swallows her words. Stares at him, feeling her chest tighten.

"Listen to me." He sits up, taking her with him — bracing her in his lap. "Listen. I need you to understand. I need this. I like this. This is...it's good for me. I feel strong, for once. Useful. Capable. In control." He finds her hand, limp at her side, pulling it up and holding it between them. "Feel this." He uses his other hand to trace her fingers down his palm. Callused. Rough. "I feel like I've *lived*."

She exhales slowly. Knows he can feel her shaking.

There's an apology in his voice when he speaks again, letting her hand fall away. "I can't go back."

It takes an unprecedented amount of time to force herself to ask what she does next. She's more terrified of the answer than she thinks she's been of anything else in her life.

And no, she's *not* going to allow him to practice Muggle photography by taking naked photos of her. No. Not a chance.

But those three days are also sometimes spent on that rocky beach out in front of the cottage, teaching him how to sew and how to use an MP3 player. Spent watching old, horrible Muggle horror films on the sofa he's very proud to have picked out himself. Spent adjusting — recalibrating, recuperating. Remembering how to breathe again.

She can't use magic in his presence, and yet she's never felt the need to.

It's apparently common knowledge in the Wizarding community that she found him.

*Witch Weekly* paid photographers to follow her around in the weeks after she first returned from Wales, and an alarming number of gossip columnists suggested she looked too well-adjusted for someone who'd lost a lover. They printed full-page articles with comparisons — photographs from those two years previous and photographs from the present.

Even she admits the difference is staggering.

But Draco's name remains stricken from every record, his location a secret bound by Unbreakable Vows between a select few. Herself, the Minister, Narcissa Malfoy, Harry and Theo.

*Theo...*

It couldn't go on.

She spent an entire evening after work pouring her heart out to Harry about it, several pints deep at the Leaky Cauldron. Because how is she supposed to leave him behind? How can she move ahead knowing he can't? How is that fair? How is it even *human*?

Harry, though — with a depth of empathy unmatched by anyone she's ever met — offered the only thing he could. Something he could offer only once. Something — possibly the *only* thing — that could ever hope to stitch Theo back together again.

And it has to happen today.

"Hogwarts is very cautious about who can access the Grounds, and when,"

The first time she met with Kingsley, she tried to argue for a reversal of the entire arrangement — against Draco's wishes, and at the expense of every dish in that small Wales kitchen. He smashed them all to bits when he found out, shouting about his *'own fucking choices'* as he launched bowls at walls.

They went several rounds over that one, screaming at each other well into the early hours of the morning across a floor covered in shattered glass.

By sunrise, they reached a compromise. He has a bad habit of slamming his lips to hers in the middle of a sentence, almost always when she's got an important point to make. But it's difficult to form coherent thoughts with his mouth tracing intricate shapes down the length of her throat.

*"I don't want to go back."*

*"I don't want you to lose everything."*

He made some sort of joke at that. Something about the Wizarding World being spared his shockingly offensive journal entries. But then he went quiet, laughter dying off as the gears turned.

*"What if — what if I could help?"*

As it turned out, the St. Mungo's Trauma Rehabilitation Program was a disaster. Very little by way of regulations. No accountability. An abysmal success rate. And of course there's the utter uselessness of that whole one-way treatment plan.

With a little sway from Harry, Hermione got herself appointed to the Ministry Board overseeing it. She began implementing significant reforms immediately, chief of which being Draco's contribution.

The Co-Recovery Initiative.

He hates the name — *"Despicably uncreative."* — but he was one of the first to volunteer, under a pseudonym of course. And from now on, once a week, she'll be bringing him back letters from assigned patients in the program and returning with experienced — albeit immensely crass — words of wisdom.

She spends three days out of the week in Wales, and the rest in London. Those three days are usually spent arguing, if she's honest. About how, no, he *doesn't* know more about television antennas than she does. And no, that *isn't* al dente.

"And...and if I stay with you instead...?"

His expression flickers. Brows furrow. It takes him almost as long as it took her to admit it.

"I didn't think I could have both."

There's a pause in which they both draw in a breath. And then her mouth lands on his — hard and disbelieving. "God damn you, you only had to *ask*." She takes his face in her hands, only able to break away from his lips every few seconds to get the words out. "I want — you by my side — and inside of me — and next to me when I wake up in the morning — *every morning*. And if this — is where I have to be — to have that — then this — is where I'll be."

He makes a sound against her lips — wounded or elated, she isn't sure — and yanks her suddenly back beneath him. It's slow and heady and nebulous. He takes her gently, with her thigh in his grasp, hitched up against his side. With his mouth on hers and his eyes squeezed shut.

"Just...just love me," she pants around a kiss.

"I am. I do."

"Love me."

"I — fuck, *Hermione* — I do."

"Stay with me."

"I will."

*April 14th, 2007*

*Diary,*

*You don't know what it's like. To wake up and see her there.*

*But I do.*

*Draco*



September 1st, 2001

Michael,

*Congratulations, I've been assigned to you. You should consider yourself lucky. I'm not going to make you write any ridiculous fucking prompts, I'm not going to tell you to watch your language, and I'm probably not going to judge you for your exceptionally poor life choices unless you do something really fucking ridiculous. When I had to do this myself, no one on the other end of it had to respond to me, so just know you're getting a much better deal.*

*First and foremost, your mother sounds like a cunt—*

SHE FLIPS THE TOP HALF OF THE PAGE DOWN SO SHE CAN SEE HIS FACE.

"No."

"No, what?"

"No, you can't send this."

"Why not? What's wrong with it?" He's leaning against the sink, aggressively drying a teacup with a dishrag, and he sounds genuinely confused.

She raises an eyebrow. "Would you like a list?"

"What?" He waves the rag at her. "It's honest. It's straightforward. Poor,

pathetic Michael What-So-Fuck probably just needs someone to tell it like it is for once."

She leaves that eyebrow where it is. "If you want this program to last longer than a week, you'll have to refrain from calling the subject's mother a cunt." She glances back at the letter. "And you'll have to tone down the arrogance significantly."

He raises an eyebrow back at her, lip curving up on one side. "What arrogance?"

She huffs a laugh and tosses it onto the kitchen table. "Fix it. Before Kingsley changes his mind."

Draco rolls his eyes. "It was Kingsley's fucking idea."

That's not entirely true. Kingsley signed off on it, of course, but really the concept came from Draco. One of his *'only good ideas'* she often tells him — because she likes the way it makes his face screw up.

In truth, it's brilliant. Not only a public service, but also a purpose for him. A link to the world he chose to leave behind in peace.

He still can't go back. His wand will remain locked up in a Ministry vault; perhaps one day it might be returned to the Malfoy Estate, when enough time has passed, but never to him.

But there was something impossibly wrong about it, when she found him. Something utterly unfair in watching him work a menial Muggle job — the only sort he could manage with such limited knowledge of Muggle life. He, with all his talents. All his brilliance left behind in the Wizarding World.

So she'd returned to the Ministry. Risked arrest admitting she'd sought him out. Kingsley had been stern about it until she insisted she was entirely to blame. After all, Draco never asked her to find him. Perhaps didn't *want* her to find him.

She tries not to think on that. Can't help it sometimes — even admitted it to Draco once, in the middle of the night, tangled up in the dark. His response was brief. Uncompromising.

"Don't be an idiot, Granger."