

But Madam Pomfrey is expecting her — less than an hour from now, in fact — and when she lurches out of bed, her stomach lurches too. She shuffles into the lavatory, knocking into things and cradling her head.

She doesn't truly start work in the Hospital Wing until next week, but today was scheduled as a training day. She won't allow herself to miss it because of a self-inflicted migraine.

Avoiding mirrors at all costs, she uses her wand to wash, dress and repair what is undoubtedly an owl's nest on top of her head. The stairs leading down to the common room are a much larger beast to slay, and she finds herself gripping the walls to keep her balance the whole way down.

The common room is something of a mess. Confetti and streamers litter the floor. Empty bottles clutter every surface. The stains on the ruby red carpet could be any number of things. And yet the majority of Gryffindor is already awake and sitting amongst it, talking over tea and enjoying a slow Saturday morning.

She sighs, flicking her wand to rid the room of the mess as she passes through, finding an empty sofa in the corner on which to down a few shots of espresso.

Gaze in her lap, forehead buried in her palm, she's one shot in when she first starts to feel the eyes on her.

She looks up once — quickly, expecting to pass it off as nothing. But they are *most certainly* staring. All of them. Dean, Seamus, Parvati, Harry, Ginny...every Gryffindor already awake. They aren't even trying to hide it.

She bristles, sitting up straighter. Had they never seen her drunk before? Last night can't have been that scandalous. Not enough to deserve this. Each of them look equal parts confused and shocked in their own right.

"What?" she snaps. "Have I got something on my face?"

For a long moment, no one says a word, but they have the nerve to continue to stare, unashamed. It's Harry, though, who breaks the silence at long last.

"...Little lower..." he murmurs.

It surprises her. That's it? Something on her chin or neck? What, a stain? Vomit, god forbid? Even then, there'd be no need to *stare*. Not like that. She huffs angrily, heaving herself back onto her feet as she swallows another bitter

corner, dressed in fine velvet robes. She wears her hair in a long braid over her shoulder, and her glasses are perched on the end of her nose.

"Good afternoon, Headmaster," says Havershim, straightening up and adjusting the tilt of her green, pointed hat. "I'm sorry to be visiting under such circumstances."

McGonagall's watchful eyes have moved past her — settled on Hermione and Malfoy, a slightly arched brow the only shift in her expression. "And what circumstances are those, exactly?" She moves to sit at her desk, the high back of the chair much further from her head than it'd been from Dumbledore's. Hermione is surprised she notices.

"I'm afraid I happened upon these two in the girl's lavatory, down in the dungeons. The place was blown to bits. Sinks and toilets everywhere — and here's these two standing in the middle of all of it. Looked as though they'd been dueling."

At this, McGonagall's brow furrows deeply. She motions with two fingers for them to come forward as she asks Havershim, "Do we know the cause?"

Hermione opens her mouth then, but Havershim is already speaking.

"It appears the Malfoy boy was looking for trouble."

A noise leaps out of Hermione's throat. Sort of an incredulous, little squeak. She whips her head around to look at Havershim — who seems quite content with her summation — and then at Malfoy, who doesn't try to defend himself. Doesn't even look angry, or surprised. He just sets his jaw and stares straight ahead.

"I imagine Miss Granger acted in self-defense, seeing as—"

"Professor, *no*," Hermione manages at last. "No. You're *wrong*." And she turns — comes to stand at the edge of McGonagall's desk. "Please, Headmaster, she's wrong."

McGonagall regards her with a calm, even gaze. "You were not acting in self-defense, Miss Granger?"

"No, Headmaster."

"So it was you who attacked Mr. Malfoy?"

She can't believe how twisted it's all gotten within the span of a half hour. "No — I...no, Headmaster, it isn't what it looks like at all," she says, exasperated. She glances back at Malfoy, and he looks confused, if anything. Still, though, he doesn't speak.

Hermione sighs and looks back to McGonagall. "It was me, Headmaster. I destroyed the lavatory. And — and Malfoy just happened upon me."

"You?" Professor Havershim splutters. "What *ever* for?"

Hermione doesn't answer her. Just holds McGonagall's gaze — hopes she'll understand, in some way, that it isn't something she can explain. That there is no rulebook for coping. That her head is a mess and her actions are a byproduct.

"I'll fix it myself," is all she says. "And I'll do detention, for however long you'd like."

"Miss Granger —" McGonagall starts, and her eyes are starting to fill with that pity Hermione can't bear to see.

"Please, Headmaster," she breathes.

McGonagall pauses. Shuts and purses her lips. She looks between Hermione and Malfoy for another long moment and then sits back. "A week then," she says gently. "I'll have you brewing antidotes with Horace." It's hardly a detention. Everyone in the office knows that. But McGonagall's word is final, despite what Havershim seems to think. As she and Malfoy are dismissed, she hears Havershim start to argue with her in hushed tones. But Malfoy has the greater half of her attention. He's fast. By the time she's made it down the spiral staircase, he's halfway across the hall. She chases after him — calls out "Malfoy, wait!" before she even knows what she plans to say. Or why. She has to call out twice more to get him to stop, and when he does, his back is rigid. He doesn't turn to her, even when she stops about a foot away.

"I — I'm sorry," she says after a moment, and she wonders why she feels the need.

"What do you care?" is his clipped reply.

"I — I just am. It wasn't fair." She feels awkward where she stands. Overexposed and clumsy.



October 3rd, 1998

Diary,

I...

Well it's really none of your business, is it? As for your prompt. "List some of the scents that bring you calm. Consider placing them around your bed at night."

Don't tell me how to organize my nightstand. But, if you must know — chamomile, cedarwood and pine. I'd say mint, but I'm sick of it.

That's all I have for you. I'm sure you'll chew me out for it.

Draco

October 3rd, 1998

IT'S A HANGOVER.

Not her worst, but decidedly her most recent — and it always feels like the worst in the moment. She wakes up in sticky, sweat-laden sheets with her hair damp and tangled and her temples throbbing.

It's overcast, thank *god*, but even the pale light leaking in through the bed curtains is too much. Makes her squint.

She wants to stay in bed. Lie there all day and swear off Butterbeer forever. Wants to piece together her memories of the party last night and determine exactly how much she had. Any other Saturday, and she might've.

Malfoy stumbles back, startled and she has to grip one of the shelves to keep from collapsing without his body supporting her. Every inch of her skin prickles. Feels raw. Her lips tingle. Her chest heaves.

And she stares at him because she can't form words.

He runs a hand through his disheveled hair — did she do that? Straightens his tie and untucks his shirtfront. Drags it down over — *oh*.

He stands there, gathering breath for a long while. But when he opens his mouth to speak, the full weight of reality comes crashing down on her, and she can't bear to hear whatever he has to say. Can't bear to try and make sense of the last ten minutes.

So she runs.

“Very little in this life is fair, Granger.”

“No, I *know*, I just —” Why is she stuttering? “I don't know why Haversham thought —”

He cuts her off, face jutting to the side, in profile, “She thought. McGonagall thought. They'll all think tomorrow.” And then he turns that last quarter of the way to meet her eyes, gaze searing. “That's bias for you, Granger.”

She falters.

“And you should know all about that.”

A moment later he's gone.



September 14th, 1990

Diary,

Saint Potter has it out for me. I'm writing this so you'll know who killed me when it eventually happens, yeah? Take notes.

He's been playing at me all week, during meals, and I'll be honest — it would be a lot more threatening without those ridiculous glasses. I've no idea what the wastrel~~he~~ sees in him. Squawfaced, round-speckled ponce. Surprised he's not on a victory tour across Europe. Soaking in the glory.

But he's here, and he's going to try and kill me, alright? And he'll make it look like an accident. He thinks I went after Granger, which is just — Merlin's right tit, don't get me started. As if I'd waste my time on something like that. I don't even have the bloody energy. Give me a little credit.

Anyhow. Here's your prompt.

"Think of some constructive measures to help you through. List them."

1. "Drops would be really helpful."
2. "How about some drops?"
3. "Oh — I know! Drops!"

I'm assuming you've sent them along and the parcel's just been delayed by a wayward owl.

For your own good, that'd better be true.

Draco

wakes up and falls asleep all at once.

She makes her own sound — a desperate sort of keen she didn't know she was capable of making and she wants him closer and she doesn't know why and her tongue meets his — flutters against it and it makes his hands tighten in her hair. Knot in it and draw her in further, if possible. Increase the pressure of the kiss.

And it's just about then that she realizes how much she wants this. Somewhere between his tongue delving deep and his eyelashes brushing against hers. Between the glass crunching under their feet and the chill of his touch. She — she *wants* this.

Her trembling hand leaves his tie. Finds the smooth expanse along the side of his throat. He gasps. Drops his hands from her hair. Belts his arms around her lower back instead and draws her body up against his.

He's cold. He's so cold. Why is he —

He spins them around. Presses her back against one of the bookshelves. Pulls her hips forward and slams them back against the wood as he kisses her, over and over again. And it's warm, suddenly — hot — and he tastes like — he tastes *good* — and her heart's stuttering and her brain is scrambled and heat pulses low and she doesn't — she doesn't — she can't reconcile the feel of his body against hers. The distinct, unspeakable hardness she feels against her inner thigh, and the racing pulse of his heart against her chest and —

He breaks away from her mouth, lips seeking something different, something *new*, and she doesn't know what it is to be kissed like this. But his mouth is where her pulse hammers — right beside her jugular and she idly thinks that he could rip her throat out with his teeth right now if he wanted to. Except it's his tongue — *oh* — his tongue that's tracing the veins in her neck, sweeping up and down where they run thick with blood and pausing every now and then so that he can warm the skin with his lips — suckle at it. She feels the bruises forming. Feels the rational thoughts escaping. But the sounds are wet and wanton and he's right below her ear and his hips are molded against hers and she *can't*, she can't, she can't, she —

One of the flying books misses its mark and crashes into a wall.

Draco and Em

it's just as cold and the words are ripped out of her throat and he's—

He's there.

His lips are on hers. His frozen, frosted lips. Against hers. Leeching the warmth out of them. Cold like stone. Unmoving. Just his mouth, folded over hers, waiting there.

Her pulse seems to panic. Stutters to a halt, then desperately tries to start up again. Beats too fast.

Malfoy's mouth is on hers. He's — he's not quite kissing her, but he's there. He's *right* there, and it's not kissing. Not quite, not *yet*, but —

It's her gasp that does it. Opens her mouth for him.

And *then* he's kissing her.

His hands find the edges of her jaw and he slants his mouth over hers and his lips force hers to part and — and he swallows that gasp. Swallows it and her next breath in one, and then his own breath gusts out against her lips — shaky, cold, with hints of peppermint — and his fingers bury into her curls and his nose brushes against the stretch of skin beneath her cheekbone that she'd never found important until now and he's *kissing* her.

What...what is this?

Her mind reels. Her fingers shake where they've stalled halfway from stopping him. Halfway between pushing him away — and starting something else. She...she doesn't know. Doesn't understand. Doesn't—

Oh.

His tongue brushes across the edges of her teeth. Flicks up in some erotic, enigmatic way she doesn't understand but it sends a pulse through her. Forms a knot in her lower stomach, no — *lower* — that tightens and builds tension. And he makes this sound. This quiet, little, soft sort of — she doesn't know what it is. Not a gasp, not a groan. Something subtle, something that's a mix between the two.

It does something, though. Lights up whatever nerve center that controls her hands and not her head, and she's suddenly tangling her fingers in his shirtfront. Twisting one around his tie. Pulling him in. Pulling him closer. And it's like she

September 19th, 1998

Goyle and Fawcett

It's A BAD DAY. She can feel it coming on, even as she wakes. The looming sense of dread. Like a heavy black curtain falling from above. She's had many mornings like these.

And so she takes counteractive measures.

She's got one more detention with Slughorn this afternoon, but otherwise it's a Saturday, and she's finished her homework ages ago.

The dappled light slipping in through the window beside her bed suggests it's as early as six o'clock. And yet she can't sleep another moment. She sits up. Slips her wand off the nightstand and casts a spell to tame her curls, feeling them right themselves around her head.

She moves quietly through the dormitory, maneuvering around the sleeping girls as she shrugs into a thick, chenille sweater — tucks her feet into a pair of boots. The days have been warm, but September mornings are anything but. And she wants to be outside. Needs to be, on a day like this.

Hogwarts is more peaceful in the morning. It has a less foreboding edge than late at night, but is equally empty. Equally calm. Even the ghosts rest, and the silence is a relief. Outside, on the Grounds, it's even better. Even quieter, and what few sounds break through are welcome ones — birds; water lapping; wind against blades of grass.

She's drawn to the Lake again. Didn't get to enjoy it properly last time, what with Malfoy...

Thinking about him brings back what he said the week before. About bias. She still isn't sure if he was accusing her of something, or if it was a comment about her blood status.

They were both right, though. Mandy Brocklehurst's spin on the story was the one that stuck, and by Wednesday of that week, the whole school assumed Malfoy had made an attempt on Hermione's life. Mind you, it changed very little about his reputation. His family is disgraced. Just like the Goyle's and the Parkinson's. People will talk no matter what fuel they're given.

It doesn't make her feel better — but she squashes the thought before she has the chance to feel sorry for him. Reminds herself that he's a Death Eater. He chose this life. He comes from a family of *murderers*, and with any luck he would've joined them. So that's that.

She itches at her scar, then remembers what Madam Pomfrey said and gives it two sharp snacks instead. Itching inflames. Sharp pressure, though — it distracts from the pain a little better.

The grass grows soggy underfoot as she stops at the edge of the Lake, day breaking over the distant mountains like a bright eye peering through the crack of a door. She casts a drying spell. Pulls the wool blanket from her bag and lays it out, sitting cross-legged and drawing in a deep breath of crisp air.

In the distance, the Giant Squid flicks up one of its arms, breaking the surface and sending small waves lapping toward her.

This. This is what she needed.

She practices charms for a while. Conjures a ring of flowers and pastel-colored mushrooms around her blanket. The dandelions have yawning lion's heads and snap at one another, and the roses change colors every other moment. She creates a small whirlpool in the lake in front of her. Sends flower petals swirling through it. Conjures a weeping cherry tree, off to the side.

Little by little, birds begin to discover her small oasis. They hover over the flowers. Perch themselves in the tree and sing to her.

There's a Muggle thermos in her bag. She doesn't know why, but she brought it with her. Something tangible, from home. From her parents. It's dented and cracked, the color faded to an off-brown, but having it gives her a melancholy sort of comfort.

With a flick of her wand, the thermos fills with coffee, sweet-smelling and steaming in the cold air. Warming the tip of her nose. She takes a sip, and it's nice — it's gentle. But it's not enough. Which is precisely why she slipped a nip of Baileys Irish Cream into her bag as well.

And that's how he finds her. Dosing her coffee with whiskey at half past six in the morning.

when she looks back at him, she's quite pleased with her summation.

Until she sees the look in his eyes and realizes just exactly what she said.

His look of surprise isn't an obvious one — his lids aren't blown wide and his mouth isn't hanging open. It's a deeper sort of surprise. One that's detectable in the slight quiver in the muscles between his brows. In the flicker in his bottomless gaze. In the way his tongue dashes out of his mouth — nervously wets his lips.

She feels the blush fan out across her face like a wildfire, and she scrambles to remedy what she's said. "I — I, well, you see, I meant — I meant that you're attractive. No — not conventionally, *uniquely*. No — *what?* No. I just meant that you're beautiful and I — *oh, my god — what the fuck is —* no. Malfoy. *Draco*. God. I — I just meant that I've always thought you're —" and with a little shriek, she claps a hand over her mouth. Stops the runaway train that's on bloody *fire* at this point.

What — in — god's — name?

Now, Malfoy's surprise is obvious. Now it's written all over his face.

And she forces her eyes away because she can't bear to look at him and she stares at the jug on the table and tries to collect herself and *dear god, what was —* She freezes. Takes in a slow, steady breath. There's a long silence.

And her voice is low and murderous when it finally comes out. "I'm going to kill him."

It breaks Malfoy, briefly, from his daze. "Who?"

She yanks the jug off the table — smacks it against his arm as she does but doesn't notice. And she holds it up to her nose. Inhales.

In the next instant, she throws it to the library floor, and it shatters with a satisfying, somehow deafening crash. "*Fucking Seamus!*" she screams. She whirls around — begins to step over the shards as the tell-tale scent of Veritas serum starts to waft up at them. "*I'm going to —*"

His hand is on her wrist, then. His alarmingly cold hand, and she doesn't understand. In the next instant, he's yanked her back. Turned her back around with a sharp tug and his other hand is suddenly molded against her cheek and

Malfoy quirks an eyebrow at her. It's a very elegant, aristocratic sort of eyebrow, she realizes, and it's a surprisingly dark shade of blond considering his hair. She follows it down as it relaxes, eyes snapping back to his when the weight of the jug transfers into his hands.

Step back.

He takes a large swig. She finds herself watching his throat as he swallows. And when he hands it back, she asks, "What about you? Why aren't you drinking with Slytherin tonight?" She sips. "I assume Friday nights are just as sacred down in the Dungeons."

"Probably more so, to be honest." He shrugs. "But I like to drink alone."

"You're drinking with me, right now," she points out.

"Well spotted." He takes the jug back.

"So, then what?"

He shrugs again. Glances away as he takes the second to last sip. "I'm not exactly well-liked, Granger."

She's almost too shocked to take back the jug. "But — I.."

He quirks that damned eyebrow again.

"Even in Slytherin?" she manages. "But...in earlier years—"

"Even then," he says. "I think they were more afraid of my father. Afraid of him and therefore friendly to me."

She wonders why the thought of it makes her sad. Why she feels the need to—

"I'm sure that isn't true."

"Yeah, well—"

"No, I'm sure it isn't," she insists. "Plenty of people liked you. Like Crab—"

she stops herself. Fumbles for another name. "*Pansy*. Pansy liked you." Malfoy laughs, then. A thick, throaty laugh she doesn't think she's ever heard before. "Pansy liked my sizeable inheritance — as well as the highly likely possibility of an arranged marriage, at least at the time."

"No, not just that," she says as she sets the jug on the table behind him. "You're handsome and intelligent and I'm sure she liked you for that, too." And

She hears him before she sees him — the crunch of his shoes. Knows it's him. Who *else* would it be? At this hour, and with her rotten luck? Who *else*?

"Malfoy," she says — an acknowledgment — and she just stares straight ahead, holding the thermos up to her lips.

"Day drinking, yeah Granger?" he draws. His voice is thick with sleep.

She sips. Swallows. Waits for him to leave.

And after a moment of silence, there's more crunching in the grass. But it's louder. He takes a seat on the wool at her side, and she has no idea why, but he's there, and his weight tugs some of the blanket out from under her and she can't help but sneak a glance at him out the corner of her eye.

He's in the stocking cap again, and a thin, overlong sweater, the color of dark chocolate. He's also barefoot, of all things, and the skin on his feet is a pale bluish shade.

"Where are your shoes?" she asks primly, taking another sip.

He doesn't answer. Leans forward instead and thumbs one of the purple mushrooms. Taps and flicks at it until it snaps in half.

She sighs. "What do you *want*?"

"You don't own the Lake, Granger."

"Yes, but I do own—" she tugs roughly, to no avail; grunts, "this — *blanket*, so could you *please*—"

Malfoy sits back, sprawling his legs out and crossing them at the ankles. He flexes his toes against the petals of the flowers and scoffs, "What exactly is all this?"

"Something I was supposed to have to myself."

"Sharing is caring, Granger." He shoots her a tainted smirk. "Isn't that what you Muggles always say?"

She splutters. "I am *not* a—"

"Oh, sorry — right. I meant Mud—"

She casts a wordless *Accio*. Yanks the blanket out from under him, and he slips, sliding down the hill a bit until his feet splash into the water.

And then he laughs. Sticks his feet in further until the legs of his trousers are

wet. “Always *were* good with spells.”

She takes a large swig of coffee in favor of saying anything else. Decides he doesn’t deserve a response. And she glares unhappily at her ring of flowers. They start to wilt as her mood sours. The mushrooms grow deformed. How many more moments is he planning to ruin?

He can’t even let her throw a proper fit without showing up and taking all the credit. *She* decimated that bathroom. *She* did.

Fucking *bastard*.

He doesn’t try to sit next to her again, and instead moves himself closer to the edge of the grass. She watches him roll up the bottoms of his trousers until they’re cuffed at his knees. And then he dips both legs into the water.

The temperature must be well below freezing.

But Malfoy behaves like he’s just stuck them in a bath. His posture relaxes — spine slackens.

And then there’s quiet.

Long quiet. Enough that one of the flowers comes back to life. Malfoy’s got his eyes closed and his breathing is slow and even, and idly, she thinks that — without obscenities spewing out of his mouth every other second, without that sneer on his face — his presence is almost forgettable. Tolerable.

She casts a charm on the thermos to warm it back up, because it’s old and really, it doesn’t work at all. Still, she keeps it. Uses it whenever she can.

Staring at the slow sunrise, she sips and thinks. Thinks and sips. Wonders a lot. Can’t help but wonder a little about Malfoy. He was barefoot to begin with, but now she can see the blue of hypothermia bleeding into his knees. His lips are purple.

But he doesn’t shiver.

Doesn’t anything bother him at all?

“What did you put in that?” he asks, and she jerks her eyes away. Knows he’s caught her staring.

“Put in what?”

“The coffee.”

He tilts his head a little to the side, so that some of the blond falls into his eyes. “Didn’t mean to hurt you,” he says. And it’s a fascinating phrase. A sentence she never thought to hear from his mouth.

It surprises her.

“I know you didn’t,” she says, and her voice is quieter now. Less vibrant. Less playful. The Butterbeer is wearing off, perhaps.

A long silence passes between them. All she can hear is the sifting of books as they fly across and stack themselves, and that’s distant at best. They aren’t really looking at each other. More like pointedly *not* looking at each other, but every now and then a mistake is made and one of them catches the other’s eyes lingering.

They play this game for a good five minutes.

And Malfoy’s the one to shatter the silence, when the time comes. “Drinking with Gryffindor tonight?”

“Hm?” For a moment she can’t process his question. “Oh — oh, well...drinking with myself really, *alongside* Gryffindor.”

He nods.

And she just can’t keep her mouth shut. “D’you know? I think this is the first time we’ve gone a full ten minutes without arguing.”

And she’s shocked when it forces a small huff of a laugh out of him. “A record, then,” he says.

“Indeed.”

After another, shorter silence, she finds herself offering the jug to him again, with another couple steps toward him. He opens his mouth, undoubtedly to say something else about its childishness, but she cuts him off.

“Just drink it. You liked my Muggle whiskey, so drink it.”

That’s about when she realizes how close she is to him. Almost as close as that day in the lavatory, but without the hostile air between them, it feels much closer. She holds the jug in two hands in front of her, and it’s touching his chest on the other side.

Step back, she tells herself.

embarrassed about it.” And then she thrusts herself off the table because that isn’t what she meant to say at all.

All the while, Malfoy stares at her like he’s watching a circus tent collapse in on itself. “What are you trying to say, Granger?” And he has that *tone*. That damned tone her friends like to use on her. Even some of her Professors. That tone that means they think they’re dealing with a lunatic. With someone fragile and easily provoked. She hates that tone.

“I’m trying to say I’m not fine,” she splutters out. Gasps at herself. “No — I mean...no, I’m — I’m *not* fine.” She thrusts her hands into her hair, squeezing her temples. “What the *fuck*? What the *fuck*?” she chants. And then, “*I’m trying to say I’m sorry.*”

It’s all run together like one word and she’s *furious* with herself the moment it comes out. But it’s out and she can’t take it back and she has to force herself to look at him some time.

So she toughens up and yanks her eyes off the table. Forces them to meet his. His brows are at his hairline. “You’re...sorry?” he repeats.

“Yeah — *and*? What of it?” she snaps, reaching for the jug. She can feel her cheeks flaming. It’s making her sweat.

“Sorry for what?”

“*God*,” she says, exasperated, “just — *stop* asking me questions, I — I’m sorry for the way I treated you...the other day. For my behavior.”

And then, suddenly, it feels like a weight’s off her chest. She sits up a little straighter. Head feels a little clearer. She sets the jug back down. Risks a glance at him. And his eyebrows are still sky high but a softness she’s never seen has bled into his eyes. It’s a confused softness. A softness he doesn’t seem sure what to do with. But it’s there, none the less.

That is, until he tucks it away. Hides it back behind his usual mask as he brushes it off. “Doesn’t matter, Granger.”

“It *does*,” she presses, and she finds she’s taken a step forward. A step toward him. “I — I was wrong. I — I just...it hurt.” Her hand absently finds her arm.

“Oh.” She takes another sip, almost compulsively, because it’s relevant. “It’s — erm, Baileys. Whiskey with cream.” And awkwardly she adds, “It’s good.”

“It’s Muggle whiskey. How good can it be?” The familiar tone is back.

Her next sip is angry. A point-making sip. “You’ve never tried it.”

He looks back at her then. Seems to consider her for a moment, and then he pulls something from his trouser pocket. Shows her a flask. “I only drink one kind of whiskey.”

She can smell the harsh cinnamon the moment he unstoppers it. The smokiness. As he takes a swig, she says, “You can’t put Firewhiskey in coffee.”

“Can’t I?”

She watches as he performs a rather impressive piece of magic. Conjures a French press in midair, which presses itself and then pours into a conjured mug. He takes it. Toasts the sky. And then he spikes it with a shot or two of Firewhiskey.

It’s fun to watch him suffer. Really, it is.

His face screws up at the first sip — goes a splotchy red. And then he chokes and gasps, and hot coffee leaks from his mouth, spilling into his lap. A hand flies up to his face to cover his nose as he chokes and splutters some more. He lets the mug drop and it dissolves into smoke before it hits the grass.

“No, you can’t,” she says, out of spite. It’s easy — nice even — being mean to him. Sort of refreshing when she’s constantly held to the standard of a golden girl. Because Hermione Granger isn’t mean. Isn’t spiteful. She’s the one who helped Harry Potter destroy seven horcruxes. The one who stopped the Dark Lord. She doesn’t take pleasure in spite.

But, oh, she *does*. If only they knew how much she does.

By the time Malfoy can gather his wits, his eyes are watering — bloodshot. He tosses the flask away like it’s red hot and splashes lake water onto his face. And he does everything he can not to look at her.

“It’s the caffeine,” she says, finally. Relents. “It doesn’t mix with flame whis-kies. Becomes sort of corrosive, really.”

“Do I look like I care, Granger?” He wipes his mouth, glaring straight ahead.

That's one thing she's always known about Malfoy. His ego is ever so sensitive. Fragile. And it's also one of the few things she doesn't blame him for.

It's a product of growing up with Lucius as a father, no doubt. It's the reason he couldn't show up to Quidditch practice in Second Year with a standard broom. Why he couldn't stand to be bested by Harry in Dueling Club. Why he challenged Buckbeak.

And she thinks it's why he never corrects the ones who call him a murderer. Because he failed to kill Dumbledore, and it was an embarrassment to him. To his family.

Malfoy can't bear to be embarrassed. She's surprised when she finds herself extending an arm. Holding out the thermos to him.

He jerks to the side at first, when he sees it. Shoots her a look of shock, and then of suspicion. And then, of course, he sneers. Lets some poison out. "I'm not drinking *that*. Not when you've put your Mudblood mouth on it."

She clenches her teeth, breathing in. "Yes, and I'm letting a Death Eater touch it — can you imagine?" She holds it out further. Flares her nostrils. *Insists*.

It's one of the few times she's seen Malfoy look absolutely dumbfounded. With those sullen eyes wide and those pale lips slightly parted. Stranger yet is his response.

He shuts his mouth. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. And then he clears his throat and takes the thermos out of her hand. "Fine, then," he says. "Have it your way. Cheers, Granger."

And he takes a sip.

And she thrusts her head back up too fast — feels the blood rush out and for a moment things tint black. She laughs a little as the whole room flips before her eyes, thrusting both hands out in front of her to regain balance. The Butterbeer teeters but she saves it. Saves it faster than she saved herself.

"*Phew*," she flashes him a grin. "That was close."

"What are you doing here, Granger?" And now his voice is all seriousness.

She shrugs. "I saw a light."

"You weren't following me?"

She shakes her head. Giggles — hasn't giggled so much since childhood, maybe. "Do you know, Malfoy, I think you and I might just keep ending up in the same place at the same time." She wiggles her eyebrows at him. "Do you know? Like —" she hiccups, "coincidence. Or —" another hiccup, "fate."

"Fate?" His tone is skeptical. Face even more so, when she manages to look at it. But there's something under it — maybe the hint of a laugh or a smile. The slightest hint of humor. She can't be sure. "Just how much have you had, Granger?"

Her gaze snaps from his mouth to his eyes, and she stares at him blankly for a moment. Then she smiles. A deep, mischievous smile. She holds up the jug, which has about a centimeter left in it, and swings it in front of him, victorious.

"You'll hate yourself in the morning," he says.

"I hate myself every morning."

A dull silence follows. One that's muted and thick. She realizes she's looking down at the surface of the table, and her cheeks are pink — not just with the flush of alcohol. She doesn't know why she said it. Didn't *want* to say it.

When she looks back up at him, his expression is tight once more, this time drawn in around his eyes. It's sort of a mix of confusion and something else. Concern? No, that's the Butterbeer again.

"Granger..." he starts.

"Mm-mm," she shakes her head. Opens her mouth to say *I didn't mean that*, but what comes out is, "I don't want to talk about it." And she sits back, upset with herself, brows furrowing. "That's not—" she tries again. "I'm — I'm

“Granger, what the bloody hell’s the matter with you?”

She sighs as the giggles fade, wiping her eyes and letting Malfoy come back into focus. “I asked first.”

“Asked what?” His eyebrows are very funny when they pinch together like that. They twitch a bit with the force of his confusion. And it’s rather fun to confuse him.

“Are you...” her hand finds the jug again, lifting it to her mouth, “following...” she sips but doesn’t break their eye contact — swallows, “me?”

Malfoy looks nonplussed. Splutters for a moment, hand falling out of his pocket. So, she’s not a threat? *Interesting*, she thinks.

“You...I—*you’re* the one who keeps turning up everywhere I go.”

She clicks her tongue at him. “Who says it’s not the other way around?”

“Granger, are you completely smashed?”

She yanks the jug back up for another sip, shooting him a dirty look. “What a rude assumption to make.” But after another gulp, she hears herself say, “Yes. Quite.” Then she thrusts the jug out toward him. “Here. Have some.”

Malfoy studies her for a moment — gives her a once over with sharp eyes and then wrinkles his nose when he looks back at the jug. “Butterbeer is for children.”

She snorts. A loud snort. A very un-Hermione snort. “Seems to be working just fine for me.”

His expression remains tight and suspicious for a moment longer, then goes lax and so does he. He leans back against the window sill behind him, diamond-shaped panes making a kaleidoscope of his reflection as he moves. “I can see that.” He stuffs both hands into his pockets. “How very — *you*. To get drunk off Butterbeer.”

She sniffs at him. Sets down the jug and braces both hands on the table to heave herself up. And then she sits cross-legged, leaning on her palms. She lets her head hang back for a moment, enjoying the way it makes the world spin. “I’ve decided not to be offended by you tonight, Malfoy. Not one bit.”

“Mature of you,” he draws.



September 27th, 1990

Darcy,

Not that it matters, but Muggle whiskey doesn’t taste all that bad in coffee.

Prompt: What is your favorite happy memory?

See? I hate this shit. Why do you care? You don’t — that’s easy. I know you don’t. And for the record, I don’t feel beetled at all. None of this is helping me. None of it’s taking any of it away. What’s the point?

My favorite memory isn’t even a happy memory anymore. It can’t be, thanks to people like you. Thanks to your side. Because my favorite memory is my mum making lemon tarts for me when I was eight and Father was out and it was raining. She sat by me on the sofa in the parlor and let me play with my noisiest toys for hours because Father wasn’t there to insist on silence. On decorum. And — and we went for a walk. In the rain. Got wet. Got covered in mud. Tracked it into the foyer and didn’t care. Mum was happy. I was happy.

And now she’s on house arrest and Father is in prison.

So I don’t have a favorite happy memory, yeah? Hope it gives you a good laugh.

Darcy

Heather Woods | Prattle Scams

September 26th, 1998

SMALL MERCIES.
They still exist, in depleted numbers. And today, they come in the form of
Madam Pomfrey.

Miss Granger,

I was informed by Professor Slughorn that it was you who assisted with the brewing of antidotes for my stores
last week, and I must say I was most impressed by their strength. Should you have any interest I would like
to offer you a temporary position in the Hospital Wing. You would be working closely at my side, every other day
of the week after lessons, assisting with antidotes, healing spells and experimental projects.

Headmaster McGonagall supports the idea, and should the situation arise, she says she will be happy to excuse
you from lessons during periods of high volume in the Hospital Wing.

A position like this could put you well on your way to a prestigious career at St. Mungo's, if Healing is a
future interest of yours.

I hope you will consider.

Sincerely,

Pomfrey Pomfrey

But there's torchlight ahead, in the back stacks. A section devoted to the
Dark Arts. She loves that section.

Following the pattern of the floor like a game of hopscotch, she makes her
way over, nursing the Butterbeer. She doesn't take it far from her lips. Books re-
sorting themselves fly past her and over her head. One nearly knocks her over.

But she dodges, skips again, trips and then sort of tumbles into the corner
where the light is, a loud giggle bubbling up out of her throat.

A chair screeches, but she's half-sprawled across a study table and has to right
herself first to get a sense of her surroundings. She straightens. Staggers her feet
for balance and thrusts her curls out of her face.

"I knew it would be you," she says bluntly, wagging a finger at him.

Malfoy is, of course, the source of the light. He's got a lantern on the table
beside him, casting light across a rather large stack of books. Even in her state,
she doesn't miss the pop of color — of purple off to the side. The ever-mysterious
journal is here. And so is he.

He's still in his school things. White shirt. Green tie. Were it daytime, every-
thing would look rather normal.

But it's the middle of the night.

She's startled him, and he's up out of his seat, one hand shoved into his pocket
— clutching his wand, no doubt. And she really can't put together his expres-
sion, but maybe that's the Butterbeer at work.

"Are you following me, Mr. Malfoy?" she slurs. It sounds alright coming out
to her ears, but she has to recognize that the world is sort of sideways at the mo-
ment. Her speech probably is, too.

"Granger," he says. Again, like a statement of fact. Why does he say it like
that? And then, "What the fuck?"

She sways. Decides to lean back against the table a little. And she takes an-
other swig of Butterbeer before setting the jug down. "The Library is closed," she
says, curt. Official. But then she hiccups — and then she laughs again. Dissolves
into a small fit of giggles because, really, it's *so wonderful* to laugh like this. She's
missed this. This side of her. Knows that, come tomorrow, it'll be gone again.

Orange and Elm

People — friends, *family* — are still dead.

She takes another swig of Butterbeer to chase away those thoughts. Ron smiles at her from across the circle. She gives him a half-smile back — a drunken, lopsided, not-quite smile.

“Right, you lot!” calls Seamus. “It’s time for the traditional Truth—” he thrusts his bottle of Firewhiskey into the air, sloshing some of it onto the red velvet couches, “or Dare!”

And Hermione realizes abruptly that she should’ve been planning her escape a long time ago. Because they play Truth or Dare with Veritaserum and — well, she hates the game to begin with. Can’t even imagine what it must be like to be forced to tell the truth, which is the only option she ever picks.

So, under the cover of the mass of rearranging bodies and the chaos of alcohol-fueled whoops and hollers, she takes her leave. Slips out from beneath Harry’s arm, past Dean and Neville, and through the corridor to the portrait hole.

The uncrowded air of the hall is nice — she gulps it down, pleasantly surprised to find the jug of Butterbeer still clutched in her fist. She giggles down at it. Lifts it up to see it in the light, watching the warm-colored liquid swirl against the glass.

It makes her lean back too far — sends her stumbling and tripping a little. She skips to a halt. Regains her balance and begins to walk across the carpet as though on a balance beam, laughing to herself all the while. One foot across the other. Hands up at her sides. Tipping this way. Tipping that way.

She hasn’t felt this light in a long time.

And she doesn’t know how she gets down the stairs. But, somehow, she continues her balancing act all the way to the first floor corridor. Continues skipping and tiptoeing until she sees unusual light in the entryway to the Library.

And so she tiptoes in — careens to one side halfway across the threshold and spills a little Butterbeer on her jeans.Laughs, because it’s *hilarious*. What little remains of her rational brain reminds her that the Library is closed — or should be.

The letter is on her windowsill in the morning when she wakes, likely delivered by an owl in the night — and it’s the first good news she’s had in nearly a month. The first since she’s been back at Hogwarts.

She reads it twice. Three times. Sets it down for a moment and reads it a fourth. Madam Pomfrey is known to be very particular about her work. Hermione has never seen a student assisting her in the Hospital Wing before.

It’s a compliment — a large one, as well as an incredible opportunity. She knows that’s the important part. But more than anything, to her, it’s a distraction. An escape.

A chance to be at Hogwarts without trying to relive the past. A chance to do something meaningful, rather than study what she’s already read — test what she already knows. It’s new. It’s different.

Her reply is a scrawled mess of excitement and anticipation, and it’s far from subtle with regard to when she should start. She finds herself practically flying to the Owlery to send it, waking up portraits left and right from their early morning sleep.

It’s a chance. A chance to feel normal again. One she can’t let slip by.

She scampers up the feather-laden steps, actually able to enjoy — for once — the crisp morning air against her face. But it’s short-lived. Because as she rounds the corner through the doorway, she collides with him. Knows his voice from the muffled “—*bleeding fucking hell*—” that comes out on their way down.

They hit the stone hard, landing in feathers and owl droppings, and Malfoy is back up on his feet in the very next instant. He wipes at his trousers with all the panic of an aristocrat in expensive clothes — because that’s what he is, after all — but it’s the flashes of purple in his hand that draw her eye.

“The fuck’s the matter with you, Granger?” Malfoy snaps, dropping his arms and glaring down at her on the floor.

Her eyes follow the journal, though, dangling from his fingers at his side. The curiosity she’d felt that morning at breakfast hadn’t died, as it turns out,

like she'd thought. Because it's back with a vengeance now, and she finds herself subduing the peculiar urge to swipe it out of his hand.

"Oi. *Granger*. Knock a screw loose, did you?" Malfoy waves his free hand in her face.

The last time she'd seen him outside of classes had been at the Black Lake. He'd taken a tentative sip of her Baileys and coffee and been unable to hide the small spark of surprise — of interest — from crossing his face. So he'd handed it back. Wiped his mouth. Given her a strange, imperceptible nod and then he'd leapt to his feet and walked back to the castle.

Without another word.

She can't help but think he looks worse than usual today. The skin under his eyes is a darker purple than she's seen before, and he just — he seems *cold*. It practically radiates off of him. His breath streams in the air, more than hers, and his lips are blue and his nose is just the faintest shade of pink.

He distracts her from her thoughts by crouching down — pinching the letter she hadn't known she'd dropped between his pale fingers. For a moment, she does nothing, watching as he breaks the seal and unfolds it. But then, as his eyes shift back and forth, she comes to her senses.

Snatching it back, she stumbles to her feet, "You can't just *read* other people's letters, Malfoy." She wipes owl feathers off her backside. "It's rude."

"I'd no idea your handwriting was so unrefined." He smirks, "Unlike the rest of you. Interning with Madam Pomfrey, are you?"

"What's it matter to you?"

Every time they speak, she finds he brings out an absurd level of defensiveness in her. She feels almost as if she needs to cover up. Hide any secrets or unpleasant truths because he'll find them and use them. Every time they speak, it feels like a battle.

These are their war tactics.

Dismissal. "It doesn't," he says.

Deflection. "And what's that you're carrying around, anyway?" Hermione folds her arms over her chest. Turns up her nose. "I'd no idea purple was in your

like I'm in Hell. And if I get one more dirty look from those fucking Pottil sisters or hear one more fucking word from that Irish prat, my patience will be spent.

And I've been very, very patient thus far.

Prompt: "Who makes you smile?"

Send me a new prompt, I'm not even going to bother with this one.

Draco

October 2nd, 1998

SHE WENT BACK FOR THE LETTER LATER THAT DAY — DIDN'T FIND IT. Which just complicated everything. Because Madam Pomfrey responded the next day. Sent her a work schedule, beginning the following week.

Which meant that *he* sent it for her.

Malfoy.

And that didn't make any sense at all.

She's been wondering about it for days — wonders about it still, even now, with a half empty jug of Butterbeer dangling from one hand and Harry's arm slung around her other shoulder. They're singing a song in the Gryffindor common room. Some drunken, boisterous revelry she doesn't know the words to, but all of the Seventh Years have joined in and even some of the Sixth Years, and it's a Friday night and somehow Harry convinced her to stay. To enjoy it.

She knows she's only capable because she starts with Madam Pomfrey tomorrow. Knows that's the only reason the ever-looming darkness isn't quite visible just now.

But she *doesn't* sing.

She just sways along with the rest of them and drinks her fair share, and for once, it's nice to forget about everything. To ignore the fact that this is just pretending. That it won't make any of it go away. That the war still happened.



October 1st, 1990

Diary,

At least it's colder. The charms don't wear off as quickly.

That's the only positive thought I can give you, so take it or leave it. Starting another month here feels like torture. It's like looking a hangman's noose in the face. Like being condemned. These walls are too thick and too stained with fucking memories and I feel like I'm in a bloody prison.

Technically speaking, it is a prison. I'm not here of my own volition. I'm not free to leave if I like. If you really think about it, a magical contract is a lot like prison. Only, this way, more people stare.

Why didn't you let put me on house arrest, too? With my mum? I don't care about finishing school. About furthering my education. No one will hire an ex-Death Eater as it is, so what's the point? Is it that you think we'll conspire against the Ministry together? Come up with some daftly plan to break my Father out and escape to the farther reaches of this bloody Earth?

Like I said, I don't have the energy.

I think you know that, too — which leads me to believe that it's most definitely punishment you're after.

Well, more power to you. You've made a fine choice. I feel

color wheel.”

Self-preservation. “It isn’t, Granger. I didn’t pick it.” The bite in his tone suddenly dies. The heat.

Idiotic, unhelpful, severely detrimental curiosity. “Then who did?”

Further deflection. “That’s none of your business, Granger.”

Intimidation. “Just let me —” She’s shocked at her own audacity, but she’s reaching for it, and her fingers only just manage to brush against its purple corner.

Attack.

Malfoy’s hand clamps down on her arm so hard that for a moment all she sees is white. Her ears ring. Her head swims. And she can barely hear her own scream. Because there’s pain. Unfathomable, searing pain shooting up her arm from the scar he’s got shackled between his fingers. Pain so different than it’s been in months. Agony. She feels her knees wobble. Thinks they might give out. But then Malfoy lets go.

And after a moment, her vision returns — slowly, like it’s combing through a fog.

She stumbles backward, away from him, cradling her arm. The scars have opened up, and she can feel hot blood seeping through her sleeve. With watery eyes, she looks up from it. Tries to see Malfoy’s face.

And he’s stunned. Stunned to speechlessness, it seems. Until,

“Granger...”

The anger has melted from his expression, leaving a sort of confused and jumbled mess in its wake.

“Granger...I —” He takes a step forward.

“Don’t,” she snaps. Her voice is full of acid and venom. “Don’t you ever fucking touch me again.”

“Granger, I didn’t know —”

“Ever,” she hisses.

But she knows. Even as she turns on her heel and takes off down the stairs leading out of the Owlery. Even as she bursts into her dormitory, hot tears

streaming down her face, startling a still-sleeping Parvati. Even as she thrusts her stinging arm under the water of the faucet in the lavatory and frantically washes away the faintest trickle of blood, she knows she's overreacting.

She provoked a frightened animal. And it bit her. That's the gist of it.

Still, it had felt good to scream at him. Honestly. It'd felt like unleashing all the pain and embarrassment she'd endured at his hand in a matter of seconds. And it'd felt almost as good as that punch in Third Year.

She turns off the faucet. Stares down at the freshly scabbing letters on the inside of her forearm and begins to gently trace them with the tip of her finger.

M...

It must be either very important or very private, whatever he keeps in that journal.

U...

But the Owlery is a very unusual place to write, she thinks. It smells foul, and the owls are noisy and restless. There's no clean place to sit. No clean space to think. Why would he go there?

D...

Unless, of course, his intent is to get away from everyone — which, in that case, he picked a very good spot. Except, she found him. She did.

B...

That day at the Lake...

L...

She'd thought she'd gotten through to him, somehow. Although, in what way, she isn't sure. Isn't even sure if she'd *wanted* to get through to him. If that'd even been something she was trying to do.

O...

But at the very least, she'd felt she understood him a little better. That, perhaps, they'd even reached some sort of mutual understanding of one another. Their twin needs for silence and solitude. For grieving and for their own, separate coping mechanisms.

O...

It had even been nice to have the company for a moment. But then the moment ended — and he went back up to the castle. And now they're back where they started. Back to hatred.

D...

But she doesn't hate him, she realizes. Not really. Not anymore.

She doesn't have the energy.

And perhaps he's no longer so worthy of hate. He's — he's despicable and arrogant and completely foul-tempered. Stubborn and crass. But he isn't trying to pretend the war never happened. Neither is he trying to pretend he wasn't on the wrong side.

She lets her arm go and collapses into a sloppy seat on the tile floor of the lavatory.

It's difficult to come to grips with the fact that Malfoy may be more honest than all of them, these days.

Parvati pokes her head around the corner, hair tousled with sleep, falling from its braid. "Hermione? Are you alright?"

She sits up quickly, dragging her sleeve down over her scar. "Oh — erm, sorry, Parvati. Yes. Yes, I'm fine. I'm sorry I woke you."

"Are you hurt?"

She twists the sleeve away from her sigh. "Just an old wound." And she gets to her feet, suddenly, deeply, horribly ashamed of her behavior in these past ten minutes. "I'll have Madam Pomfrey take a look at it."

And it's only after Parvati leaves and she's looking sideways at herself in the mirror that she realizes she left her letter on the Owlery floor.