



October 6th, 1998

Diary,

I am apparently conscious.

I am also apparently not in Azkaban. Yet. I expect that could change at any moment.

She...

Fuck, she fucking sent in a fucking entry. In my stead. For me. After she fucking stole it. After I fucking...

After I attacked her.

Merlin, I fucking attacked her — what the fuck was I thinking?

Remember when I was writing about how preposterous the idea of that was? Yeah — I know. The irony tastes like arsenic.

She just — she makes me fucking insane. I told you. I warned you. I fucking did. It's in writing. Granger. Fucking, fucking Granger. It's always Granger. With her fucking explosive fucking hair and those fucking freckles

shot of espresso she's conjured.

Moving to the long, tilted mirror above the fireplace, she mutters — half to herself and half to them, "From the looks on your faces, you'd think I had some sort of gaping wound—"

It's as though a bucket of ice water is tossed over her head. No — it's as though she's been dropped into an arctic pool. The sensation of falling and the shock of cold, all at once.

She'd thought it was a dream.

A humiliating, unacceptable, bizarre fluke of a dream that she'd fully intended to bury down deep and never think of again. To repress.

And yet, there it is — cold, hard proof that she not only can't repress it, but that it's...*real*. It happened.

Proof in the form of blackish-blue love bruises lining the expanse of her throat on both sides.

She gasps. Drops her espresso and stumbles back several feet, instinctively casting a Glamour charm before another thought can enter her scrambled mind. Her hand flies to her throat, covering it for extra measure.

But they've already seen.

She risks a glance their way, horrified, and her cheeks flame as she finds Seamus chuckling and nudging Dean. "Good going, Granger — about time you had some fun." And this makes Dean laugh and from then on the two of them are useless.

She moves her wide eyes to Harry instead, mouth opening and closing as she desperately tries to form some sort of excuse. Part of her hates herself in this moment for not being more promiscuous during earlier school years. It would've made this easier to pass off as nothing.

Would've meant they wouldn't expect answers.

At least Ron wasn't—

The door to the boys' dormitory slams off to the side, and the red-headed devil himself wanders sleepily into the common room. Hermione's stomach drops from the pit of her abdomen, straight to her feet.

“Morning...” he yawns, rubbing his eyes with one of the overlong sleeves of a Mrs. Weasley-sewn jumper. He notices the Gryffindor Inquisition a few seconds later, blinking, gaze jumping back and forth from Hermione to the group of them. “S’goin’ on?”

*Please don’t, please don’t, please don’t, please—*

“Mione’s got herself a love bite,” cackles Seamus, face going purple with laughter, and Hermione remembers in this moment that this is all his fault. Her hand tightens around her wand, and she’s prepared to hex him into the next century when Ron — her-first-fucking-kiss-Ron — “this-just-Isn’t-going-to-work-Ronald-I’m-sorry”-Ron — asks the dreaded question.

“Who from?”

“Tell us, ‘Mione.” It’s the first thing Ginny’s said, but Hermione doesn’t miss the slightly hurt edge to her tone. This is the sort of thing she’d expect to be told before everyone else, it seems.

But the panic is bubbling up in her stomach and her heart is starting to stutter and her cheeks are so red she feels as though the blood might burst out. Instead, her words do, loudly and not convincingly at all: “*No one!* It’s nothing — it’s no one.”

And she’s out of the portrait hole and into the hall in fifteen seconds flat.

She can’t — she doesn’t —

She feels like she needs to hide.

No.

No.

Calm, rational Hermione steps to the forefront of her brain, pushing the jumbled mess she’s become out of the way. What she needs is to focus.

She’s meeting with Madam Pomfrey, now in less than twenty minutes. Espresso is coursing through her veins and she’ll be listening and learning and keeping her hands busy. It is the perfect distraction to have at a time like this.

So she gathers a deep breath and resets. Resets everything. Her posture, her heart rate. Sets off to the Hospital Wing with every intention of keeping her mind blank.

When she holds out the journal, the bird squawks in recognition. Snaps its beak once before closing it around the corner of the binding.

And only when its golden wings have disappeared on the horizon does she allow herself to sit, collapsing amongst owl droppings and plucked feathers — and she cries.

She fucking cries.

October 5th, 1998, she scrawls, and it's almost illegible.

Diary,

*She took it from me. And she was wrong to do so. So wrong.*

*She took it because she felt helpless. Because she*

*wanted...control? Power? Leverage? She isn't even quite*

*sure at this point.*

*But she never should have done it. And she's sorry.*

*She's truly sorry.*

*Because she sees that I'm trying. That I'm dealing with the consequences of my past actions and taking them in stride. She sees that I'm struggling. She sees that I didn't deserve this.*

*She sees that I'm not who I used to be.*

*And she forgives me. Even if I never manage to say that I'm sorry. She forgives me.*

Draco

Her hand is trembling when she pulls it away, and she looks up to find herself in the breezy doorway to the Owlery. She moves to the ledge, and a few owls twist their heads to stare at her.

She knows what Draco's owl looks like. Waits a good half hour for it to come in to preen. It squints at her suspiciously when she approaches, cocking its gold-flecked head to one side.

"Cygnus," she says gently — she's fairly certain that's its name. "Can you take this where it needs to go?"



An hour and a half has passed and she's studiously chopping Shrivelfig as Madam Pomfrey stews antidotes when she first slips up.

She thinks about it.

It's the first time since that horrifying moment in front of the mirror that she's allowed herself to remember it. To grapple with the fact that it actually happened. It.

It, which was kissing Malfoy.

*Being* kissed by Malfoy.

Even as she just scratches the surface of the memory, sensations and sounds start flooding back to her. The scent of his subtle cologne. The taste of peppermint. His hands — cold and long and far too real, far too low on her hips. His mouth, frozen on the outside, hot within — his mouth *everywhere*.

Subconsciously, her fingers burst over the skin of her neck, finding it tender. Her breath hitches and she yanks her hand back down, recommitting to the Shrivelfig even as the sounds of Malfoy's low groans echo in her ears.

How could she have thought it was a dream?

How could she have forgotten that it *happened*?

She can't remember anything that happened after. She can't even remember getting back to the common room. And her memories of what happened before are foggy at best. But the in-between...

Him...

That she remembers perfectly.

Her fingers are shaking. She realizes she should be disgusted with herself. She hates him. She should hate herself for ever getting that close. For ever letting him touch her.

His own aunt was responsible for her arm — for permanent scars. His own blood.

She should find him and this whole experience *vile*.

But her traitorous mind goes elsewhere, tracking backward to the few other kisses she's had in her life.

Number one was Ron. And she'd always expected it to be Ron. Hopped it would be Ron. So much so that it had been almost predictable when it happened.

And disappointing. Wet and sloppy and rushed. Childish, like they were.

After that, it was a Muggle named David, during her drunken post-war assault on higher London. It had been nice enough. He'd kissed well. But the brief lapse in judgement had produced nothing further. No relationship. Not even a second date. Fruitless.

Then Ron again, to see if he'd improved. He hadn't.

Then someone she'd never known the name of at another bar. Also fruitless. And then...Malfoy. Her fifth kiss.

She realizes how swollen her lips feel. Wonders if Madam Pomfrey noticed. Wonders if her Glamour's holding up, even though she's never doubted one of her Glamours before.

She doesn't allow herself to wonder whether it was her best kiss, because she knows that it was and she doesn't want to accept it.

So instead she wonders where he is right now. What he's thinking.

Malfoy, who hates her as much as she hates him, if not more. Malfoy, disgusted by her dirty blood.

Malfoy, whose hand had toyed with the button of her jeans more than once, if she remembers it right. Malfoy, whose tongue had been only too ready to taste her.

"Miss Granger, you're shaking." Madam Pomfrey snaps her from her daze, and she finds she's been decimating the poor Shrivelfig. "We've been at it long enough for today, I think. You did well." Poppy gives her a clinical sort of pat on the shoulder. "Now get some rest."

And yet, on her way out of the Hospital Wing, she realizes that to be alone with her thoughts right now is the last thing she needs.

a blanket of guilt. An argument has broken out between Ron and Harry behind them. It's hard to hear what's being said. She doesn't want to know, but she asks anyway. "What happens? ...If you don't write?"

Nott huffs at her. A bitter laugh.

"We go to prison, Granger." And after a pregnant silence, he adds, "Congratulations, you've won the War."

She could throw a number of things back in his face. She could remind him that if his side had won, she'd probably be dead. No. Not probably — definitely. Eradicated like an insect with pesticides.

Filthy Mudblood, as she was. But again, she keeps her mouth shut. Glances over at the purple journal.

"You have to write daily?"

Nott doesn't bother saying yes. Just says, "The Dementors are probably already on their way." Something twists in her gut.

Her eyes find purple again. And she makes a snap decision.

"The *fuck* are you doing?" Nott hisses as she skirts around the foot of the bed and reaches for the journal. Her wand is out and in his face before he can get too close. He stops short. "

I'm correcting my mistake," she says, voice low. "Back away." The look in his eyes is disconcerting. It's the first time she's ever seen him appear on edge. "If you destroy it — he won't even get a trial." It's the first time she's heard desperation from his mouth, too.

Ron and Harry have stopped arguing. The Wing is silent. Tense.

"I'm not going to destroy it."

Her hand closes around the binding. She backs out of the Hospital Wing with it, wand trained on Nott, all too aware of the gapes and wide eyes of Madam Pomfrey, Harry and Ron.

Her pace is breakneck.

Halfway down the hall, she transforms the tip of her wand into a quill point, flipping through the journal with one hand and trying to hold it open with her thumb on the first blank page.

He rolls his eyes again. Scoffs this time. “So fucking dramatic. Of *course* it’s still Monday. You were out for — what, maybe an hour? Just long enough for your freckle-face git of a boyfriend over there to do the dirty work. You fucking *fainted*, Granger. Get over yourself.” Then he points to Malfoy. “Him, though? Who fucking knows?”

She’s angry. Wants to throw insults, too. But she can’t seem to find the words.

“Tell me, Granger — what kind of a Gryffindor beats up an unconscious man?”

“I didn’t ask him to—”

“Doesn’t matter. Like you said, it’s your fault, right?”

She bites down on her lip. Tries to keep calm as she breathes out through her nose. “Right,” she forces out. A tense silence passes between them. Malfoy’s breath hitches in his sleep, and both of their eyes shoot to him. Hover for a moment.

When Nott meets her gaze again, the hostility is back. “Why’d you fucking take it?”

“How do *you* even *know* about it?” she rallies.

Nott tilts his head back, looking her up and down. Then he pulls something from his pocket. A lime green notebook, the same size as Malfoy’s journal.

Her stomach sinks.

“Because I’m his Crutch.”

“His what?”

“Merlin, Granger, I thought you were *intelligent* — his *Crutch*. It’s a Healer’s term. We’re in the same bloody program. I make sure he sends his letters. He makes sure I send mine. End of story.”

The same program...

He and Nott are in the Wizarding World’s version of Alcoholics Anonymous, except instead of alcohol it’s trauma they’re treating.

She has considered how much damage the War did to their side, but never to this degree.

Something that feels a little like heartbreak throbs in her chest, swaddled in



October 4th, 1998

Diary,

*I'm not bottling anything up, and I don't appreciate the metaphor. Privacy is still a thing, yeah? Don't expect me to spill my guts out onto these ugly purple pages. It won't happen.*

*Let's consider this arrangement strictly need-to-know.*

*And there are certain things you don't need to know.*

*Prompt: What secrets are you keeping?*

*I'd say nice try, but it's not.*

Draco

October 4th, 1998

SHE DIDN'T RETURN TO GRYFFINDOR FOR THE REST OF THAT SATURDAY, MEAN-  
DERING AIMLESSLY AROUND THE GROUNDS INSTEAD AND AVOIDING HER HOUSE-  
MATES AT ALL COSTS. Avoiding *him* above all else. She'd skipped every meal,  
dodged every "hello" and only crept back into the dormitory when it was well  
after midnight.

But nothing could keep her mind from racing.

And now that it's Sunday, she knows she can't avoid what's doubtlessly wait-  
ing just outside her bed curtains.

At least the hangover is gone.

She sits up silently, sweeping the crooked curls out of her face and sneaking a compact mirror off of the nightstand. From what she can hear, none of the girls are awake yet, so she takes this chance to examine the evidence from the safety of her four-poster.

Tilting her neck this way and that, she tries not to grimace as she studies the bruises. The Glamour has long faded and the marks where his teeth and tongue and lips have been are all too obvious. All too easy to trace. She can almost remember which kiss left what.

It's absurd.

She snaps the mirror shut and drops her head to her knees for a moment, trying to organize sentences in her head. Excuses. Alibis. She's certain the age-old "*I tripped*" scheme won't work. And a part of her really doesn't want to lie to Ginny.

The other part knows she has to.

She sits there in silence for a few minutes more before resigning herself to an ugly fate. One of her greatest fears is being caught in a lie, and now she finds herself in a position where she has no other option.

No one in Gryffindor would support what she did. What *they* did. The bias is too strong. She can't tell them. Not Harry. Not Ginny. *Especially* not Ron.

A sudden, unwelcome image of a certain redhead storming off in a rage to find a certain blond floods into her brain, and she pinches the bridge of her nose to get rid of it.

No, the truth would cause too much pain — both emotionally and physically. And with that decided, she throws back the curtains.

She was wrong. Not only is Ginny awake, but she's sitting bolt upright on the side of her adjacent bed, and the sight of Hermione has her getting to her feet.

"Mione..." she starts, but Hermione holds up a hand, stopping her before she can say another word.

And out floods the practiced lie. The big lie. The one she won't be able to take back. "I don't know who it was. I was drunk and it was dark and now it's over."

"Granger," he acknowledges. There's a caustic edge to his voice.

She doesn't exchange pleasantries. "Who pulled Ron off of him?"

Nott crosses his arms over his chest. "I did."

She glances back down at Malfoy, eyes tracing the bruises. "Thank you," she hears herself say.

"And just what the fuck are *you* grateful for?"

The hostility surprises her a little. She takes a step back, eyes a little more open, meeting Nott's pointed stare. "It was my fault," she says. This surprises her, too. The truth, after a long queue of lies. "The whole thing."

Nott's eyes roll back into his head. "You fucking Gryffindors. So starved for attention. So ready to take all the glory..." He steps toward the table next to Malfoy's bed — slams something down on it. The fucking purple journal. "...and the blame."

She feels Harry's sudden presence behind her.

"Ooh, is it your turn to defend her honor, Potter?" quips Nott.

"Walk away, Harry."

"Malfoy tried to fucking *strangle* her—"

"Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the white knights of the Gryffindor Princess. How *romantic*—"

"He's a fucking *psychopath*—"

"*Walk away, Harry*," she snaps again, loud enough this time to shut them both up.

"Mione..."

She turns to him, anger diminishing at the hurt look in his eyes. She sighs. Says, "I'm fine, Harry. I can handle it myself. Please...please just don't interfere."

He hesitates a long while, then nods mutely, walking backwards a few steps before turning and heading back towards Ron.

Hermione looks back to Nott. He's got an eyebrow raised. Looks maybe even a little amused. "Do they always do exactly what you say?" He makes a little whip-crack motion with his hand.

"Is it still Monday?"

When the pillow falls away, Ron looks confused. “Mione, I—”

“*Don’t*—” she holds up a hand, sharp voice echoing off the walls, “say a word. Not one bloody *word*.” And she’s stumbling out of bed, rearranging her skirt and rolling up her sleeves.

“Hermione, you really shouldn’t—”

“Quiet, Harry.”

Poppy seems keen to let her throw her little tantrum, continuing to wrap Ron’s hands even as he asks to get up.

“Madam Pomfrey?” asks Harry. “Should she really be—”

“She fainted, Mr. Potter. I am certain she can walk without assistance.”

And a brief affection for Poppy blows through Hermione’s brain, as though carried on a spring breeze before being swallowed up by what is otherwise a tornado. Hermione crosses the Wing at a brisk pace, all too aware of the thudding pulse in her wrist. She stops at the foot of Malfoy’s cot.

There’s a restraining charm around him. She can just barely see the glow of it if she squints.

She can’t touch him, then. She can only stare.

Somewhere, at the back of her mind, she wonders why she thinks of touching him at all.

He’s a mess. His black eye is swollen and his cheeks and neck are scattered with bruises, as though an ink pot exploded not far from his face. The gash on his temple looks like it came from hitting stone, and Hermione can easily visualize Ron — Ron, thinking he’s so brave, so gallant, thinking he’s protecting her — beating an already unconscious Draco Malfoy to a pulp.

She wonders how it was allowed to happen, with Havershim present.

But, then again, Havershim never liked Malfoy.

It’s then that she notices the looming presence of Nott in the corner. He’s standing far back from Malfoy’s bedside, but he’s still pretty clearly watching over him. There’s blood on his uniform, too — his perfectly pressed white shirt — but no wounds.

So it’s Malfoy’s blood.

It’s done.

Ginny takes a moment to compute the words before she responds, but Hermione sees her face fall a bit in disappointment. She wonders what she’d been hoping for. A suitable person Hermione could use as a rebound from the War? A Zacharias Smith or a Michael Corner type?

Certainly not a blinding white-blond, with a green silk tie and a lip that quirks up on one side when something vicious is about to come out — the same way it does when his tongue is tracing the roof of her mouth.

A bizarre pulse materializes in her lower abdomen, and she can feel color flooding into her cheeks. She needs to redirect her thoughts, and quickly.

“I’m sorry, Gin,” she says. “I would’ve told you, but there’s not much to tell.”

Ginny hides her disappointment quickly. “Well — suppose I’m just glad you’re having fun.”

It’s almost exactly what Seamus said, and it has her wondering whether they all see her as such a walking tragedy. She hates the thought of it, but it’s a perfect out.

“Yeah.” She forces a smile. “Me too.”

They talk about other things as they dress, and for a while Hermione is relieved that the subject seems to have been miraculously dropped without much effort on her part. But they’re halfway out the dormitory door to head to breakfast when Ginny says, offhandedly, “You know...we could always use a Pensieve.”

Hermione stutters to a halt on the first step of the stairs. “What?”

“For your memory,” says Ginny, “so we can find out who it is.”

“Oh...I...” *Shit*. “I hadn’t really thought of—”

“MIONE! GINNY!” It’s Ron from the foot of the stairs, bless him. “Come on, we’ll miss breakfast!”

And she wants to run into his arms, she’s so grateful. But as they walk the halls, she has to recognize that she’s only temporarily safe.

Ginny will bring it up again.



She has to perform the entire routine again at the breakfast table in the Great Hall, this time with over a dozen eager, onlooking Gryffindors.

They're disappointed too, no doubt hoping for better gossip.

*If only they knew*, she thinks. It'd be all the gossip they'd ever need.

"That's all it is," she shrugs. A few of them turn away immediately and start other conversations, and she breathes an inward sigh of relief.

Harry smiles at her. "Good for you, 'Mione." Him too, then. At least she has the sympathy vote.

Ron's the only one with any quips about it, which she supposes she expected. "Should be more careful," he says around a mouthful of stewed potatoes, sort of pointedly not looking at her. "Someone could take advantage of you."

"Ron!" Ginny slaps his arm.

He doesn't take it back though, and Hermione doesn't argue like she normally would. Anything to drop the subject.

She's tense until Dean starts a discussion about his and Seamus's latest prank on Peeves — they've sort of appointed themselves to be the new Fred and George. A good thing, too. Hogwarts needs the lightheartedness desperately.

Still, the thought of Fred makes her gut wrench.

She devotes her full attention to the plate of spinach and eggs in front of her, reaching for the salt as she nurses a cup of pumpkin juice.

She almost chokes on it.

Malfoy. He's standing in the doorway to the Great Hall, and she's spent all this time preparing herself for her friends and their questions that she spent absolutely no time preparing for him.

Her eyes are stuck on him like a fly to spun sugar, following as he walks, hands in his trouser pockets — hands she now inadvertently knows the texture of, the weight of. He takes a seat at the edge of the Slytherin table, like always.

He doesn't look at her. Doesn't look at anyone, really, as he serves himself a plate and pulls out that ridiculously purple journal again.

And she realizes —

Like a lightning bolt to the brain, she realizes that no matter the time and

But she's none of those things.

She's sitting up.

It takes about five seconds for a pair of hands to try and force her back down, but she fights the pressure, letting out an unexpected yip of disapproval. The hands release her, and Harry's glasses move into her line of sight.

"'Mione, you shouldn't sit up so fast," he says.

"I want to — I want to sit up. I want to sit," she replies, voice a croak, words jumbled.

Harry sits back cautiously. He's cross-legged at the foot of her cot, face a map of concern not so unlike the way he usually looks at her.

"What happened?" she asks, massaging the suddenly throbbing expanse beneath her chin.

Harry bites his lip, adjusting his glasses where they're perched on his nose. "Well, erm — Malfoy attacked y—"

"No, no," she waves him off, "I know that part. *After*. What happened *after*?" He seems a little surprised at her reaction. Clears his throat and messes up his already messy hair a little more. "Oh, erm..."

That's when she notices Ron over his shoulder.

Ron, who's sitting on the end of another cot, getting his hands wrapped by Madam Pomfrey. Madam Pomfrey's shaking her head and muttering to herself, but Ron is looking at Hermione. A boyish grin spreads across his face, and he pulls one half-wrapped hand away to wave at her.

His knuckles are split. Bruised and bloody.

She puts it together before Harry says another word.

"Tell me he didn't," she breathes.

Harry sort of grimaces.

"You absolute *arses*, Ronald Weasley!" She's lobbed a pillow at him before she even considers that it could hit Madam Pomfrey. Poppy, however, has adept reflexes as it turns out, and she dodges casually, allowing it to pummel Ron directly in the face.

"Do control yourself, Miss Granger," is all she says.





*Purple and Elm*

*October...6th? 7th? Maybe? It's likely still October, 1998*

SCRATCHY SHEETS. That's what wakes her up. Scratchy sheets and the queasy sensation in her gut — the kind that comes with sleeping too long.

Her eyelids are sticky. Hard to open. But when she can gather the muscular force to peel them apart, the clinical white of the ceiling is all too familiar. So is the herbal scent hanging in the air. The Hospital Wing.

It's not like waking up had been with the hangover. This time she remembers everything. *Quite* clearly.

Swallowing is hard with such a dry throat. Her lips stick together, too. It takes her a second, but she manages to tilt her head to the side so she can see the rest of the Wing. The three beds next to her are empty and tightly fixed, but the fourth bed down has a body in it.

Her queasiness intensifies at the sight of blond hair. She wonders if that'll always be the first thing she recognizes about him.

For a moment, she thinks he's there because he hasn't woken up from the stunning jinx yet. But then her eyes refocus, and the color red grows more and more vibrant.

He's covered in blood.

Why is he covered in blood?

She can only see half of him, but on that half she sees a black eye and a split lip and a still bleeding gash at his temple. His white shirt is scarlet. And he's out cold.

The memory of his icy hand clasped around her throat comes flying back, and she knows she shouldn't care. She should be furious. Happy, too, that he's somehow this badly injured.

effort she puts into making sure the truth never sees the light of day, she's only half of the equation.

A sticky sort of helplessness bleeds into her gut.

What if he tells someone? What if he's already *told* someone? What if — what if he's writing about in that *bloody purple journal* of his?

She's suddenly completely lost her appetite. She tells her Housemates as much as she stands on unsteady legs.

She has to do something.

She *has* to.

She can't just sit and wait for her world to go up in flames.

Smoothing down her skirt, she adjusts her path so that she's walking down the main isle toward the gold doors, swallowing down her panic with each step. Malfoy's about halfway between her and the exit, and she has half of that amount of space to catch his eye.

She slows. Walks casually — struggles not to walk strangely. Scuffs her foot on the ground to make a little noise.

But only when she has just about half a meter left in her window does he finally look up.

And meeting his eyes startles her so much that she almost forgets what she's doing. His gaze is heavy. Lidded. Sharp. Full of everything and nothing she can understand, and the expression on his face gives nothing away, as usual.

She hesitates. Messes up her careful pace and stops, for just a moment. And then she gathers her wits and does her best to cock her head toward the exit as subtly as possible.

Malfoy quirks a dark blond brow, so she does it once more, just in case, before striding past him and over the threshold into the school's entryway.

Her nerves are prickling, and the moment she's away from the thick of the Sunday crowd, she heaves out a breath, blowing out three more in quick succession, like a woman giving birth. All of her careful planning has been reduced to a few precious seconds of panic, and all because she hadn't planned for *him*.

*Damn* her, why hadn't she planned for *him*? Any logical person would have.

And she's always fancied herself to be logical.

Bloody hell.

Somehow, she ends up in the courtyard, which is mostly empty thanks to small mercies. Still, she doesn't trust it, walking straight through and turning the corner to the hidden outdoor alcove she often finds couples snogging in.

The irony is not lost on her.

Taking a seat on the stone marble bench, she waits.

It's of course entirely possible that he isn't coming. Entirely possible that he finds her laughable and pathetic and he's still sitting there enjoying his bacon and—

"Can I make a suggestion, Granger?"

She jerks where she sits as his shadow falls over her. He's in jeans today — she can't remember ever seeing him in jeans before. Jeans and a dark blue cable-knit jumper. For once, he's dressed for the weather.

She clears her throat, crossing her arms. "If you must."

A wry grin tugs his lips up on one end, just like she remembers, and she tries to crush the fluttering in her stomach — to rip the wings off of those butterflies — as he says, "If subtlety is your aim, then this..." He mimics the way she'd cocked her head a moment ago, although with much exaggeration, "...probably isn't the best way to go."

She squints up at him, flashing an unfriendly smile, "Oh thanks, I'll keep that in mind."

How is it so easy to fall back into their petty banter after —

After what happened.

She drops her fake smile, wordlessly making room for him on the bench and avoiding his eyes. And Malfoy takes his time sitting down. Of course he does. Takes a good while to consider it, eyes scanning her up and down — she can feel it, even if she isn't looking. And then when he does sit, he does it so languidly it makes her want to kick him in the shin.

He should be as tense as she is, by right. But of course he isn't. He's Malfoy.

She can't let herself lose sight of that fact.

Malfoy back, and without his body pressed up against hers, her knees buckle.

She falls just as Malfoy does, yanked to the ground by Nott and dragged back.

The next hazy figure to come into focus is Harry. He seems sort of torn between joining Nott in restraining Malfoy and attending to her.

Idly, she thinks that she doesn't need *attending*.

She doesn't even feel hurt. Just dazed. Dazed as though drugged.

Harry's at her feet, crouched down, eyes wide. "*Hermione* — Hermione, are you hurt? Are you—"

"Stop it, Draco — *stop*," she hears from behind him. Nott's still got Malfoy's arms strapped in like a straight jacket.

Everything everyone's saying is melding together into one. Her breath still hasn't returned, and all she can do is stare past Harry, his mouth moving but the sound not making it to her ears. She stares at Malfoy, his face red, jaw tight, fighting his friend's grip, gaze still locked on her.

The only thing he's held onto is the journal, clutched so tightly he seems to be denting it.

She knows now.

Knows that it represents his second chance. One that she almost stole from him.

Havershim is the third figure to approach. She seems to have seen enough to make a quick decision, and she promptly stuns Malfoy.

The last thing Hermione sees before the world goes dark is Malfoy going limp in Nott's arms.

he's got one of those long, slender hands she'd once let caress her around her throat. The other holds his wand, and he places the raven-black tip of it under her chin, letting the wood press into her flesh.

Even if she could move, she wouldn't be able to. She can't even speak. Can't breathe.

And she just knows she was wrong. So, so wrong.

Malfoy is entirely dangerous.

"*Fucking mudblood cunt*," he growls, jerking her once. Her head knocks back against the stone. And as she sees stars, she thinks about how she's never heard him use that word before.

Malfoy swims back into focus, the pressure of his hand on her throat increasing. He's as close as he was on Friday night, and her frazzled brain almost can't discern between intimacy and violence in this moment.

The tip of his wand reminds her.

"Do you have any *fucking* idea?" he jerks her again. "*Any idea* where they'd put me? What they'd *fucking do*?" He drops his wand and reaches down to snatch the journal from her limp hand. "Do you know how *fucking important* this is?" He shakes it in front of her face, eyes like a madman.

Hazily, she sees figures approaching fast from over his shoulder. She knows they're running. Any yet, they seem to move in slow motion. Her unfocused eyes slide back to Malfoy's, finding them sharp like shards of ice. She knows she's in shock. Knows she could get herself out of this if she could only shake the numbness from her hands.

But she can't.

And she just releases one shaky breath, watching it gust up against his face. His fingers loosen around her throat. Just a fraction. Vaguely, she wonders if the new bruises will cover the old ones.

Malfoy's dark blond eyelashes flutter as he blinks once.

But his hand has barely released her when another arm belts across his chest from behind.

"Mate, mate — what are you *doing*?" It's Theodore Nott again, ripping

"So, Granger..." he crosses one leg, ankle on his knee, "why is my breakfast getting cold?" It's a little disconcerting — him speaking as though nothing's happened. She wonders if he plans to deny it, and the thought sets her off balance.

Still, she powers through, beginning to deliver a speech she hasn't even finished writing yet.

"Well, I think it's fair to accept that we're both human beings."

"Well spotted—"

"This will go much more smoothly if you don't speak until I'm finished," she says, staring straight ahead into the distance. This bench is perfect, as it turns out. She doesn't have to look at him as she speaks.

Malfoy huffs a laugh, but beyond that stays silent, and she pauses only a moment more before continuing.

"We're both human beings, and we were both a bit tipsy Friday night. It is safe to say that human beings tend to give in to frivolous desires when tipsy, and I don't think there's any use beating ourselves up over what happened. However, for both our sakes, I think it's incredibly important that we never speak of it to anyone, and even between us, we never speak of it again. And, of course, it can never happen again, not that that needs saying. We can cross wands on it, if you like."

She's quite proud of herself, when it's all out. Thinks she's delivered a very diplomatic and calm solution to the whole debacle. But the ever-growing length of Malfoy's silence starts to deplete this pride and turn it rancid.

So rancid that she eventually finds herself giving in and risking a sideways glance at him.

The look on his face is, as always, unreadable.

"...Well?" she prompts after a few more seconds pass.

"Well what, Granger?" he says at last, tone equally impossible to riddle out. "You brought me all the way out here to see if I kiss and tell?"

She's a bit surprised. Can't tell whether he's offended or if he finds it funny, somehow. "Well, no — I just—"

“Wanted to go again?” His eyes meet hers so suddenly and so directly that she gasps.

“*What?*”

That wry smile makes a reappearance. “That’s why you brought me to the snogging bench, isn’t it Granger? For a repeat performance?”

She’s gobsmacked, to put it lightly, fumbling with her words, “I—how *dare* you—”

But Malfoy’s up off the bench in an instant, and so suddenly she can’t even comprehend it he has his hands on either side of where she sits and he’s leaning over her. Slanted at an angle. Almost as though he’s about to do a push-up. And their faces are only centimeters apart.

“Could’ve just asked, Granger,” he murmurs, and his voice is low and deadly, to the point where she can’t tell if it’s a seduction or a threat.

Her heart is hammering in her chest, and her breath has abandoned her. He’s so close she can smell everything she remembers from that night, and it’s bringing back sensations and other reminders of everything he did. Everything he touched.

It’s so clearly a power play. She knows he isn’t deluded enough to think she’s brought him here for more. But she’s unintentionally given him the greatest weapon he’s ever had against her.

And now he knows exactly how to pull her strings. Exactly how to make her uncomfortable.

Malfoy’s always loved making her uncomfortable.

“Step back,” she demands, but it comes out as little more than a whisper.

“Someone could see you.”

“Does that scare you?” Malfoy asks, inching impossibly closer. “Being seen with me?” His breath disturbs the hair alongside her face, shrouded in mint and icy cold. “Being seen — like this...” he inches that last bit forward so that the tips of their noses brush against one another, and it’s all too familiar, “...with me?”

Hermione’s breath hitches. She holds it. Doesn’t know what else to do. Her nerve endings have caught fire and her thoughts have scattered. All she has left

what she sees.

Malfoy is following her.

No, not following. *Charging*. Striding swiftly, purposefully, one hand toying with the knot of his tie — loosening it — the other gathered into a fist at his side. And his eyes — his eyes are *blazing*. He knocks shoulders with other students as he walks, and even when they turn and say things like, “Hey, watch yourself, mate,” his eyes never deviate from her.

She stumbles. Trips as she tries to increase her pace. Tears her eyes away as her breath falls out of her in a wave.

She does it. Does what her foolish brain has been telling her to do all along. She breaks into a run.

*Coward*, another side of her thinks. But she’s never seen that look in someone’s eyes. No — no, she’s wrong. Once before, in the eyes of Bellatrix Lestrange.

Her book bag slips from her shoulder and clatters to the stone floor, spilling quills and ink across the hall, but she abandons it. Instead, her free hand goes to her wand in the pocket of her skirt.

“Hermione?” It’s Harry — leaving another classroom. She doesn’t see him, but she recognizes his voice. It doesn’t stop her.

At every side, people are staring, but she’s sprinting now. Her heart rate kicks into high gear, because she can hear Malfoy’s own footfalls, heavy and fast on the stone behind her. He’s running, too.

He’s actually *chasing* her.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck...*

It’s the worst scenario she could think of realized.

His legs are longer than hers. He’s faster.

She only makes it as far as the statues in the entryway before he catches up, but her wand gets caught in her pocket as she turns, trying to yank it free.

And the height she’d been admiring just this morning becomes a suddenly damning disadvantage. He crowds her into the wall, backing her up until she’s pressed against the rough stone beside the doorway to the Great Hall.

Her hand is stuck — pinned in her pocket, and before she can get a word out

stare — like the barrel of a gun. Sees the way his fist is balled on the desk.

A knot forms in her throat.

“Right — yeah, of course,” says Parvati, looking at her like a bird with two heads before turning to face the front. Hermione barely hears. All she can think in this moment, of all things, is how much she regrets S.P.E.W.

Bloody traitorous house elf.

The class passes like a hallucination. She never raises her hand. Bitches two spells when asked to perform them. Feels at every moment that she may vomit.

She never looks back again. The journal is sitting at the top of her desk, continuously catching her eye like a threat. Taunting her with its vibrant color. Every now and then she hears a sound from behind. Malfoy, tapping his quill against the side of the desk.

He may as well be stabbing her with it.

“Class dismissed.”

Her stomach drops. The most ridiculous word flies through her brain at all sides. *Run, run, run, run, run...*

It’s idiotic.

She urges rationality to come back to the forefront. Tries to think clearly as people stand and shuffle all around her. What is she so afraid of? Malfoy isn’t *dangerous*. Moody, pompous, headstrong, yes. Perhaps even a little mentally unstable. But dangerous?

She’s been overthinking. She can just tell him the truth.

Gathering a shaky breath, she stands slowly. She’ll head back toward the Great Hall — collect her sanity, calm down a little. And then she’ll go and find him and return it. Like an adult.

With a determined huff, she picks up the journal, slings her bag over her shoulder, and strides confidently out the door. She watches the flagstones pass beneath her feet as she walks, swiping her thumb along the textured cover of the diary.

Overthinking. That’s all it was.

Offhandedly, she throws a glance over her shoulder. Doesn’t expect to see

is her thundering pulse and her numb fingers, useless at her sides.

“Yes,” she admits at last, squeezing her eyes shut like a coward and trying to calm every loose organism flying around inside of her.

Malfoy laughs again — another deep, breathy laugh — at the way she’s grinding her teeth. Tensing her muscles. “What are you doing?”

“Ripping the wings off of butterflies,” she breathes, even though he’ll make no sense of it.

He laughs again all the same, and it’s enough to brush his top lip against hers. Her eyes fly open and she sucks in an audibly sharp breath.

“Please stop,” she hears herself wheeze, but it’s almost soundless.

And his eyes are half-lidded and his cold breath is whistling past her teeth, and she watches that lip quirk up on one side yet again as his tongue dashes out. Only for the briefest of seconds. But enough to flick up against her bottom lip. It’s enough.

Enough to have her reaching for him. Enough for her to pull him to her and open her mouth to him. Enough for her to lose all sense of control, this time without the aid of alcohol.

Except it’s also the exact moment that he pulls himself away.

He straightens up like it’s nothing. Like he hasn’t just been a hair’s breadth from kissing her again. And he’s so calm and cool and collected that it makes her want to throw things.

“Needn’t worry about your reputation, Granger.” He stalks away. Just like that. Tosses the last bit over his shoulder. “Like you said, it can never happen again.”

And she sits there, the cold of the marble leeching through her skirt — furious and trembling. A nebula of mixed emotions, a catastrophe — Clutching that ugly purple diary from his pocket like a vice.



October 5th, 1998

HE KNOWS.

He has to know by now. The same way she knows now that this is the last thing she should've done. A line she shouldn't have crossed.

She spent all night flipping through it, and less than three entries in she knew it was something she wasn't supposed to be seeing. It was too personal. Too close.

And it made too much fucking sense.

Scrawled across those first few pastel lavender pages, she'd found evidence of alcoholism, abuse, self-harm and regret. So, so much regret. Unfit parents. Drug overdoses. Death.

She'd pieced it together: this wasn't so unlike Muggele parole. He has to submit these entries weekly — or perhaps even daily — to a psychiatric healer. Those moronic Third Years hadn't been entirely wrong about the situation.

But she's trapped now.

She can't give it back to him. He'll know she took it. She can't keep it from him. He'll be arrested for not submitting entries. She can't unsee what she's seen.

It's too, *too* personal.

What was merely a petty attempt at revenge has backfired violently.

*I'd love to be gone. I'd give anything to be gone. Let me be gone.*

The slant of his handwriting is the sort you see from psychopaths. Ink is splorched everywhere. It's almost as messy as his life, and it's riddled with things she'd never have known from looking at him.

It's also riddled with opinions about her — opinions she hadn't been prepared for.

...*bitch*...

*Purple and Elm*

morning.

Luckily, their eyes don't meet, and as the two of them take a seat at the desk behind her, she starts to relax a little.

He doesn't suspect her. If he did, he would've confronted her immediately. Malfoy isn't shy.

Havershim leaves her office and starts writing on the blackboard with her wand. Parvati walks in with a minute or so to spare, smiling at Hermione as she takes her seat beside her and gets out her books. Everything seems exceedingly normal.

Until—

"Oh, 'Mione," says Parvati, and she digs further into her bag. "Almost forgot."

The color purple, up until yesterday, had never had an association with panic and despair for Hermione. It was just purple. Not her favorite. Not her least favorite. Purple as in plums. Purple as in candy hearts.

Now, though — now purple is panic. Purple is a fever dream and an electric shock. Purple is that feeling in your gut when a parent catches you in a lie. Purple as in pain. Purple as in *perfect* — *just perfect*.

Purple is the color Parvati is handing to her.

Malfoy's journal.

"The house elf was remaking the beds this morning and found this behind your headboard. Thought you might've needed it for class. I said I'd bring it to you."

She's shaking. Parvati's holding it out to her.

She doesn't have to look to feel the searing burn of a gaze from behind, like a hot poker digging into the back of her neck. She doesn't want to take it. She stares at Parvati wordlessly until her face starts to change.

"Hermione, are you—"

Her hand closes around the binding, and she knows she's sealed her fate. "Thank you," she says, somewhat dazed.

She has to look. She can't help it. Out the corner of her eye, she sees Malfoy's

all the years she's known him, she's never seen Theodore Nott lose his cool.

Sweeping the chestnut brown hair out of his face, he turns and rifles through his book bag, and suddenly he's spreading parchment and quills and texts out onto the table across from her.

*"What are you doing?"*

*"Studying."*

*"Not here, you aren't."*

"House tables aren't exclusive. They're suggestions, to prevent brawling." He dips his quill into ink and starts writing, ignoring her stunned expression.

"Nott," she snaps, and he finally looks up at her, expression bored. "Why are you sitting here?"

He bites down on the feather tip of his quill — a disgusting habit. "War's over, Granger. I can sit where I want. Today, I wanted to sit here."

She scoffs. Bristles. Opens her mouth to argue. Can't think of anything.

She's no idiot. He isn't sitting here on a whim. But he's also Theodore Nott, and asking him to explain himself is like asking grass to grow in winter.

All that's clear is that he isn't leaving.

And she feels like she's fallen into a snake pit. So many snakes. *Too* many fucking snakes.



Transfiguration is the class she's been dreading all day — the only class of her Monday schedule she has with *him*.

She itches at her scar as students flood into the classroom, shuffling in her seat. It isn't just her scar that itches, it's her very skin. Every inch of it. She can't get comfortable. Can't stop thinking about what's under her pillow at this very moment.

She can't even remember what lesson they're supposed to be learning today.

A wave of icy cold slides down her back as she catches sight of his white-blond hair in the doorway. He's walking with Nott, and it makes her doubly nervous. She starts to wonder if Malfoy has something to do with their run in this

*...Mudblood...*

No, she'd been prepared for those. But not for ones that said things like *con-fusing... and distracting curls... and everywhere I look, she's there...*

Those entries were of a rarer nature, and they'd sort of coagulated towards the end — the most recent. She'd been changing his mind about her.

But she's read over the entry from October 3rd over and over again, and nothing.

Nothing about the kiss.

It's childish of her to expect him to write about it. After all, it didn't mean anything, did it? But thinking about it has her remembering his antics at the snogging bench, and an unwelcome shiver slides down her spine.

Above anything, she hates a puzzle she can't solve.

The purple binding feels hot in her hands — feels like it's burning her with guilt. She lets it fall to the sheets between her knees. Uses her wand to check the time. Six in the morning.

She hasn't slept.

How could she? With both the past and the future colliding inside her head? Thinking about the touches he's already given and the hate he's going to give when he finds out?

It's the first time she acknowledges that she doesn't want him to hate her.

It's also the first time she acknowledges that kissing him was...different. None of the sloppiness and stickiness she'd gotten from Ron. None of the fumbling hands and knocking teeth. Kissing him was clean — crisp and succinct, every movement having meaning, every touch placed where he wanted it to be — and yet at the same time entirely unclear. Dark. Demanding. Sensual. With his bold tongue and adventurous fingertips. She'd never imagined Malfoy could kiss like that.

She'd never imagined kissing Malfoy at all.

And yet now she can't imagine why.

She sits back against her pillows, tangling a nervous hand in her curls as she, for once, allows the image of him to seep into her mind unfettered. Undererred.

Why hadn't she ever thought of Malfoy in that way? His despicable attitude notwithstanding, there was never a conceivable way to pass off his looks as average. He's tall — taller than most of the boys she knows, and even though she's always told herself that height should have nothing to do with it, there's something about sinking into the inky darkness of his shadow. His hands are long...delicate. Aristocratic in every sense. There would've been no way for her to know in the past how smooth the pads of his fingers are, but after feeling them trace her naked hipbones after slipping beneath the waistband of her jeans, she knows. *Oh*, she knows.

She doesn't expect the sudden spark of arousal when it comes, but she snuffs it out quickly, ushering the image of him from her head like a disease and forcing herself to stand up. To get away from the bed, with its sheets and its pillows and its connotations.

Her eyes find the violently purple journal again, and any lasting arousal is flattened by fear and guilt.

She hasn't decided what to do yet. Part of her wants to play it by ear, but that's too open-ended. Too mysterious for a rationally-grounded brain like hers. She knows he won't believe that he dropped it — she'd had a rough enough time slipping it from such a deep pocket when he'd been leaning over her like he was. And even if he did believe that, he'd never believe she hadn't read it.

Moments like these make her regret giving up her Time Turner.

Right now, there's nothing she can do. Nothing but wait. But it's Monday, and spending all day in bed avoiding him isn't an option. They have *classes* together. Bloody hell.

A fresh wave of panic fans out inside her chest, and she's *so fucking furious* at herself for getting into this situation. Her old self — the girl before the war — would never have done this. She would've minded her own business and studied...hard. She wouldn't be caught dead letting Malfoy push her up against a bookcase.

Old Hermione wasn't a girl like that.

She wonders now, though. Is she a girl like that? Because no matter how many

top coats of denial she slathers onto it, the base coat is and has been since Friday night that she wants more than anything to feel those cold, rough lips again.

One of the girls sits in bed — Parvati. It jerks her into motion and out of her thoughts, and she shoves the diary under the silk of her pillow, making her bed in a rush. There'll be no more sleep this morning.

She's the first one down to the Great Hall for breakfast, and she's come armed with reading that's weeks ahead of what they're learning in class. Still, it makes her feel like her old self. And she'll do anything to chase that shadow.

It has all the makings of a nice morning. Warm porridge. A London Fog steaming beside her open books. Silence. No one to disturb her.

But, as of late, nothing that seems right stays right.

The thud of a book bag on the bench startles her. She splashes London Fog onto her hand and hisses at the burn.

And of all people, a Slytherin sits down at the table. *Her* table. It isn't the usual Slytherin. Not the one that lights up her nerve endings like fuses.

It's Theodore Nott.

And he comes with his own index of complications. He, having been the object of her First Year girlhood crush. He, having been her nemesis in academic merit for all the years following. He — sarcastic and slippery and dressed as always in a perfectly starched shirt, thrown off by an absurdly uneven tie.

They don't speak.

Until now, apparently.

"This is the Gryffindor table," she says, so childish she instantly regrets it. Nott grins, and unlike Malfoy, it isn't a rare sight. He's been flashing her winning smiles ever since he beat her to highest score on the Potions final, second year. "I'm shocked, Granger. Shouldn't you know all about Muggle segregation? How *wrong* it was?"

She gawks at him. "Who are *you* to lecture *me* about segregation, *Death Eater*?" And even she knows it's an overreaction. She swallows and sits back a little, flushing. "Sorry," she mutters. She wonders where her filter has gone.

"Touchy, *touch-y*," he tsks. He's never had a fragile ego. Just a large one. In