

According to Ginny, Ron never really moved on. And if this is how he stomachs Zacharias Smith, she can only imagine how he'd react to the truth. The idea of it makes her nauseous.

For the first time in days, her scar itches.

She's tried to gravitate the topic of conversation away from all of it several times, bringing up the kink in the wards she'd seen by the Quidditch Pitch — something that still bothers her — but nothing really takes for more than a minute or so.

Everyone is too enamored with the idea of Hermione Granger, lonely, damaged fraction of the Golden Trio, finally moving on from the War.

Which isn't the truth of it by a mile.

Malfoy is nothing but a powerful distraction. The War is still with her every day.

*November 2nd, 1998*

SHE'D KNOWN IT WAS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME, AND IT HAPPENS ON THE WAY TO DEFENSE AGAINST THE DARK ARTS.

"Hey!" someone calls, feet scuffling behind her. "Hermione!"

She turns — sighs when she sees Zacharias. He catches up to her with a short sprint, book bag bobbing from shoulder to shoulder.

"Hi," he says, out of breath, boyish face a bit pink.

"Hi," she echoes. Her stomach ties itself in knots. She has no idea where this conversation will go, but she expects he's probably angry. And rightfully so.

"I — erm..." His hand makes its way up around to the back of his head, rubbing his hair into a mess of fluff as he struggles for phrasing. He's leaning to one side, then the other, awkward and unsure.

"I'm sorry," she blurts out.

"I — no, no, don't be sorry — it's okay, erm — I mean, I...I feel as though some things were lost in translation. But yeah, erm — it's just...I mean, the whole idea's really sweet, and honestly, I'm flattered — honestly. I just, I erm..."

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*that look like cinnamon and those fucking brown eyes.*

*I called her a cunt. A fucking blueblood cunt.*

*I've never even used that word on Pansy.*

*She just — she fucking —*

*Fuck.*

*I want to fucking kill her almost as much as I want to kiss her.*

*No. No, that's not what I want to do. I don't want to kiss her. I want to make an indentation of her body in my mattress. I want to hear those fucking sounds she makes again. And I want to ruin her life.*

*The things she fucking wrote — fucking Mertin.*

*I should rip the page out. I should pass it off as fucking bullshit.*

*But I like looking at her atrocious handwriting.*

*Don't ask me. I don't fucking know why.*

*Draco*

*October 6th, 1998*

THE OTHER GIRLS IN THE DORMITORY STARE AT HER.

They watch her while she dresses — watch her while she brushes her teeth. Their expressions are soaked in that pity she hates. Their eyes are low though. They're looking at her throat.

She wonders why she hasn't Glamoured it away. Doesn't think she will.

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There's no use in hiding this one.

Havershim and McGonagall found her in the Owlery late the previous night, curled up in droppings and feathers, asleep — filthy. Tear-stained.

She's still upset with herself for such a pathetic display of emotion. Still embarrassed by the entirety of yesterday. Nott was wrong. She isn't starved for attention, she loathes it. And she doesn't plan to encourage it by giving in to these looks of pity and crying on someone's shoulder.

She isn't even going to acknowledge how sore her throat actually is.

She's going to square her shoulders and move on. It's what she's best at.



“Mione, please — just hear me out. Hear my side—”

She's been silently ignoring him until now, but he's pushed her to her limits. “No, Ronald — you don't *have* a side,” she snaps, startling Dean, who's sitting beside her, into spilling apple cider into his lap.

Ron has been badgering her throughout dinner, having moved from sitting next to her to sitting across from her just to force himself into her eye line. To his credit, he seems genuinely confused as to how she can possibly be mad.

He saved her, right?

She huffs to herself, loudly slurping her own cider to drown out the sounds of his excuses. Harry, who seems to have taken pity on him, chimes in with, “Really, ‘Mione, it was just a stupid mistake. His heart was in the—”

She brandishes her fork at him like a weapon, “Harry James Potter, don't you *dare* say his heart was in the right place.” And when Harry shuts his mouth obediently — which momentarily brings her back to Nott's whip-crack motion — she aims her fork at Ron instead, whose desperation is palpable. “*You*. You have got to start thinking of the consequences of your actions. And you *must* start acting your age. What you did was cowardly, and you did it for attention. I'll ask you kindly to stop jumping into puddles to save me from drowning.”

For a moment, her speech stuns him into silence. But when the first words that follow turn out to be, “Merlin, ‘Mione — it was only Malfoy—” she's up

words came out of her mouth, she's regretted them.

Somehow, she's managed to dig herself even deeper into a crater of lies. Ginny and the other girls had been only too happy for her — they'd joked, teased her.

“*What were you so afraid of?*”

“*He's cute — how's the snogging?*”

It certainly hadn't helped that Parvati was drunk. Hermione had asked, of course — to keep this quiet. She'd thought Parvati's inebriation might work in her favor — hoped she'd forget come morning, and somehow the disastrous evidence of her cowardice wouldn't be all over the school.

She'd thought wrong, clearly.

Almost everyone knows.

Just, hopefully not Zacharias Smith.

And hopefully not—

She makes the mistake of letting her eyes wander in the other direction. Past the Hufflepuff table and toward the familiar corner belonging to Slytherin. Malfoy's deeply involved in his journal, scribbling with a certain fury.

She bites down on the inside of her lip.

That doesn't necessarily mean that he knows. Any number of things could have him so angry.

But she watches him for a good minute, and before long, his livid gaze slides in the direction hers has been all morning.

He shoots the blissfully unaware Zacharias a glare that could freeze Hell. He knows.

“*Bollocks*,” Hermione mumbles to herself. But when she glances back at her tablemates, they're staring at her.

“What?” asks Ginny.

“No — nothing. Forgot an assignment, is all.” They probably don't buy that. Her traitorous eyes continue their tour of stomach-dropping sights, falling on Ron next. He's upset — visibly. His normally carefree manner is absent, and worst of all, he's not eating. Never a good sign.

*Before you report me for “coming unhinged,” do me a favor and consider what you’d fucking do if your fucking pitl was pretending you were a bloody Hufflepuff to save face?*

*Why doesn’t this fucking book let me cross things out anymore?*

*She’s not my pitl. That was a grammatical mistake. But you know what I fucking mean.*

*I feel like my blood’s fucking boiling.*

*I’m thinking of doing something stupid.*

*Draco*

November 1st, 1998

SHE REALIZES SHE’S NEVER PAID MUCH ATTENTION TO HIM BEFORE.

But now she catches herself glancing sideways at him every other minute, as though something in his face will give away whether or not he’s heard yet. She understands why Parvati thinks it’s him.

He’s almost tall enough. And blond, but a darker blond.

But his features are infinitely less angular than Malfoy’s — he’s almost baby-faced — and he’s stockier. Less aristocratic.

Zacharias Smith is not her type.

It’s an unfortunate train of thought. Has her falling down a rabbit hole of possibilities. The possibility that Malfoy’s her type. The possibility that people are starting to pale in comparison to him.

Which is — which is just *absurd*.

She’s a bloody idiot. She knows. And for every second that’s passed since the

and out of her seat in an instant, heaving her ink-stained book bag over her shoulder.

“I’m going to study for a while,” she says. “Enjoy your dinner.”

As she leaves, she can’t help her eyes from sliding over to the Slytherin table. She knows he hasn’t been arrested. Knows he doesn’t have detention either, as she’d used the last of her bargaining chips with McGonagall last night to somehow convince her that it was a misunderstanding.

But he isn’t there.

She tries not to let herself feel disappointed. Tries to make herself see just how ridiculous that is. She should be relieved, if anything. He should *scare* her, at this point.

But she’s clearly lost whatever was left of her sanity — because he doesn’t.

She makes it about halfway to the Library before it occurs to her that Ron could go looking for her. And he’s just humiliated enough that he might stand to be around books in order to try to apologize.

So she diverts, turning on her heel and heading back down the stairs. Heading out the front doors of the castle and making her way to what has become her favorite place.

She doesn’t admit to herself that she’s hoping he might be there, too — but it’s the only way to explain the fluttering in her stomach. The wings of the butterflies she hasn’t managed to kill yet.

It’s colder than she expected outside, and she conjures a thick, knitted cardigan, slipping her arms into it as she makes her way down the grassy hill. The moon is pale and massive, looking over the castle like a white eye and illuminating her surroundings almost as well as daylight.

She watches her breath rise in the air. Folds her arms about herself. Swallows — winces at the pain — as she first notices his outline at the edge of the Black Lake. The fluttering in her stomach morphs into a whirlwind.

This is probably a terrible idea.

She knows he knows she’s there. About five feet away, she sees his shoulders tense. Still, she doesn’t let herself slow down, doesn’t stop until she’s standing

beside him.

Neither wants to look first.

They stare out at the pitch black of the lake, listening to it lap and swell. She knows she owes it to him to speak first, but it takes her at least a full minute to make her voice work. To make it actually create sound.

“Hello,” she says. *How fucking ridiculous. Stupid, stupid*—

“You again,” is his response. A statement, not a question. And he gives nothing more.

She glances down at her feet, shuffling her toes inside her shoes. And then she gives in and glances over at him first.

He’s still facing forward, so she studies him in profile. His face is healing, but slowly. Madam Pomfrey has done her best to counteract the handiwork of Ron’s fists — the swelling is gone, and the violent red of the dried blood has been cleaned. But the bruises remain. One eye is circled in black, like a raccoon’s. His lip is split.

But the longer she stares, the more she realizes that she isn’t looking at the bruises. She’s following the cut, angular line of his jaw. Admiring it. Studying the curve of his eyelashes.

She clears her throat and looks away. “Did — erm..did the entry make it in time?”

“Is that why you came out here?” Malfoy’s voice is unfriendly. Tight. “For a ‘thank you?’”

She bristles. “That’s not — no.” She pauses. Takes a moment to stop herself from reacting poorly. “I don’t want you to thank me.”

“I don’t plan to.”

“Well...good.”

“Good,” he says.

She opens her mouth. Shuts it. Are they really going to be this — this *childish*?

“Look, Malfoy — I came out here to—”

“Don’t bother.”



*November 1st, 1998*

*Diary,*

*Oh, you'd better be fucking kidding me.*

*This'd better be a very bad joke. There's no other way to explain what I've just heard.*

*Pansy's watching me write. She's ruined my breakfast with her juicy morning gossip, and now she's staring at me like she's expecting me to transform into an imp or something.*

*But —*

*Fucking Zacharias?*

*I've always known Granger's a bloody milksoy when it comes to her fellow Gryffindors, but ZACHARIAS? The fucking least she could've fucking done was say I was fucking McLaggen — or someone at least minimally less revolting than that fucking candy-ass Hufflepuff toss-pump.*

*I want to rip her fucking hair out.*

*I want to do more than that.*

“Oh, shut it, you great cow,” Ginny thrusts a pillow in her direction. Misses narrowly. But when her eyes find Hermione again, they’re full of curiosity, and a bit of something else. “That’s who it is? Zacharias Smith?”

Hermione stares at her in silence for a long moment.

It’s relief, she realizes. That’s the look on her face.

She’s relieved by the name. Smith is one of the only other blond boys in their year, and to Ginny, Parvati and the others, he’s the only logical answer. The only acceptable blond that Hermione would dare to fraternize with.

And it fills Hermione up with so much panic and guilt that, no matter how much force she musters inside herself to hold it back, she says it anyway.

“Yes...yes, it’s Zacharias Smith.”

This time she’s audibly flustered. “You — I...”

“You should leave.”

And just like that, her calm, diplomatic demeanor goes out the window.

“*Malfoy*,” she bites out. “I didn’t come out here to deal with your arrogance.

Now stop sulking and be a bloody man about things! I’m trying to make amends.”

Malfoy does turn to her then, showing her the full extent of the bruises. His eyes tighten. “Be a...*man*...about things?” he hisses, voice deadly — oozing sarcasm. She regrets using that word, but she can’t back down now.

“Yes,” she says matter-of-factly, squaring her shoulders. “Grow up.”

For an extended second, he doesn’t move an inch — all she sees is the slightest flicker in his expression. The slightest spark. Then he turns his body fully to face her, leaning down to close the eight-inch gap in their heights.

“You know, I was right about you, Granger,” he murmurs, lip quirking up on one side, eyes switching between each of hers. Searching them. Then he smiles fully. A rakish, vicious, sharp-toothed grin. “You really are a *cunt*.”

There’s about a half-second gap between the time it takes for her eyes to widen and the moment her uncoordinated fist meets his face.

Pain explodes behind her knuckles, and she staggers back a step or two, swearing, just as Malfoy does the same, hand flying to his freshly bleeding mouth. She doesn’t know how to punch — has only done it once before, coincidentally to the same person — but this time she’s certain she’s broken her thumb.

“What the *fuck*, Granger?” he roars, doubling over and spitting blood into the grass.

Hermione is cradling her hand, half-angry and half-frightened, when he throws his head back up, repeatedly dabbing at the blood with his palm. His lip is split on both sides, now, and his eyes meet hers like a lightning strike.

“Is that what you fucking think I needed? Another *punch* in the *fucking face*?”

Her only thought is to defend herself. “At least you were conscious this time!”

she screams.

"Fucking *fuck*, Granger! *Fuck*!" He spits more blood out, turning in angry semi-circles as though to prevent himself from throwing her into the lake.

"You called me a — a *cunt*!" The word tastes foreign on her tongue. "*Again!*" she adds for good measure.

"You were fucking *acting like one!*" He rounds on her, approaching so fast that she backpedals, inadvertently stepping several feet into the icy shallows of the Black Lake. Malfoy follows her straight in, splashing his way through, and suddenly they're inches apart, the water up to their knees. "You still are!" he shouts right into her face. Has to have the final word.

Blood is dripping from his lip down his chin. It glistens in the moonlight. And he stands there, breathing angry puffs of steam as her feet slowly go numb. Neither says a word for a full minute. They only stare at one another.

And when the silence is broken, she's the one to do it. Feels that they've somehow begun an invisible chess game, and it's her move.

"Are you proud of this?" she asks quietly, lifting a hand to trace her fingers over the curved bruise on her throat — the vague shape of his palm.

Malfoy's eyes flit down. Flicker again with some nebulous emotion, but it's gone too quickly for her to analyze.

"No, Granger," he answers at last, and his tone still has the slightest edge. "I'm not fucking proud." His eyes sweep back up to hers. "But I don't regret it, either."

Saliva pools in her mouth. She's trembling from the cold, but she hardly notices. "So you're the type to hit women?"

Malfoy's eyes narrow. A muscle in his jaw twitches — and he takes a sudden step closer, making little waves dance around her. She sucks in a breath, but doesn't move. Doesn't know why, but she doesn't move.

"I don't think I ever *hit* you, Granger," he says, voice low. And then his lip does that thing again — tugs up on one side, and she wonders why she doesn't hate the look of it. "But you should take it as a compliment."

Even she can't imagine where he's going with this. She raises an eyebrow, face

to happen — we don't...we aren't...*right* for each other."

Ginny says nothing, waiting for her to finish.

"We just..." Hermione sighs, setting aside the tea on the nightstand, "we ended up having a lot in common. And one night, we'd had too much to drink—"

"The night you got the bruises," Ginny says — confirms, really. She nods. "I'm sorry I lied to you. I didn't know how to explain."

"But who *is* he, Hermione? Are you honestly that afraid to tell me?"

"Yes," she admits.

"*Why?*"

Her stomach feels like it's sinking — like there's weight in it. Practically a bowling ball. She thinks it might be the sensation one feels right before they lose a friend. But she's made her decision, and now is a better time than any. She forces the words to rise up in her throat.

"Because it's—"

The door to the dormitory bursts open and laughter spills in. Shadows move from behind the bed curtains.

"Hermione *Jean* Granger!" someone sing-songs drunkenly — maybe Parvati. "Where are you, you wild minx?"

Ginny pinches the bridge of her nose, letting out a groan. She bats aside one of the curtains, and her *Muffliato* fades away. "Pav, bloody hell—"

Parvati is arm in arm with Eloise and Romilda, wobbling on her feet, face split with a massive grin. "*You!*" she announces too loudly when she sees Hermione, giggling and nearly falling over before Eloise tugs her backward. "Why didn't you tell us about you and Zacharias?"

Hermione blinks. Blinks twice. Opens her mouth and shuts it as Ginny sneaks a glance at her.

"Zacharias?" Ginny echoes.

"I feel *betrayed*!" Parvati wails, and Eloise and Romilda hush her amidst more giggles, working her over towards her bed. "Where is the bond of *sisterhood*?"

She sets Hermione up against her pillows, then sits cross-legged in front of her at the foot of the bed, drawing the curtains around them. She casts a quick *Muffliato*, sets her wand aside and then fixes a pair of enormously large brown eyes onto Hermione and waits.

Hermione says nothing.

"Alright," says Ginny after about a full minute. "Well, who is he?"

Hermione makes a sound of desperation and drops her face into her hands, still singing and raw, now swollen from crying. "That's the worst question."

"It can't be that bad—"

But Hermione's fervent nods cut her off.

"Hermione," Ginny says soberly. "No one could be anything but happy that you've found someone. I know Ron can be—"

Now she's shaking her head, and adamantly at that. "You're wrong. You're so, so wrong."

"Well, Ron will just have to muck up and deal with it."

"It's not just Ron. It'll be all of you. Trust me, please. Trust me." And she sounds more neurotic than she ever has. She may as well be rocking back and forth.

"Alright," Ginny holds up her hands in surrender. She picks up her wand and conjures a quick and rather impressive cup of tea, holding it out to Hermione. "Then we'll start with easier questions."

Hermione sips it while it's too hot.

"How did it start? And when?"

She speaks around the cup at her lips, her breath disturbing the steam rising from it. "A little after the start of term." Vaguely, she thinks how much this feels like two girls talking at a slumber party, beneath blankets.

If only it were that simple.

"And it started by accident, really," she continues, staring into her tea. She's afraid if she looks at Ginny, she'll lose her nerve.

"How does something start by accident?"

Her tone comes out defensive — she can't help it. "Neither of us wanted this

flushing with blood from the cold. Waits for him to continue.

"I see you as enough of a threat..." another step closer — there's not enough safe space between them now, "...to feel the need to use force."

She scoffs, reminded again of their proximity when the strand of hair dangling across his forehead blows aside with her breath. "A threat?" she intones.

But his face doesn't change, and she realizes all too late that he's serious.

"Yes," he says. "A threat."

"To what?"

"To everything I am. Everything I believe in. To every molecule and every strand that makes me, me." His breath gusts up against her face, warm for once, but as always tinged with peppermint, and she finds herself frozen. "Yeah, Granger...you're a fucking threat."

And for a moment, all she can comprehend is the thresh of the water. Loud — so incredibly loud to her ears.

The rest comes into focus in her mind slowly. Dazedly.

His hand, sweeping beneath the curtain of her hair, curling around the back of her neck, ungente, just as he's always been. His definitive, decisive huff of a breath. The last sip of air she's given before his mouth finds hers.

And all she can think is...

This kiss is hatred.

This kiss is violence and pain and trauma, carefully wrapped in the ribbons and bows that are his lips. This kiss is his hand around her throat and the smack of her head against stone. This kiss is the hollow ache in his stomach when he reaches into a pocket to find that he's been robbed of his second chance.

This kiss is agony. It tastes like the blood still dripping from his lips — tangy and metallic. Its pressure is almost painful. His teeth pierce the flesh of her own lips. His fingers bruise. He means to hurt her.

And she wants to pull away. She wants to. She knows she should.

But as he takes out his anger — his pain and frustration — on her in a way she never thought possible, she realizes she has a choice.

She has the choice to shove him back. To walk away and wipe his blood from

her mouth and to never understand. To turn her back on the unsolvable jigsaw and leave the pieces abandoned on the carpet. To cleanse the name of Malfoy from her life with bleach and bias.

Or she has the choice to kiss him back.

Just to see if the pieces fit, upside down.

Her first touch is tentative. An uncertain placement of her palm on the plane of his cheek. Clumsy fingers against icy skin. But it's enough to disturb the punishing rhythm of his lips. To cause a stutter in the violence.

He makes a sound — toneless and breathy. A confused and quiet sort of gasp. Because he's been expecting her to stop him. He's been trying to make her.

But this time he doesn't get to win.

She spreads her hand out. Grows bold. Slides the other back past his ear and into the deceptive softness of his hair. Her hand hurts from punching him. But she pulls him closer, despite all pain.

And suddenly the pieces fit.

His pressure weakens — pulls back. His teeth free the tortured flesh of her bottom lip, and his hand falls from the nape of her neck. Finds the small of her back, suddenly soft and uncertain. Barely touching.

And he becomes malleable. Gives her the turn she's earned.

Hermione stretches up onto the numb tips of her toes underwater, dragging his head down to meet her halfway. She licks the blood clean from her lips and then searches for his. Finds them suddenly timid. Motionless.

And she kisses him with all the gentleness she knows he's never been given. Crosses her wrists behind his neck and buries herself in him, letting go of inhibitions and warnings and self-preservation. She runs her tongue alone the smooth line of his teeth, asking permission — waiting as he opens for her, and their tongues meet like old friends.

And when Malfoy wakes from his shock, he's kissing her back without violence. With violence of a different sort entirely. With passion, and yet restraint. With desire.

His hands fist in the thick fabric of her cardigan, bunching it up around her

It makes her pause mid-step.

“And you’ve got him wrapped around your little finger.”



Nori's words echo in her head as she struggles to wash the nightmarish remains of the make-up from her face. She's scrubbing at it the Muggle way — doesn't feel like using magic. Wants to keep her hands busy and her mind occupied. But it isn't working.

*“You’ve got him wrapped around your little finger...”*

Surely, he can't be serious. The only person she can possibly picture having Malfoy in such a position is his father. The implication that she could have such an effect on him is...well, it's ludicrous.

Malfoy's left streaks of white on her upper lip. She scrubs at them the hardest, until her face feels raw and itchy.

The dormitory's been empty for too long as it is, and when at last she hears the door open, she's expecting it, even as a thick dread settles in her veins.

“Mione?” she hears — it's Ginny.

“In here,” she says, turning the sink faucet off, resigned.

Ginny appears in the doorway, and the accusatory expression Hermione's expecting isn't there. In its place, concern. More than she's accustomed to.

“Are you alright?” she asks, toying with her lovely red braid.

Hermione nods mutely. She's almost numb. This conversation is long overdue, and while she feels she's spent weeks rehearsing it, she still isn't prepared.

Clearly not, because the first words out of her mouth are: “You'll hate me.”

And then she's bursting into tears — loud, pathetic sobs, and as they stream down her cheeks her stomach sinks in horror. It seems she's far from numb, and this isn't how she wanted it to go at all.

But Ginny's an inch from her in a heartbeat, gathering her up and pressing her wet face into the shoulder of her gown. “Bloody hell, ‘Mione,” she says. “That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard.” And with a sad laugh, she'd leading her out of the bathroom toward her four-poster.



doesn't know. Clearly, he knew Malfoy's costume tonight, but she wouldn't have pinned him to be among the top ten most upset by their actions.

He'd have to wait in line.

"Whatever bollocks you're trying to pull with Malfoy had best stop now."

"Who are you? His father? What does it matter to you?" She lurches up two steps to get ahead of him, but he catches up quickly. She realizes she should be worried that he knows, even if he seems to be the only one. That's one more mouth to keep shut.

A silent fury builds in her stomach at Malfoy. The next time she sees him, she swears she'll—

"Like I've said before, Granger — I'm his Crutch. And I won't have you fucking with his head any more than you already have. Whatever you're doing, trying to make him trust you and what not, put a fucking end to it. *Now.*"

She stops short, so quickly Nott almost trips. "Making him *trust* me?" She pins him with what she hopes is a vicious glare.

"Yeah, Granger. That's what I think you're fucking doing. Either that, or this is some pathetic *'Rehabilitate the Death Eaters'* project of yours. Which ever way, I know you'll come out looking like the hero, and he'll end up in Azkaban or worse."

Nott's speech surprises her. It takes her a moment to form any response at all, and when she does, it comes amidst stuttering scoffs and huffs.

"I — you...what on *Earth* are you on about? *Azkaban?* A bloody kiss will hardly put a man in Azkaban."

Nott's thick brows converge over his eyes. His gaze darkens. "That wasn't just a kiss, Granger. We've established neither of us are idiots."

She sniffs. Tries to plaster an impassive expression onto her face, even as his words make her think more than she wants to. "You're drunk," she says. "Sleep it off. And if you're this upset, why don't you speak to your bloody *Crutch* about it? He's the one causing all the trouble."

She storms off ahead, and he doesn't follow. But he calls after her, "Oh, I have, Granger."

waist, and he drags her against him. A welcome warmth in the cold.

He's never felt warm until now.

The water ripples beneath them. He lifts her — unexpectedly, expertly. Belts an arm beneath her as her legs encircle his waist instinctively. She gasps, and the friction is treacherous. Torturous. Sublime.

Now they're on a level playing field. And as he slants his mouth over hers, she forgets the taste of blood and the ache of the bruises beneath her chin. Forgets the past, if only for just a moment.

Forgets to hate him.

His cheeks are damp. She tastes the salt of stray tears, and for the first time she realizes that Malfoy is capable of them.

And she knows that — no matter what he does to her — she will never tell a soul.

October 14th, 1998

Diary,

*It doesn't mean anything.*

Draco



October 9th, 1998

THE BRUISES ARE FADING, AT LONG LAST.

She catches sight of herself in the mirror next to Madam Pomfrey's office, on her way out of the Hospital Wing and back to her dormitory. Finds them nearly gone. The marks of his fingertips are yellowing, and the love bites have vanished entirely.

Now the only bruises left to heal are the ones on her lips, from the night by the Lake.

She hastens away. Tries to push back the whirlwind of memories as she ascends the first flight of stairs, only to fail. And miserably, at that.

It's so hard *not* to think about it. Every time she speaks or moves her lips, a soreness bites back, and she remembers the pressure that started out so unpleasant and became so exquisite. She remembers the numb ache in her feet, hypothermic — stiff. They remained a bluish purple long after she left the lake. It took her hours, in the dead of the night, to work feeling back into them in the dormitory bathroom, using a conjured tub.

Malfoy never shivered, she realizes. Not once.

By the third staircase, she's thinking about the way he breathed. A long, steadying breath, warm against her mouth — the one he let out just before

October 31st, 1998



SHE WIPES HER MOUTH. Smears what is likely already smudges of black all over her lips and chin. The gazes of her peers are heavy — almost painfully so — and she feels all she can do is clear her throat, straighten her corset and stride quickly from the Hall.

The cool air outside the gold doors sends a chill through her blood, and she shivers as she makes her way toward the Grand Staircase. Her cheeks are flaming, her heart thudding like a mallet in her chest. Footsteps echo behind her.

Someone is hot on her heels.

"Ginny, *please* —" She whips around, breathless, only to see Theodore Nott charging up the steps after her.

"What the fuck are you playing at, Granger?"

He's not who she expected, and she's unprepared. "Nott?" she says stupidly, almost in a daze.

He stops on the step below her, costumeless, smelling of alcohol. His face is pink with it, and also with anger. "Answer me," he snaps. So he isn't drunk enough to slur.

She gathers a breath. Speaks primly, with more focus. "I don't understand the question." And she's grateful her voice comes out steady. Turning, she resumes her march up the staircase, trying to calm the tremble in her fingertips, which is entirely Malfoy's doing.

But Nott follows her up, matching her stride and taking each step simultaneously. "Don't play dumb, Granger — you've never been an idiot."

"Neither have you, so I'd assume you can tell when someone's telling the truth," she quips, refusing to look at him. What he has to do with anything, she

enchantment on his lips.

Because it's like a drug.

Her protests die in her mouth, her fighting hands go limp against him, only to come back to life to slide up to his shoulders. Her eyes fall shut and all she knows is his taste. Mint and the bitter tang of the white make-up on his lips — the black on hers.

One of his hands dives low — sweeps across the expanse of her thigh. Hooks it up around his hip. She gasps, and he takes the opportunity to reunite their tongues. Familiar old friends.

She's lost in oblivion for the remainder of the dance, only coming to her senses when the music dies away, as does the sound of swishing skirts and pounding shoes. It's over.

Breaking away from his lips is like pulling away from a magnet. Gravity is against her. But when she manages, flushed and panting, her thigh still gripped tight in his gloved hand, it only takes one glance to know they're the center of attention.

Quickly, she detangles herself from him, going redder still from the stares.

She remembers she should be furious. But as her face morphs into a glare and her mouth opens, Malfoy cuts her off.

"Don't expect me to apologize."

And he surges forth once more to brush his nose up against her neck — to clamp his teeth down on the still tender expanse in front of everyone, ripping a hoarse, little shriek from her mouth.

Then he's backing away. "I'm not sorry," he says, voice even. Dark.

And he disappears into the darkness of the Great Hall, lost amongst the crowd — leaving her alone at the center of dozens of wide eyes.

stepping back. Stepping away. Without another word, he'd turned and gone, leaving her with nothing but a lingering glance and more bruises to attend to. She has not spoken to him since, and each time she sneaks a glance, she finds his eyes averted.

Stupidly, she wonders if it'll always be this way. Stupidly — because there is no *always*. There is no *it*. She has chalked these up to flukes. Murphy's Law in practice. Random, scientific phenomena. The collision of two chaotic bodies amidst more surrounding chaos. Nothing else would make her crave Malfoy's touch — and vice versa.

Malfoy is a coping mechanism.

Still, by the fifth staircase these thoughts are gone and she's once more el-bow-deep in memories.

*October 17th, 1998*

QUIDDITCH.

Is there any point at all?

To be fair, she's never enjoyed the sport, but now more so than ever it feels utterly meaningless. Like putting a bandaid on a knife wound — in theory, it could help, on a much smaller injury.

But Quidditch is a bandaid on the already-dead body of Hogwarts. If even Harry can't bring himself to play, she wonders why they still have matches at all.

That being said, she somehow finds herself in the stands this afternoon. Ginny's pressured her into coming along, guiltig her under the guise of, "*You just don't seem to have...recovered. You know — from...*"

From the incident with Malfoy. If only Ginny knew how many more *incidents* there were.

Still, she wanted off the subject, so she relented.

And now she's in the cold, windy Gryffindor stands on the left side of the pitch, watching a rather unexciting match between mostly Fourth and Fifth Years. The majority of students older than that have opted out, following Harry's

lead. It seems they can drink, laugh and be merry, but Quidditch is crossing the line.

So far, all Hermione has learned this year is that coping mechanisms make very little sense.

She sits, disinterested, amongst a large group of Seventh Years, sandwiched between Ginny and Seamus — who she has not forgiven. But she couldn't very well go hexing him into oblivion without explaining why, and there was absolutely no chance of that.

So she's bearing her fury in silence and sour side-glances.

Sighing, she watches as the game pauses yet again due to a foul — these Fourth Years really are rubbish at Quidditch. Doubly so, considering even she can tell, and she doesn't know the rules. She realizes that the only thing that really made Quidditch bearable was cheering Harry on.

Well, that and watching Malfoy get knocked off his broom every now and again by the Weasley twins.

Her heart swells in two directions — painfully, confusingly. Aches at the thought of Fred, and yet inexplicably warms and excites at the thought of Malfoy. And she's so disappointed in herself that she tries to chase the ache instead.

She drops her chin onto her fist, almost going cross-eyed as she refocuses on the slow-moving match. The blurry blues and reds of the Quidditch uniforms zip past her line of sight, and slowly, her gaze moves to the shadowy shapes of Hogsmeade's roofs in the distance.

She's busy counting chimneys when she first sees it.

It makes her blink — clear her eyes, and for a moment she thinks she's seen a fleck of dust or the blur of something caught in her eyelash. But then, seconds later, she sees it again.

In the distance, just before Hogsmeade — somewhere along the barrier of the Grounds — she sees a ripple in the air. Like a mirage. It waves the way a body of water does, when a pebble is tossed into its depths. A small, controlled section of the atmosphere.

She sits up straight. Stares.

Ron hook elbows and skip around.

He's taking this too far. He's toying with her. And he's going to get them caught.

The circles split back into lines for the final portion of the dance, and she thinks she does a careful job of positioning herself to be paired up with either Ron or Harry.

"Alright, Hermione?" Luna asks dreamily, having noticed her smile missing. She turns to answer, only to have the dance charge forth before she's ready.

The lines meet in the middle, and it's absolutely *impossible* that she's miscalculated this badly. *Impossible*. Which means Malfoy slid himself between Ron and Harry at the last minute.

Making him her partner.

She opens her mouth to say god knows what, but he shocks her into silence by lacing his fingers through the cinched front of her corset and yanking her up against him. With a gasp, her hands fly to his chest, instinctively trying to push away.

"Are you *mad*? What are you *doing*?"

Malfoy's other hand sweeps down to her lower back, pulling her closer yet, and she goes abruptly still.

"To answer your question from before," he says, voice low as he begins to twirl her about in the dance's final waltz, "no."

"No what?" she breathes, limp in his grasp, forgetting all the steps. Her eyes flit to other couples as he leads, trying to see whether they're being watched.

But Malfoy stops them short just then, dragging her close once more so she's flush against him. It forces her breath to build at the top of her chest, and she stares up at him, lips parted, cheeks flaming, heart pounding.

"No — I don't think we've done *nearly* enough to each other."

And then his hands fan out against her waist, yanking her hips in, and he sweeps down to capture her mouth. A helpless squeak of protest is the last thing she can manage.

And of all things, she makes a mental note to ask whether he's placed an

than she'd hoped. She doesn't want to spoil it. So she offers him a small smile, and in turn his face lights up.

The couples portion is slower. Each pair meets at the middle of the circle, touching palms and revolving around one another before moving back into the circle. After each turn, they all grab hands and gallop together counterclockwise — a part that used to make her laugh.

Seamus manages to force it out of her tonight, too, by rapidly increasing the speed beyond its capacity and turning their spinning circle into something of a ceiling fan catastrophe.

After all the couples have met in the middle, the many circles come together again as a whole, and they repeat the portion with the lines. She finds herself laughing with Ginny and Luna as they break from the original choreography and perform a devolved, drunken mess of the can-can.

The First Years are tripping all over themselves trying to remember the steps, and the older students are being no help, herself included. Couples get jumbled and rearranged as they divide into circles again, and this time Dean is gone and Ron is paired with Luna. Harry laughs the way he used to when he's thrown into the mix with Seamus, and it makes Hermione's heart swell. Ginny and Neville skip the touching of palms and grab hands to spin in a raucous pinwheel.

And Hermione's laughing freely as she rushes forth for her turn, only to realize that if Ron's paired with Luna, then—

A mask of black and white fills her view as Malfoy steps up to meet her. Her laughter is sucked up and out of her throat as though by a vacuum.

She glances nervously to the side, finding confused faces, but none of disgust. They don't recognize him.

Malfoy's taking her hand before she has time to prepare herself, and he sweeps her into a spin, twirling her once — twice. She roots her heel into the ground, stopping to hiss at him in a whisper, "What are you doing?" before they step back from one another and rejoin the circle.

His face is impassive as ever, skeletal lips quirked up to one side — the only evidence he's enjoying this. She glares at him over Luna's shoulder as she and

Her breath stops in her throat.

*It's the wards.*

Not a moment later, she hears herself making an excuse about a headache.

"Not again, 'Mione," Ginny calls after her, but she's already cutting across the stands toward the staircase.

As she makes her way down and out of the Pitch, tripping over her own feet, she tries to remember everything she's ever learned about wards. Thinks back to Flitwick's lessons and the Forest of Dean.

Protective enchantments are not her best skill. But she knows enough.

An uncorrupted ward should never ripple like that.

She makes a beeline for McGonagall's office.

In the months following the War, she'd read in the Prophet that McGonagall herself had recast the wards during Hogwarts' reconstruction. And if they were McGonagall's, they wouldn't be easy wards to tamper with.

A flicker of a very specific type of fear comes to life inside her — one she hasn't felt since Harry cast his final spell that day. It's the fear that kept her going while they were on the run. The fear that kept her alive, kept her way of the possibility of danger at every turn.

For a long while, it'd become something she'd expected to feel every day. Just like hunger or exhaustion or any other natural sensation.

It cannot be a good sign that it's back.

Throughout the Castle, decorations for Halloween are being placed along the walls by House Elves and professors, but she hardly notices as she skirts past them. She doesn't stop to wonder whether this adrenaline she's feeling is healthy, or even necessary. Perhaps it's the pathetic joy that comes with feeling useful — like she's doing something that makes a difference.

After the War, nothing in daily life has quite measured up. Subconsciously, she considers she might now have a permanent attraction to danger.

That would explain Malfoy.

She shakes him away and picks up her pace, heart racing. But her brief excitement is cut short when she finds the wards in front of McGonagall's office

glowing gold.

She's meeting with someone else.

Hermione practically skids to a halt before the statue of the griffin, suddenly having no outlet for the energy coursing through her veins.

She paces in the foyer in front of the statue for good ten minutes, flexing her hands in and out of fists, feeling restless — anxious. A weakened ward could break at any moment. Anything trying to get in from the other side could've already done so.

It sparks that flicker of familiar fear, and a moment later she's racing back the way she's come, feet slapping against the flagstone, feeling for her wand in her pocket. She's past the childhood needs for an adult to set things right.

She's been through a war. She can handle things herself.



Hermione's paced the thirty yards or so adjacent to the Quidditch Pitch for over a half hour. Traced her view from the stands to where she saw the mirage in front of Hogsmeade several times.

And she's found nothing.

The rippling she saw is nowhere to be found. Upon testing the wards with her own wand, she's discovered them to be intact.

But she isn't mad. Isn't hallucinating.

She knows what she saw.

And it bothers her so much, she stays out there until well after dark.

*October 31st, 1998*

SHE DIDN'T WANT TO COME.

Neither did Harry, as it turns out, and yet thanks to Ginny — here they both are. In the glitz and glamor that is the Great Hall for Hogwarts' annual Hallow's Eve Ball. The room is darkly lit, with floating Jack-o-lanterns decorating the

The Samhain Quadrille. A regency-style dance they'd been taught as First Years in preparation for their first Hallow's Eve Ball. The Weird Sisters have stepped aside to allow the orchestra to perform, Flitwick conducting.

Bodies shuffle quickly as everyone on the dance floor adjusts themselves into two long, parallel lines, facing each other. For a moment, Hermione stands stranded in the middle — torn. She doesn't want to do this. Doesn't even know if she can remember the steps.

But Harry catches her eye with a small wave. "Come on, 'Mione," he says, grabbing hands with Dean and Ron at his sides. "For old time's sake."

The overture of the Quadrille is almost over — a ghostly, minor-keyed arrangement. She glances behind her, where the girls are lined up, and Ginny and Luna are holding out their hands to her.

She decides she'll do it.

But for her own sake.

Slipping in between them, she takes their hands with moments to spare before the dance starts. Then the violins take over, and at once both lines raise their interlocked hands above their heads and prance forward several steps. They swing them back down as the two lines converge, then back up to their original positions, and Hermione finds her muscle memory to be much stronger than she'd anticipated.

When next the line of girls rushes forth, the boys raise their arms, and the girls separate and duck beneath them, turning and grabbing hold again, then repeating.

She'd forgotten how much fun this was.

People laugh as they make mistakes. As the lines disperse into circles of couples, Dean and Seamus cause a riot by accidentally pairing up with one another. They run with it, Seamus batting his eyelashes better than any girl she knows as the couples bow to one another. Hermione is paired with Ron, and she notices the apprehension on his face.

They haven't spoken much since the incident with Malfoy.

But tonight — this dance — is turning out better than she'd expected, better

bobs a shoulder — a half shrug. “Something like that. Paying homage to my Death Eater roots.”

She knows he says it to rile her up. She snatches another drink from a floating tray, gulping it down in favor of speaking.

“What about you? A clown?” He scoffs, “Honestly, I expected something a little more creative.”

“I’m a *harlequin*,” she hisses around the rim of her glass. “And Ginny dressed me up. If I had any choice, I wouldn’t be here.” Inwardly, she wonders why she’s being honest. Why give him the satisfaction?

“Ah — Weaslette. I should’ve guessed.”

“Don’t you have somewhere else to be? People to mingle with?” It’s a low blow on her part, considering he’s already admitted he doesn’t have many friends.

But Malfoy shakes it off, as cool and collected as he’s ever been. “No.”

Gone is the boy she’d seen the day he left those bruises, capable of such overpowering rage. In his place is the sly, persuasive Malfoy who always gets his way — familiar, and yet unfamiliar to her all the same.

“Bothering you is more interesting anyway,” he says, and she bristles, swallowing down the rest of the hot cider so fast it burns her throat. With a grimace, she pushes past him.

“Haven’t we done enough to each other?”

And before he can say another word, she steps onto the dance floor, allowing herself to be swept up by the tide of twirling bodies.

Firelight flashes behind her lids as she closes her eyes. She doesn’t dance, but she sways with the rest of them and listens to the music. Tries to think back to a time where it wouldn’t have been difficult to do this. To be loose like this. Free like this.

Now, it takes effort.

Heat crawls up around her. She feels the make-up start to bleed as she sweats. And suddenly the tune changes.

It’s one they all recognize.

misty enchantment of the night sky. Torches line the walls, every now and again flickering with ghostly shapes. It smells of pumpkin and spiced cider and McGonagall has had no trouble at all booking the Weird Sisters as entertainment.

After all, what act would refuse to play for the savior of the Wizarding World?

Their music is loud and energetic and all around bodies are dancing and jumping and colliding. Harry and Hermione stand like stone pillars amidst it all. It’s one of his worse days — she can tell. His scar aches sometimes, or so he’s told her, not so unlike hers does, and she’s caught him rubbing at it a few times this evening.

Overall, Harry’s been doing a tremendous job of uplifting everyone — particularly Ron. He’s managed not to dwell on the past and to keep spirits high, and yet it’s a heavy task. One he can’t shoulder every day. Which is why she doesn’t ask why he didn’t want to come tonight. Why he isn’t smiling.

They afford one another the same courtesy.

She, having never pretended to enjoy the post-War festivities, had obvious reasons for attempting to dodge this Ball. But Ginny — tenacious Ginny — had only to lay out a costume on her dormitory bed and flash her pleading eyes.

Now, she’s here, a glass of cider in one hand, leaning against Harry. Counting the minutes until it ends. Ginny’s dressed her up as a sort of *harlequin*, a short, corseted dress with diamond patterns and ridiculous little bells dangling from the pleats. She refused the jester’s hat, so Ginny mussed up her hair rather wildly and then tied it up into a bun, with loose curls hanging alongside her face. Ginny *did*, however, insist on the make-up, conjuring dark colors around her eyes and framing them with shapes like spinning tops. Black lips, as well.

She feels absurd.

But Ginny’s form of coping is revelry, and she’ll do nothing to ruin that for her.

To match Ginny, Harry has been dressed as a prince, waistcoat and dashing jacket to match. Certainly not his first choice, but from the way he’s looking at Ginny — gorgeous in her periwinkle princess gown — it’s worth it.

It isn't long before she comes to sweep him away for a dance, and Hermione loses her partner in misery.

By no means does she want these sorts of events to stop. A war shouldn't end human happiness.

But it has for her, and being forced to partake feels — disingenuous. Fake.

She sighs, retreating back into the alcove beside a sleeping ghost, sipping her cider as she watches the dance.

*"Their will shall overshadow thee. Be still — be still,"* the Weird Sisters croon from the stage, lyrics taken from a poem she recognizes but cannot quite place.

She remembers a time when she loved Hallow's Eve. It'd been her favorite season at Hogwarts. The decorations. The ghosts, bold and unabashed, dancing through the halls at all hours. She'd particularly loved the Ball. Had daydreamed about being asked to dance by Ron.

She huffs a laugh at herself. Can hardly believe she was once so childish.

And she sees him through the bottom of her glass as she finishes off the cider — blurry and distorted.

"I think you drink more than I do, these days," he says.

Something inside of her clenches. It's a difficult sensation to read — she isn't sure if it's unpleasant or not. But no matter what it is, it's partly nervousness. She hasn't spoken to him in weeks.

Pulling the glass away, she jumps a little when she sees him.

Malfoy has never been the sort to dress up. Least of all now — or so she'd thought.

But tonight he's fully ensconced in the garb of a corpse: torn evening suit, black leather gloves, face painted in blacks and whites like a skeleton. She probably wouldn't have recognized him if he hadn't spoken first. Not unless she'd caught sight of his blond hair, slicked back almost like he used to wear it in earlier years.

She isn't sure how to feel.

The contrast of such dark black around his light eyes is captivating. The tooth-like stripes across his lips just draw more attention to them. The suit and

the gloves —

She's lying, she does know how to feel. She just doesn't want to own up to it. Gathering her wits, she lifts the glass and waves it at him. "It's cider. I've given up drinking." She lets the glass fall away, and it disappears in midair with a small puff of smoke.

"Have you?" draws Malfoy.

"Yes," she says. No, she hasn't. She took two or three shots of Muggle whiskey prior to entering this room. And now she regrets it, because she has no idea how to talk to him.

She doesn't know where they stand.

The last time they interacted, her legs were wrapped around his waist. The thought of it sends a shockwave up through her spine, and she finds herself taking an unconscious half-step back.

"Always were the moral sort," he says, sipping his own glass of something that most definitely *isn't* being served by the school. "Good for you, Granger." His tone is laced with sarcasm. Mocking.

For some reason, it's almost a relief. Don't they always say that intimacy changes people?

She's dealt with so much change as of late that it's sort of nice to have something to depend on, and Malfoy's sarcasm is as constant as the ocean. Intimacy has had no effect on it.

Still, she's stunted for a response. Can't seem to form a casual sentence. And for a long while he just studies her with those icy eyes.

She wonders if he'll bring it up. Wonders if he'll gloat about it. About coaxing her into that "repeat performance" he'd mentioned as a joke. She couldn't really blame him if he did.

Her actions, of late, have been less than admirable.

Not to say that he's any better.

As the silence between them grows too thick, she forces words out of her throat. "What are you, anyhow? A dead aristocrat?"

He nurses his drink. Gazes at her with too much knowledge in his eyes and