

Hermione drops the flask in her hand. It shatters on the flagstone.

“Put him here! Here!” Madam Pomfrey’s response time is quick, like a whip-crack, and she’s guiding the students to lay him on the bare cot as she rolls up her sleeves.

Hermione is frozen.

“Miss Granger, *quickly*,” Poppy waves an arm behind her without looking, but when Hermione doesn’t move she whips around. Snaps in the air. “*Now*, girl — good gracious, get over here!”

Hermione trips over her feet, stepping in glass as she forces herself to move to Poppy’s side.

Malfoy is always pale.

But not like this. Now, he is the color of the sheets he’s being laid out on, blending in like camouflage. All of his veins are visible — he’s translucent — and she can practically see them struggling to hold in what little blood is left. But all of it — *all of it* — is pouring out, gushing like a river without a dam from his left arm and turning the white sheets violently red.

The stretch of skin bearing the Dark Mark is gouged. Carved into like a slab of meat. Blood is pooling on the floor beneath it where it dangles off the side of the bed — flowing down the length of his arm and into the palm of his hand, before leaking out between his fingers.

She feels her stomach roll. Her gaze flits to his face.

And he’s just staring. Straight up, at the ceiling. His eyes are bloodshot — glassy, half-lidded. Hauntingly dull. If the entirety of the situation were removed, he would appear uncommonly bored.

He blinks. Slowly. He’s conscious.

He’s *conscious*.

“*Miss Granger!*”

Madam Pomfrey’s sharp voice jolts her like a electric shock, and a moment later she’s soaked in warm blood, his arm braced in her hands. She smears it on the bedside table as she fumbles for Essence of Dittany. Madam Pomfrey has swept aside the half-dozen Slytherins surrounding them to stand at the foot of

“Zacharias—”

“*I’m gay*,” he rushes.

Hermione swallows whatever sentence she’d had poised on the tip of her tongue. Zacharias’s face blanches, and he glances around nervously at the now empty corridor.

She opens her mouth. Shuts it. Much like a fish.

Of all the ways she’d expected this conversation to go, this direction wasn’t on her map. She’s torn between relief and confusion — relief because he seems to be taking it all quite graciously, and confusion because — well, why is he telling her this?

“Alright,” is the first thing she can manage.

“I just — erm, I thought it wouldn’t be fair not to tell you, considering the feelings you have for me—”

“Zacharias—”

“Like I said, I’m flattered. And honestly — maybe if I wasn’t—”

“Zacharias—”

“But I am, and I’m sort of confused by the whole rumor, and I just—”

“*Zacharias!*” she snaps, and finally his brown eyes focus on her and his mouth snaps shut. What she plans to say is very cut and dry. Concise. A sort of *‘it’s all a big mistake, no hard feelings, let’s part ways as friends’* ordeal. But what she plans to say never makes it past the back of her tongue.

Instead, this finds its way out — like a rogue bludger:

“It isn’t you in the stories, it’s Malfoy.”

She feels her heart clench down on the blood inside of it. A ripple of panic shoots through her as she realizes what she’s saying, but she finds she can’t stop now that she’s started.

“Friends of mine saw us — at the Ball. And they jumped to their own conclusions. I only said it was you to protect myself.”

Zacharias looks as though he’s been petrified. She isn’t feeling much better. Feels foolish most of all, considering he’s someone she doesn’t even know if she can trust.

Of all people to tell...

She's mentally hexing herself for the entirety of the silence.

Then Zacharias comes back to life. "Erm..." he says. He's off to a good start. "Right, yeah — okay." Then he seems to do a mental double-take. His brows knit together. "Wait, no — you and—"

"Malfoy, yes," she exhales. Lets out her first deep breath in almost half a minute. She suddenly feels lighter. But perhaps that's only because he hasn't run off cackling yet, preparing to divulge her secret to the entire student body.

No, he's only scrubbing at the space above his nose as though he's got a migraine.

Could be worse.

"Malfoy?" he says again, and his tone is somewhere on the fence between horrified and incredulous. "*Really?*"

She purses her lips. Heaves out another large breath. Her gaze drops to her feet.

"Fascinating."

Her eyes snap back up. And suddenly Zacharias looks rather excited, though she can't fathom why. "What?"

"Sorry, sorry," he squints, laughing to himself as he seems to try to reorganize his thoughts,

"I just — wow. *Amazing*. I never could've pictured —"

"Yes, I know."

"What an *odd* pairing —"

"Mm-hm."

"I mean, after everything —"

"Zacharias, I've already gone through all of this in my own head. *Please*."

Again, his eyes refocus, and after less than five minutes talking to him, she has an excellent grip on his personality. Scattered. Bashful. Unfocused and sporadic. Harmless. A bit like Luna, actually. "Right, yeah...sorry."

At the back of her mind, she wonders how many hearts it'd break in Gryffindor if it got out that he was gay. At least three, off the top of her head.

right to be.

She shouldn't have said the things she said to him. Shouldn't have encouraged this silly attraction of theirs, when what she'd known would happen all along in her heart had happened not five minutes later.

Aside from the time she fell off a playhouse as a child — saw her own bone jutting out through the skin of her leg — Malfoy is tied to every horror in her past. Malfoy Manor lives in his eyes and in his touch and in his voice, and she was foolish to ever think differently.

Still — even the logic of this can't prevent her from worrying.

Ginny is another problem.

Hermione had an inkling that she doubted her relationship with Zacharias, and now that it's proven to be so short-lived, the suspicion in her eyes has doubled. Half the time, during meals, Hermione finds the pretty witch's gaze sliding over her, and it makes her second guess each bite.

She has to lay low. She has to stay away from Zacharias — away from Malfoy at all costs. No, in fact — she thinks she has to stay away from everyone, for a while. Things had been simpler and safest toward the beginning of term, when she'd kept mostly to herself.

It'll seem like a regression to her friends, no doubt. But a necessary one. The Hermione they'd become accustomed to — broken and unexciting and empty, like a shell — well, she isn't much but she's certainly safe.

Yes, reverting back to her old ways seems like a brilliant plan.

For all of twenty seconds.

She's brewing Skele-Gro for Madam Pomfrey, quietly lost in all of these thoughts, when it starts. A slow-building raucous, somewhere down the hall from the Hospital Wing. Shouting, scuffling, several sets of desperate footfalls. She and Poppy glance up at the same time, and somehow, instinctively, Poppy knows to clear off the cot she's standing beside.

A moment later, a huddled mass of students comes careening around the corner through the entryway.

"Pomfrey, Pomfrey — *help!*" Not it is shouting.



*November 25th, 1998*

*Diary,*

*It's this fucking thing on my arm.*

*Destroying my life.*

*Draco*

*November 30th, 1998*

SIX DAYS.

It's been six days, and nothing.

Not even from Parkinson, who's such a talented gossip she's known to have information ages before the subject even does.

Which means Zacharias hasn't said anything.

Hermione doesn't like that. It makes her uncomfortable. Because she's already told Harry and Ron and Ginny and Parvati and everyone else who noticed their distance and cared to ask that they've broken up, meaning he could play his hand at any moment.

But like Malfoy said, he only has one card.

Her stomach ties itself in a sailor's knot. She's added the boathouse to an ever-growing list of places in Hogwarts she can no longer visit. And while, if anyone ever asks, she can cite Snape's death as her reasoning, she knows inside that it has nothing to do with Snape.

Malfoy has been notably absent from classes — on both the remaining days of last week as well as today, it seems. Absent from meals, too. She's almost as worried as the morning she thought he'd drowned himself, even as she has no

But Zacharias is very different than she'd assumed from a distance.

He's apologizing for his tangents, cheeks going pink again, and she's thinking that maybe — just *maybe* — he might be kind enough to keep this to himself.

Only time will tell, really.

She feels the need to make a quick escape. Doesn't want to wait around for something to go wrong. "I've — erm, I've got to go," she says, turning — hiking her book bag more tightly over her shoulder.

But he calls after her. Of course he does. Nothing can ever be simple.

"Wait — Hermione!"

She glances back. Holds her breath.

And he says, "Maybe we can help each other."



*November 9th, 1998*

*George and Elmer*

Malfoy Manor's marble floor against her back. She must make a strange sound, because Malfoy lets go of her immediately.

And she remembers who she is and who he is and suddenly everything she's just said feels like little more than pretty words.

"Granger?" he murmurs, cautious — questioning.

"I..." she swallows thickly. "I have to..."

She can't even finish the sentence. Isn't sure what she meant to say. Stop? Leave?

But her feet decide before she can, and the next time she catches a breath, she's halfway back to the castle, Malfoy's unreadable expression burned on the backs of her eyelids.

SHE AGREED.

Does it make her a fool? Is she falling deeper, still, into the pit?

It's a horrible idea, but as much as it displeases her logical brain, it appeals to all the other pieces of her that want so desperately to keep the truth shrouded. It even appeals to her conscience, because she can't reconcile forming an affection for Malfoy.

No. She can't.

Zacharias's plan is far from perfect. An unrefined and clumsy attempt on both their parts to conceal what perhaps shouldn't be concealed.

She realizes she didn't bother to ask why Zacharias is so desperate to keep his secret. His, being pure. Harmless. His, which is not a choice, nor a betrayal to himself and everyone he cares for.

Unlike hers.

But, then again, people are cruel. She understands. Of course she does.

Over the weekend, she sent Zacharias an owl, with one word scrawled across the parchment.

*Okay.*

After all, it was like being handed a false alibi. It doesn't matter how wrong it is, she had no choice but to take it. It's a lifeline. The only one she's likely to get.

But today's the day she has to play the part, and subconsciously she wonders if she even can. She's never tried something like this before.

And she's a very poor actress.

She tries to breathe through it. Urges herself to have perspective. This is

She gasps, though, when he suddenly pulls her arm up and dips his head low, holding it in place by her elbow as he plants a featherlight kiss on the letters 'M,' 'U,' and 'D.' He glances up through his lashes, mouth still on her, almost as if he's asking permission.

For what, she doesn't know.

She gives it anyway. Nods, releasing a trembling breath.

But she doesn't expect him to open his mouth — run his tongue along the sensitive length of her scar. A little shriek is forced out of her throat, and her entire body jolts. Malfoy just grips her elbow tighter, planting another kiss on the last three letters.

And then he's suddenly backing her up — pressing her against the window ledge.

"Hold still, yeah?" he murmurs, straightening up to nestle into her neck — to kiss up the line of her jaw and then backtrack downward to suckle at her pulse point.

She can't manage an answer. Her mind has been wiped clean like a chalkboard.

Malfoy's cold hands trace her figure, running up and down her waist and caressing her ribs through the thick fabric of her uniform jumper. It makes her shiver and warms her all at once. He kisses his way up the center of her throat, finding her chin and then returning at last to her lips.

She kisses him back eagerly, surprised at herself all the while, and their quiet gasps for breath fill the empty boathouse. He tastes like the peppermint from the Amortentia. Smells like the weak remnants of his cologne after it's mostly worn off.

She's lost in it. Lost for what feels like hours but is probably only a matter of minutes.

But then she feels his callused fingertips brush at the skin below the hem of her skirt. Start to slide upward.

She wakes up.

Goes rigid and tears her mouth away, feeling the inexplicably vivid cold of

hardly the most dangerous thing she's done — nowhere near the most frightening. This is nothing. Absolutely nothing. So she breathes and she focuses on the scratchy seams of her skirt against the sides of her thighs as she meets Zacharias in the corridor outside Defense Against the Dark Arts.

His brows jolt up as he sees her — a silent communication. An *'are you ready?'*

She bobs her chin in response, reaching for his hand the way they discussed. Their fingers interlock, and they walk into the classroom together. Another decision she can't take back.

She wonders idly as eyes start to catch them and whispers start to slide through the air whether she'll ever do something she doesn't regret, even the smallest bit. She regrets how much toothpaste she squeezes onto her brush in the morning, always a little more than she needed. Regrets her choice of shoes halfway through the day. Regrets the way she starts sentences and the way she ends essays.

But it's more than perfectionism. More than a simple desire to make every little thing flawless.

It's that she'll find a flaw, even when there is none. Without fail. She must.

She realizes in the ten steps between the door and the desk she'll share with Zacharias that she doesn't believe in perfection.

And she should be satisfied, because the look in Malfoy's eyes is far from it. He's at the back desk, where he usually sits, with Nott. She has the misfortune of good eyesight. Can watch the emotion flicker across his face. Anger she expects, but she can see something flare up just before it. A sort of hurt. Evidence of a bruised ego.

She's almost forgotten how sensitive he is. His recent behavior's fluctuated between violence and numbness for the most part.

But Malfoy isn't completely stone.

And neither is she, apparently, despite all efforts — because that look, however brief, makes her chest tighten. She's quick to avert her eyes.

They sit.

Hestia leaves her office. She's been doing a remarkable job as the DADA professor this year, all things considered. This is hardly the easiest class to teach, following a war.

She taps her wand on the desk, and the room collapses into silence. The whispers are gone, but Hermione can still feel many pairs of eyes on the back of her head.

"Alright," says Hestia, matter-of-fact as always, "today we're dueling — but I'd like to remind all of you that our next class is Boggarts. I mentioned this at the beginning of term, however, I'll say again: should any of you wish to be exempted from the lesson, you will be excused, no questions asked. It is meant as a healthy and therapeutic exercise in conquering fear, and I know many of you have benefited from it in the past. However, it is not my wish to expose any of you to further trauma, should you not feel up to it. Are we clear?"

Hermione's stomach sinks as the class murmurs affirmatives. She'd forgotten about this lesson. Forgotten to make a choice.

She still isn't sure whether she can do it. And now she has less than two days to make up her mind.

Any other year, and she'd be the first in line. She'd been so put out when she didn't get to face the Boggart in Third Year — had been so curious. So certain she could learn so much from it. Wanted to know her greatest fear more than anything.

Now, she isn't so sure.

What may've once been academic failure could now be watching a friend die. She shivers where she sits, ignoring Zacharias's questioning glance. "Split off into pairs, now," says Hestia. "I want you practicing defensive spells and blasting charms, specifically, and in a few minutes I'll bring us back together for demonstrations. Yes?"

Chairs screech as they're pushed back. The desks vanish a moment later. And she finds herself suddenly dueling with Zacharias, whom she's never practiced magic with before. Odd, how little room he once took up in her life when now he's become so crowding.

resting on hers. Even though she's felt more of him. Even though they've done this before.

This feels different. It always does. Feels new.

But this time, especially — and she realizes it's because she doesn't feel guilt. She isn't grappling with self-doubt or consequences. By tomorrow, if Zacharias has his way, everyone will probably already know.

There's something freeing about it, and for one infinitesimal moment, she doesn't give a damn what anyone thinks. Perhaps she will in the morning. Perhaps even five minutes from now.

But in *this* instant, with his cold, unmoving lips over hers, she can only think of how right it feels. More right than most things have felt in her entire life.

It morphs quickly into more than a touch. He slants his lips and takes her chin in hand and his tongue darts out to taste her.

But then he pulls away, and she goes very still.

His eyes look dark when he's this close, shadowed by their proximity. "What about Weaselby?" he asks quietly — soberly.

The petulant nickname from so long ago forces a little laugh out of her.

"What, *Ron*? What *about* Ron?"

"Aren't you two destined for each other, or some fucking rubbish like that?"

He hasn't let go of her chin. He's so close, every word ghosts against her skin.

She searches his eyes. Realizes he's completely serious in this moment.

"Ron and I have about as much in common as a book and a tea kettle," she says.

"And, what?" Malfoy asks, voice low. "You and I have more?"

"In common?" She huffs another laugh. Pulls back slightly to roll up her sleeve, and then to reach delicately for his and do the same. She shows him their scars, side by side, just as she'd imagined. "Yes, we do."

Malfoy meets her eyes. Something she can't quite explain passes between them. He's quick to roll his sleeve back down. But then he takes her arm like he did the other day. Looks down at it, gently running his thumb along the clean skin beside the etched letters.

ruined.”

Her eyes flit up, and she regrets it when she sees the look in his eyes.

“You’re right. That is selfish,” he says.

“That isn’t the half of it.” She pushes off the wall. Risks two steps toward him, and a chill from the nearby water rushes up against her. Makes her shiver. Malfoy strands like a statue. “I...” she breathes, losing the strength in her voice as she reaches out her hand. She pulls it back twice before finally allowing it to rest on his chest over the soft knitting of his jumper. “I like the way this feels, too. You.” Her other hand follows as though magnetized, and now she has both palms flat against his pectorals. She can’t imagine how this looks from an outsider’s perspective. He doesn’t move away though, and she realizes she’s never touched him quite like this. So slowly. So carefully. She doesn’t even know what she’s saying anymore. It’s falling out of her like a leaking faucet. But the floodgates have opened and there’s no stopping it. “I...I like touching you, and I like it when you touch me. It’s the only time I feel like I can escape.” She runs her hands downward a little boldly, so that her fingertips rest on his ribcage. “You’re so cold and un-soft and so...so *not* Ron.” She has no Veritaserum to pass this off onto, she realizes. There’s nothing she can do to take this back. No excuse she can make. Malfoy, for his part, has shown no conscious reaction, but she can feel his pulse through his jumper. It’s skipping beats like a broken record.

“I like how alone you are,” she breathes, “because it means I don’t have to share you with anyone. I owe you to no one. You’re as alone as I am and you — you’re my secret...even though you’re not mine. Even though I sometimes wonder if you could be mine. Sometimes wish you were.” She fists her fingers in the fabric of his jumper, and his breath hitches. His first truly noticeable reaction. It yanks her eyes up, and they meet his like the impact of lightning on rock.

“Does that make any sense?” she breathes.

His eyes search hers — frosted glass against muddy brown. “None,” he murmurs, and then he leans in.

At first, it’s just a touch of the lips. No movement. And yet there’s something to it. Something cathartic and calming and yet equally exciting about his mouth

*You could’ve said no, she reminds herself.*

Yes, she could’ve. Should’ve. Didn’t. An endless pattern in her life.

*November 10th, 1998*

*Diary,*

*Someone should tell Granger that no one fucking holds hands. If she’d ever been in a real relationship, she’d know that.*

*I can’t believe you idiots are still sending me these prompts. Nothing I’m giving you is helping with my treatment. What’s the bloody point?*

*Also, really don’t appreciate that you had Nott shadow me last week. Stop telling him about my supposedly “concerning entries.” It’s none of his business. It’s bad enough that you’ve made it yours.*

*Prompt: In moments of extreme stress, how do you calm down? I bite my tongue until it bleeds.*

*And then as soon as I can, I throw myself into an ice bath, because Merlin knows you haven’t given me any fucking drugs.*

*Sadists.*

*Draco*

*November 11th, 1998*

HER CURIOSITY WINS OUT. IT ALWAYS DOES.

And now she’s in line for the infamous cupboard, trying every moment not to hear Remus’s voice in her head. She doesn’t need any extra sadness heading into this.

Hestia hasn’t opened the door yet. She’s explaining the Riddikulus charm to

those who've never attempted it, and Hermione is missing Lupin's cheerful gramophone more than ever. All those years ago, in this room, the mood of this lesson had been exciting — adventurous and fun. Now, it's just foreboding.

The room is seeped in worry. Hestia can tell. She's come prepared, and the table beside her is well stocked with treats and euphoric elixirs — for after, no doubt.

"That being said, I'll remind you once more — you may excuse yourself at any moment in which you become uncomfortable."

Silence greets her in response.

"Very well," she says, tugging the front of her robes straight. "Off you go, Parvati."

It's a particularly bad start. The door of the cupboard opens and Lavender Brown's lifeless body flops onto the floor. Parvati screams. The class gasps.

Hermione looks away.

Later, she hears that Lavender's corpse proceeded to stand up and stalk towards Parvati, who could not manage the Riddikulus Charm and had to be helped away, two vials of euphoric elixir clutched in her shaking fists.

Padma leaves with her, and Hestia, visibly frazzled, hesitates before inviting the next student up. Hermione can see the doubt building in her eyes when she looks back at last — she's entirely second-guessing this lesson.

It's Dean next, and his common fear is a relief. Cockroaches begin to spill out onto the floor, multiplying on top of one another and building into a mountainous wave. Dean staggers back a few steps but manages to transform them into butterflies, which circle rather beautifully as the next in line takes his place.

Hermione glances behind her. Harry's a few people back, talking to Seamus. She catches his eye. Raises one eyebrow in a silent question.

Just like in Third Year, she isn't sure it's such a good idea for him to face the Boggart. But Harry's expression is calm — serene, even — and he merely presents her with a small, reassuring half-smile.

Why does he always have to be so much braver than her?

She sucks in a deep breath, turning back — watches Zacharias deal with a

her shoulder. "You think you're a fucking prize?"

"No."

"You think, out of a room of hundreds, I'd choose you?"

"I'd choose *you*."

"Because, let me tell you, I fucking wou—" His words stop as though he's been magically silenced.

She's staring at the window again. Doesn't want to look at him. And yet, she meant to say it. Could've stopped herself, but chose not to.

At the very least, she appreciates she made a conscious choice.

"You what?" he asks quietly. Barely a murmur.

"I'd choose you."

There's a long pause. She listens again to the water in favor of acknowledging the silence.

Then Malfoy sniffs. Angrily. "Don't play the saint, Granger. That's Potter's job."

She turns again, facing him but not looking up. Not certain she wants to. "I'm being incredibly selfish, actually," she says to the ground, matter-of-fact.

"Wildly, wildly selfish."

Another painfully long silence follows. When he speaks, his voice is softer.

She stares at his feet.

"And how's that?"

Her answer is easy. Unexpectedly so. It flows out like it's been meant to know the world beyond her throat for a long while. "I like the way I feel when I'm with you. You don't expect me to be happy or recovering or even...or even fucking *polite*. You treat me the way you did before the war. You're rude and patronizing and — and violent and you don't tiptoe around me, you — you call me a cunt and throw me into walls. You're horrible. You're *horrible* and I fucking hate you as much as you hate me. When I feel the way I feel around the rest of them, I feel like a stain. Like I'm tainting everything else. I don't — I can't explain it properly. I just...with you, I can — I can feel as furious as I need to feel. You're so sullen and so mean that it doesn't feel like I'm ruining anything. It's already



person. They're charcoal grey and tucked into a pair of brown boots, and he's isn't wearing a coat. Just a black jumper, which she imagines does little to ward off the cold November air.

"What was so important it couldn't wait until morning?"

She turns fully to face him, leaning back against the window ledge and chewing her lower lip. "I tried to end my...*arrangement* with Zacharias Smith," she says after a moment. "And he — well, he didn't take it well."

The water laps in the silence.

Malfoy's expression is difficult to read. "Didn't take it well," he echoes, giving nothing away in his tone, either.

"He said he'll tell them all — about..." she makes a feeble gesture between the two of them, and his brow does quirk at this, "...if I don't continue."

Malfoy ruminates for a moment, gaze complex. But when he speaks, there's an edge. "And you're so scared of this that you felt the need to organize a late night rendezvous?"

"Early morning," she says without thinking, grimacing once it's out of her mouth. "It's...it's early morning, not late night," she adds pathetically.

"Can you ever turn that fucking part of your brain off?"

"Look, Malfoy, I just wanted to give you some warning," she rushes before he can continue, and he bites back on whatever he planned to say. "I don't think he'll wait too long to play his hand."

"He has one card, Granger — and it's me," Malfoy crosses his arms. Her eyes are drawn, traitorously, stupidly, to the appealing curve of his biceps, lean and yet masculine. A Seeker's build. "It bothers you *that* much?" he asks again.

"No — I...yes. I — I don't know," she stumbles, turning away and facing the window again. She takes a breath and tries to organize her thoughts. It's hard to do that while looking at him. "It wouldn't be pleasant for you either."

"Even though *I'm* the Death Eater." He finishes the unspoken part of her sentence. His voice is icy. "Making you the better half of the situation."

"I never said that."

"Fuck you, Granger," he snarls, as if she hasn't spoken. She risks a glance over

particularly convincing illusion of a thousand foot drop. Heights. That must be it for him. She wonders how the Boggart manages it.

His Riddikulus charm transforms it into a fake looking movie set background, and students let out half-hearted laughs as he steps away.

And suddenly it's her turn.

She should've been paying more attention. Hadn't expected it to come so soon.

She struggles to pull her wand from her pocket as she steps up, a notable hush falling over the room. No doubt, a few of them are still wondering whether a paper with a Satisfactory, rather than an Outstanding, will show up.

The movie set background sways eerily in a nonexistent breeze. The Boggart is thinking. Studying her. She can almost picture it watching her, even though she'll never know its face.

Then the background falls, as though dropping from a coat hanger, and its papery form floats down to mold into a figure, like a sheet falling over a ghost. Her pulse hesitates. Palm grows sweaty around the base of her wand.

And suddenly the figure is all too familiar. All darkness. Raven curls.

"Ello, lovely," Bellatrix hisses, and gasps ring out. She's in the same lacy black dress as that day, hair as wild as ever, sharp, yellow teeth glinting. And that same knife is in her hand.

More than anything in this moment, Hermione is furious with herself. How can this be her greatest fear? A woman who's long dead? How can she be so pathetic?

But she realizes not long after that it isn't Bellatrix Lestrange she fears.

It's the pain.

Bellatrix whips out her wand and screams, "Crucio!" and in the precious moments before the curse hits her, Hermione's thinking that she's never read anything about Boggarts producing spells.

Her reading doesn't spare her from the agony.

She catches a glimpse of Hestia's horrified face before white hot pain blinds her, and she can't hear herself scream. Can't feel her fingers. Can't grip her

wand.

She's frozen in an excruciating bind, feeling knives being driven through her skin and her bones being bent in all directions.

She feels as though she's back on the cold, black stone of the Manor floor. The pain is identical. Her scarred arm throbs and her mind goes blank and all she can picture are Bellatrix's cold, bottomless eyes.

It feels endless. But perhaps it's only been a matter of seconds.

And then the pain stops, and it takes her a moment to gather her wits. Her angle's changed. She's on the floor.

Her foggy mind expects Hestia's jumped in front of her, the way Lupin did for Harry, to draw away the Boggart's attention.

But it isn't Hestia.

It's Malfoy. Of course it is.

His long, black trousers obscure her view, but past them she can see his Boggart.

It's his father.

Or rather, it's Lucius, but reflected in a large mirror that faces Draco. She puts the pieces together as Hestia casts the Boggart away, back into the cupboard.

"Quiet down, all of you," Hestia snaps, and Hermione realizes just then what a raucous the class is making.

Malfoy steps away from her, moving to the table as Hestia rushes to Hermione's side.

"Miss Granger, are you alright? I do apologize — I never expected..."

But her gaze is magnetized to him, focus gone, and she watches as he takes two bottles of euphoric elixir from the table. He swallows one down and tosses the other over to her casually. It clinks against the stone, rolling to a stop in front of her sprawled feet.

"Bottoms up, Granger," he says, and leaves.

"I...no, Hermione. At least, I'm not trying to," he fumbles, pushing the dirty blond hair from his eyes. It's nothing like platinum, she realizes. Nowhere near platinum. "I just..."

"You'll just out me if I back out of our deal."

He says nothing. Doesn't blink.

"I'd say I could out you, too," she says, surprised at the steadiness in her pulse — the strength in her voice. "But I'd like to stay above that level."

"Try to understand the position I'm in," he calls after her, but the door is already closing.

And as she walks down the deserted corridor, dark with the hour, she finds herself quite unexpectedly appreciating young Draco Malfoy — the one who called her Mudblood and sneered in favor of smiling.

He never pretended to be a nice boy, like Ron or Zacharias.

He made a point of being anything but.

And for a moment, the honesty of it overwhelms her. That old saying echoes in her head. Malfoy never tried to catch his flies with honey. He never promised sweetness. He threw vinegar the whole time.

She wonders if she's preferred vinegar to honey all along.

*November 25th, 1998*

"YOU REALIZE WHAT TIME IT IS, DON'T YOU GRANGER?"

Her pulse stutters, and idly she wonders when she became this unhinged. Turning, she finds him standing in the doorway to the boathouse. An unconventional place to meet, certainly, but safe she reckons.

She's been staring at the spot by the window, where Snape once lay bleeding. It's impossible not to picture it, and Malfoy's arrival is a welcome distraction.

"Yes," she answers at last. He has the letter she owed less than an hour ago in his hand, and if it isn't obvious from the shadows beneath his eyes that she's woken him, it certainly is from his dress. He's... well, he's wearing joggers — something she could've never pictured the Malfoy heir in, had she not seen it in

finish. Fresh. Like rain.

“Oi, mate,” says Zabini suddenly, and it rips her eyes up from the depths of the potion. He’s waving a hand in front of his nose and looking at Malfoy.

“Put a little less on, yeah? Gives me a bloody migraine.”

Her stomach drops.

Malfoy looks confused. She watches his nose scrunch up, and as he inhales, his eyes shoot straight to her.

That’s what it is. It’s his cologne.

Hermione rips the cork from the tube of lacewing flies and throws them in, backing up just in time to watch the potion explode.

Students gasp and laugh and Luna glances over at her curiously. She can’t see Malfoy through the smoke.

“Well, now, Miss Granger,” announces Slughorn, “I’m disappointed. Off to the table with you.”

The scent is gone, though. That’s what matters.

She skirts around the brewing tables to join Seamus, unable to look even as she feels his eyes following her.

*November 24th, 1998*

SHE FINDS SHE WAS ENTIRELY WRONG ABOUT HIM.

Zacharias Smith is *not* a nice boy.

And it only takes one sentence to completely reposition her view of him.

“If you end it, I’ll tell all of them.”

She’s on her way out — stops dead a foot from the door of the Prefect’s Bathroom, where they’ve come to discuss things.

Zacharias backtracks almost immediately — mutters things like, “I mean — I erm...just, *please*,” but she’s already seen the vindictive expression on his face.

Fascinating...an absolute wolf in sheep’s clothing.

She’s disappointed in herself for not seeing it earlier.

“Are you threatening me?” she murmurs.

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*November 11th, 1998*

*Diary,*

*I don't know why I did it.*

*No, maybe I do.*

*But that's worse. That's so much worse.*

*I don't know what I was thinking. I just—*

*Oh, bleeding fucking hell, she's here.*

*November 11th, 1998*

AFTER AN ABSURD PERFORMANCE BY ZACHARIAS, IN WHICH HE FEIGNS GREAT AFFECTION AND CONCERN, HESTIA TELLS HER SHE’LL EXCUSE HER FROM THE REST OF HER CLASSES. To take the remainder of the day to rest and to eat some sweets.

But Hermione’s feet don’t make a move for the Gryffindor Common Room at the foot of the Grand Staircase. They turn, almost instinctively, and lead her out into the courtyard.

Her mind is a haze, at best. Still a little foggy from the pain. Her skin seems to tingle, the way it did for hours after they apparated to the safe house that day. Like it’s trying to restitch itself after being invisibly carved up.

So she lets her feet do the work. Trusts them. Has a hunch of where she’s headed.

Lately, whenever she follows her feet, they somehow lead her to Malfoy.

This is no exception. She finds herself stumbling down the familiar hill towards the Black Lake, and halfway down she can already see his silhouette — an ink stain against the sparkling surface of the water, glistening as the afternoon

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sun sinks below the hills.

He's sitting, hunched over his knees, and for half a moment she thinks he might be crying.

But no — he's scribbling ferociously. She should've guessed.

Her feet crunch against the icy grass. She sees him tense. He snaps the journal shut.

Had she not been so numb, she might've rehearsed something to say in her head. Might've approached this moment with some small measure of grace or tact. Instead, her fractured mental state delivers the most cold, unbridged version of her thoughts to the back of his bright blond head.

"So you're afraid of becoming your father."

For almost a full minute, he doesn't say anything, just stares out at the water. It laps against the silence. Then he exhales, quietly, distinctly.

"Observant as always, Granger. Ten points to Gryffindor."

She bristles at that, even as she knows she deserves it. She gathers her robes about her to fend off the cold and debates whether or not to sit down.

It's wrong to be here. She should be committing to her chosen lie — should be pretending to bask in Zacharias's attention and playing the helpless girlfriend. That's her side of the deal.

But this is where her feet put her, and with every nerve ending in her body fried to crisp, she can't argue. She folds herself down onto the scratchy, dead grass. Says what she's thinking, because every time she tries to filter her words, she fails — so why put in the effort?

"Why did you do that?"

Malfoy doesn't answer. Stares straight ahead at the horizon, one hand absently reaching up to tug at his eyelashes.

"I could've handled it myself."

"Not everything is about *you*, Granger," he snaps, tone colder than the November air. Then he gives a low, angry sort of growl before she can respond, ripping his wand from his pocket and uttering a spell under his breath.

Hermione watches an opaque blanket of white ripple over his body, visible

Except Malfoy's at the perpendicular table, next to Zabini, and that isn't safe at all.

From her position, she can see the steam rising from his cauldron — can watch as it gusts up against his face and creates beads of sweat on his pale forehead.

"Now, remember my friends," says Slughorn, and she's exceedingly grateful to be snapped out of it, turning her attention back. "Concentrate," he insists, as if he knows her thoughts. "I cannot stress enough the power and delicacy of this potion."

Hers is nearly complete.

But that's what's concerning. With only a few steps to go, she should already be catching hints of her favorite scents. Spearmint and mown grass and what not. And so far all she's getting is the mint. It isn't spearmint, either. It's peppermint, rich and strong.

She practically holds her breath as she drops the last ingredient in, afraid as never before to follow in Seamus's footsteps and blow the whole thing up.

He's already done that, after all. She'd have to join him where he sits, over at Slughorn's infamous quarantine table, hair smoking.

The last ingredient stews for a moment, and luckily nothing combusts. But the peppermint remains ever strong, and as she sniffs at it, brows furrowed, new scents begin to appear one by one. Smoke seems to be one of them. A wood-burning, campfire sort of smoke. Then something she isn't quite sure about — perhaps linen. And then there's...

Her pulse quickens. She feels the flush creep up from her neck onto her face. Whatever this last scent is, it's having an effect on the strength of her knees.

She grips the table for support, just as Luna says, "That's a very interesting one, Hermione," in that musical, lilting voice.

Her head is moving in two directions, one of which forcefully tells her to step away, and the other insists she dive right into that cauldron — because anything that smells *that* good cannot be dangerous.

It's...it's sort of musky. Oaky. But there's citrus in it, too. And a sort of watery

*And a part of me wants it to hurt her when I do it.*

*No.*

*No, I'm not her type at all.*

*Draco*

*November 23rd, 1998*

ZACHARIAS IS PLEASED.

After nearly two weeks of spreading their fake relationship around the school, he tells her that the Slytherin boys have laid off. They no longer tease him. At least not for the reasons they did before.

And while she's happy for him, she wants to end this more than anything.

All of it feels wrong. Feels almost...*sticky*, if that makes any sense. Every time they kiss in front of Harry or Ron or any of their peers, really, she feels like she needs to take a shower. It's all wrong.

And it's entirely her fault.

So she's dedicated the next few days to thinking up some creative and believable way to end things. She'll talk it over with Zacharias. Maybe have some massive, scripted blowout in front of everyone. That way his reputation is protected, and she can be free to—

She stops her thoughts like she's stepping on an insect.

Free to do *what*?

She refuses to let her mind go in that direction. She's ending this for herself. So she doesn't have to lie anymore. For that and for only that.

She thrusts her focus back onto her cauldron. They're making Amortentia today in Potions — for the first time this year — and she's purposely placed herself as far away from Zacharias as possible in case it becomes clear to anyone just how different their tastes are. She's brewing next to Luna, which feels safe enough.

for just a moment before it fades away. Malfoy's shoulders relax.

She knows he won't answer if she asks. Murmurs, "*Specialis revelio*" instead. Malfoy barely flinches as his spell is revealed to her. Seems to have expected her to do it, really.

It's a cooling charm — and a stocky one at that. He's altered it quite a bit to perform at its most extreme.

It's no wonder now that he's always so cold.

"What on Earth are you doing that for?" she asks, again before she can filter herself.

His answer is flat. Deadpan. He still doesn't look at her. In fact, she's surprised he bothers to answer at all. "It numbs the pain."

"What pa—"

Gunmetal eyes lock onto her, and he wrenches up the sleeve on his left arm. She can't help but gasp. She hasn't seen it until now. Certainly, she's seen him scratching at it. Itching the fabric of his sleeve. But not since he's returned to Hogwarts has she seen the state of the Dark Mark on his arm.

It's *festering*.

The skin around the mottled gray-green of the snake is peeling back — a raw, reddish shade, blistering in parts, scabbed over in others. The mark itself seems to have faded. Well, no, not faded. It looks smeared, rather. And yet somehow still permanent.

She doesn't even notice that she's reaching for it until he yanks his arm away. She snatches hers back, too, cementing it to her side in case it gets any other foolish ideas.

A part of her thinks how silly this is.

Not two weeks ago, he'd left another half-moon bruise on her neck — said pretty words like *I'm not sorry* and made her feel pretty things — and now she's afraid to touch him?

It's simply nonsensical.

Still, she doesn't reach for him again.

"Cold is all that helps," he says into the silence.

Absently, Hermione toys with the wool of her own sleeve. Drags it up to trace the letters she's already traced a thousand times. "For a long time, I'd just cast Stinging Jinxes on my legs. My other arm," she says and doesn't know why. Then, out of nowhere, she finds herself laughing. Loudly. Boisterously.

Out the corner of her eye, she can see Malfoy looking at her weirdly. She can't tell if it's with distaste or confusion.

But through her laughs, she manages, "D'you know? It's the most absurd bloody thing — fucking ridiculous, but d'you know? When I first came back here — " she stamps the grass with her foot, "when I first saw your pompous bloody face again, d'you know the first thing I thought?" She risks a glance at him, finding his stare unnervingly sharp and direct. It's safer to look away. "I thought about how similar we were — our scars were. *Are*." And she surprises herself by baring her arm to him — displaying her scar in the fading afternoon light. His eyes lock onto it as though magnetized, then jerk back up to her with a look that's guarded and complex. "I wondered," she continues, unable to help another laugh, "I fucking wondered if one day we'd ever compare them."

Her humorless smile falls, though, as she stares longer into his serious face. And then he suddenly takes her arm, icy hand sliding under to grasp her by the elbow. She stifles a gasp at the contact, watching somewhat helplessly as he draws it toward him. He shoves the rest of her sleeve up and out of the way, and she finds herself grimacing — preparing for pain.

Except, there is no pain.

He brackets the scar with impossibly gentle hands, lifting her arm to hold it closer to his eyes. To examine it. She can feel his cold breath gusting up against it. Can see gooseflesh rising up along her arm in response. She flushes, knowing he can see it too.

Then, with a touch featherlight, he traces the carved letter 'M.'

Hermione does gasp now. Can't help it. If it hurts even when she touches it, why doesn't it hurt now?

"What are you..." she starts to say, but he interrupts.

"Why Zacharias?" he asks, still focused on her scar. "Of all fucking people?"

memorized Hopworts. A History because Merlin fucking knows she never shut her mouth about that one.

Yes, that's a must.

I'll bet he's into ballroom dancing and chess and he'll definitely like cats. He'll be an art aficionado and he'll do things like cook for her and learn her favorite poems and I'm absolutely fucking positive he'll be the sort to make love.

I'm not that fucking man.

I wear expensive, elf-tailored suits that would disgust her humanitarian disposition. My tee has to be black and over-brewed and if I ever had a wife, we'd already be divorced. I don't know a fucking thing about her beloved Muggle books and I used my copy of Hopworts. A History to make charmed paper dragons. Mother made sure I could dance, but she never said I had to like it — and I made it my business not to. I cheat at chess and I fucking hate cats and I've never cooked a meal in my fucking life. I think poetry is pathetic. And I wouldn't make love to Granger.

What a concept.

No — to her I want to do the things not written or spoken about in polite society. I dream about doing them. My hands itch when I see her. I so fucking badly want to do them.



*November 13th, 1998*

*Diary,*

*I can't imagine anyone believes it. It looks so forced. And I can't fucking stand it.*

*Every time he kisses her on the cheek and every time she fucking reaches for his fucking hand, I want to carve my fucking eyes out the Muggle way. And I don't fucking understand that.*

*But he's not her fucking type.*

*I'm half expecting you to write an actual reply to this one, just so you can laugh in my face. What'll it say? Oh, probably something along the lines of "And what, Malfoy? You think you're her type?"*

*No, I'm not her fucking type.*

*She's — she's probably very particular. I'd wager her type is a man who wears a waistcoat and a cable-knit jumper every day and drinks his tea with three fucking sugars. The type of man who'd kiss his wife when he came home. He's probably read every book by all those bloody Muggle authors she loves — fucking Shakespeare and whoever. He's probably also fucking*

And his soft tone doesn't match his words.

She's surprised he's asking. A little surprised that he even cares.

She huffs, quietly, "You know it's fake, right?"

"Do you think I'm an idiot?" Again, his tone and words don't line up, and as he traces the 'B,' he says casually, "Zacharias Smith couldn't find your quim, even if you sat on his face."

She rips her arm away from him with a disgusted sort of squeak. "You're vile," she snaps.

He meets her eyes, impassive. Shrugs. "It's true."

An underling part of her brain is piecing together that he knows Zacharias is gay, but she's too busy being offended to notice.

"You didn't answer my question," he adds, looking back out towards the waiter. The sun is setting.

"Your — I..." she fumbles.

"Why him?"

She struggles to respond. Again, opts for the truth, voice terse. "He was the safest option. I had to tell them something...after what you did on Hallow's Eve." Malfoy huffs. Goes silent for a long moment. Then he says, "Mine's bigger." Hermione coughs. "I beg your par—"

He yanks up his sleeve and displays the infected mark to her again. "My scar. It's bigger..." His eyes lock onto hers, catching what is likely a fiery blush, "Than yours."

She swallows back her embarrassment. Belts her arms around herself as it grows colder and looks away. "Yes, I suppose it is." She feels itchy and uncomfortable. Stands up.

Malfoy's eyes follow her.

"I..." she hesitates, glancing down at her feet. She isn't sure what she wants to say, and yet it feels entirely necessary to say something. "Thank you," is all she manages, after a long pause, and the phrase feels awkward. Too much and inadequate all at once. She isn't even sure if she is grateful. "For what you did."

"Hurt that bad coming out of your throat?" he snarks. Her face must've gone

sour.

“Yes, actually.”

“Don’t strain yourself, Granger.” He stands too, brushing off his trousers.

“You still haven’t told me why you did it.”

Again, Malfoy doesn’t answer. He shoves his hands into his pockets and glances sideways at her. “Zacharias Smith,” he says again, instead. “He’s safe?”

She lifts her chin. “Yes.”

“Because he isn’t me.”

Her pulse stutters. “...Yes.”

He takes a step toward her, and the dying light catches his blond hair — creates an ironic halo effect. One of her feet slides back. She debates stepping away. Somehow can’t, even as he moves so close she has to look straight up to meet his eyes.

“Anyone but me...” he murmurs, searching her gaze, “right, Granger?”

She smells the familiar mint on his breath — clinically strong. “Right.” she breathes.

One of his hands reaches up to trace the line of her jaw, cold as ice. Her joints are locked in place, muscles useless. And yet she doesn’t think she’d move if she could.

That same hand travels upward, fingers ghosting over her lips. “Fuck you, then,” he whispers — and he sweeps down, mouth inches from hers. They share the same breath, noses against one another.

“Likewise,” she says. Her voice trembles, barely audible. The movement of her lips makes them whisper against his, and a frighteningly familiar pulse comes to life in her lower abdomen.

His hand snakes around to the back of her head, tangling into a fist in her mess of curls. “I can’t fucking *stand* you,” he hisses.

Her eyes flutter shut. “I know.”

Loathe as she is to admit it, she wants nothing more in this moment than to kiss him. She wets her lips. Tilts her head back. His grip tightens.

“Oi, Draco — oh.”

They jerk apart. Her pulse skyrockets, and for a moment she thinks it’s all over.

But it’s Nott up on the hill. He stands stock still. Shoots her a withering glance as she rushes to right herself before shifting his eyes to Malfoy.

“What is it?” asks Malfoy, impeccably calm.

Nott pulls that lime green journal from his bag and waves it in the air. “Less than half an hour. Just checking up.” His eyes find Hermione again. Tighten.

“I’ll meet you in the Owlery.”

Nott huffs. “Right.” He tucks the journal back into his bag. “See you then.”

And he turns on his heel, trudging back up the mountain.

Hermione clears her throat. Adjusts her bag on her shoulder and moves to follow Nott towards the castle. “I should—”

Malfoy’s hand finds her arm, holding her in place. Their eyes meet, and something inscrutable passes between them.

Then he seems to think better of it, and he lets her go.

She sucks in a deep breath, hesitating only a moment before managing to set off on her way.

“Granger,” he calls after her. She looks back. He’s toying with a ring that looks like an heirloom on his finger — doesn’t look at her. “I couldn’t just stand there...like I did before. Not again.”

She opens her mouth. Makes a small sound of confusion, brows furrowing.

He looks up. “You asked me why.”

She puts it together. Something warm and unfamiliar floats around in her chest.

“Because I couldn’t stand there and watch you scream. Not again.”

She exhales.

That night she dreams of him. And she isn’t sorry.