

a fucking Jackson Pollock.”

She feels like she hasn't taken a breath since she started. Gasps and gulps down air, tears streaming down her face. She drowns any future words with Firewhiskey and waits for Ginny to speak. She's been silent this whole time. Listening. Staring.

The sudden quiet is painful. Makes Hermione's fingers tremble.

Ginny sips her whiskey.

And then she asks, quietly and calmly as ever, “Who is Jackson Pollock?”

“Masterpiece Muggle splatter artist,” Hermione murmurs around the rim of her cup, unsure what to make of this response.

Ginny nods as though committing it to memory. Sips more whiskey.

“Please say something.”

She swallows, setting down her glass and starting to twirl the ends of her hair around her fingers. Never a good sign with Ginny. “You won't like what I have to say.”

Hermione scoffs. Splutters. “I — I don't care. I don't. I knew that before I told you. I want to know what you *think*. What you really think.”

Ginny sighs and leans forward on her elbows. “I think...” she pauses, sighs again, eyes flitting between each of Hermione's. “I think he's going to hurt you.”

She nods, feeling shaky and neurotic. “He is. He *has*. But — I...I've hurt him, too. I'm not...I'm not powerless in this situation. I'm not scared. I can hurt him, too.”

Ginny's eyes narrow. Not in anger, but rather introspectively. Like she's sizing her up. “Spoken like a true Slytherin,” she says, and her gaze drops to the silver and green tie.

Hermione gives a nervous laugh. She can't read her. Isn't sure exactly how she means it.

“Speaking of which...” Ginny pulls out her wand. Casts a spell to fix her robes and glammers her neck in under ten seconds. She's always been quite impressive with her magic.

“Thank you,” says Hermione quietly. She still can't tell what she's thinking.

the cot and elevate Malfoy's legs.

“What happened?” she demands, terse but calm, as always. Hermione cannot imagine how she's calm.

“I — I don't, I don't know, I found him like this,” Nott rushes. “Must've been an accident.”

Someone laughs.

It's Malfoy, half-heartedly, still staring at the ceiling. “No use lying on my account, mate.”

“Mr. Malfoy, don't speak,” Pomfrey insists.

Hermione is applying the Dittany with trembling hands, but the wound is resisting it. “It isn't working,” she gasps out, for the first time hearing how strange she sounds. Unsettled. Unhinged.

“It's Dark Magic, I doubt anything will,” Madam Pomfrey snaps, and out the corner of her eye, Hermione can see her preparing a touniquet.

“What are you doing?” Nott demands, but one of Pomfrey's nurses pushes him back when he tries to take it out of her hands. “You can't cut off his arm!”

“There's nothing to be done. Dark Marks resist healing.”

“You haven't even *tried* anything?”

As they argue, Hermione presses her hands to the wound, struggling to stanch the flow. “What have you done?” she whispers. “What were you thinking? What have you *done*?”

And Malfoy turns, his head falling to the side on the pillow with too little strength, tired eyes finding hers.

“Looks better now, doesn't it?” he rasps.

A sharp breath falls from her mouth, and then Madam Pomfrey is pushing her aside and tying a magical touniquet above his elbow with her wand.

“Hey! *No*!” Nott is being barricaded by more than one nurse, now.

Malfoy's eyes follow Hermione as she falls back into the crowd, her muscles not responding, her mind a useless whirlpool.

Madam Pomfrey takes Malfoy by the wrist and poises her wand where she intends to cut. Nott is hurling obscenities. Several of the other Slytherins are

looking away, squeamish — some have turned their backs.

Pomfrey opens her mouth, the spell on the tip of her tongue.

“Wait!”

For a moment, Hermione doesn’t realize she’s the one who said it. But everyone has turned to look at her and Madam Pomfrey has an eyebrow quirked. “Miss Granger, now is not the time to—” She acts on impulse. “No. Wait.” And she pushes back through the crowd of nurses and students to stand at Poppy’s side, pulling her wand from her pocket.

“Miss Granger, he doesn’t have much—” She does it before she can be stopped. Takes Malfoy’s arm out of Madam Pomfrey’s grip and hovers the tip of her wand an inch or so above the wound.

“*Imperio*,” she breathes.

There’s a collective gasp.

“*Miss Granger!*”

But she doesn’t take her eyes off the wound — feels Malfoy’s gaze on her.

“Heal,” she demands. For a moment, there’s nothing but an agonizing silence. Madam Pomfrey starts to bat her away, pulling at her arms.

But as she stumbles back, she watches. And another mass gasp rings out as the gouges in Malfoy’s arm begin to reluctantly sew themselves back together.

Within thirty seconds, the lines of the Dark Mark are intact again and its evil shape stares back at them beneath a sheen of drying blood. Stares with all its permanency.

Malfoy’s expression is a mask. Hermione is numb.

And not a moment later, Aurors are charging through the entryway of the Hospital Wing.

be. I remember what he used to call me. I remember all of it. But then he just — he sits there and he tells me he couldn’t watch me scream like he did before. And he spends all of his time writing in that bright purple journal and just looking so *out of place*. Like me. So much like me. We — we’re so similar. And I’ve spent so much time thinking it should be Ron. Growing up thinking it. Waiting for it to feel right. To sit right in my stomach. But it’s wrong. It’s so, so wrong, and when Ron kissed me I was numb. I was nothing. And then — then fucking Malfoy kisses me and it just absolutely shatters all those hopes I used to write down in my thirteen-year-old diary and I just had to sit there and try to make sense of it. Of how that could be. How the one person I’m supposed to hate unconditionally is the only one I want to let touch me. And my thoughts have been so impossibly *loud*, all trapped in there at once, bickering and arguing and switching sides. Because I couldn’t just go and tell you, like I could if it were some other boy. I couldn’t sit with you and Parvati and Luna and gush over how it made me feel and where he touched me because it’s fucking Malfoy and I’m not allowed to feel that way about him — and...and because every time anyone sees him touch me they think he’s trying to kill me. It’s fucking *prejudice*. And it’s too strong. It’s too fresh. So I let you all believe it was Zacharias because at least that was safe, but it hurt him. It fucking *hurt* him. And it hurt me and I wanted so badly to have you know the truth. To have you all know. But how could I? How could I? Knowing what you’d think? What some of you might do? What *Ron* would do? So I lied. I lied. I felt like I had to. I’ve been lying for months. But then — last night, I...we...it’s gone too far. It’s gone too far and I can’t lie about it to you anymore. My first time was supposed to be with Ron. Everyone told me that. I told me that. But no — no, my first time — *mine*, me, Gryffindor’s bloody princess, or whatever bollocks they call me in the Prophet — was with Malfoy. Death Eater. Pariah. War criminal. Slytherin’s disgraced fucking prince. It was with him, in a hospital bed and I wanted it to be. I didn’t waste it. In my heart I know I didn’t waste it. And I had to tell you because it was so absolutely, ridiculously right. He and I are paint splattered all over the place and we’re staining everything and maybe we absolutely don’t go together, but to me — to me we’re



December 1st, 1998

GINNY RETURNS WITH TWO PINTS OF FIREWHISKEY, AND IF THAT DOESN'T EXPLAIN HOW SHE FEELS ABOUT IT, NOTHING DOES.

Without any breakfast, it affects them quickly, and it makes telling the truth so much easier.

Hermione finds the words just pouring out of her, like ink from a broken well.

"It's...it's hard to explain. It's like — d'you know what splatter art is? It's a Muggle thing, it's strange. Abstract. It's taking paint and just throwing it against a canvas. Staining everything. Just letting it hit where it hits. And it's violent and messy and it has no rules or patterns or intentions. Bright, vicious colors thrown everywhere. Some people think it's just a disaster on paper. That it's the act of making art by ruining art. Other people adore it. But it's — it's just that you can't undo it. Can't erase anything once it's there, you know? Can't even try to aim or make it look a certain way. It's just this collision course — this clash of paint and canvas that somehow, somehow makes something. And that...that's what happened with Malfoy. *Draco*. We just sort of collided with each other — stained each other with all of our problems and just sort of bled out all over the place. But I...I like the way it looks? I think? I don't know, Gin. I don't. I absolutely *do not know*. I don't know if I'm making a mistake or reading things wrong or hurting people but I don't feel normal unless I'm with him. It started with the Lake. I kept accidentally finding him there, or I don't even know if it *was* accidental, but I kept finding him there and he's just such a *prick*. All the time. He doesn't care. He says what's in his mouth, he doesn't swallow it or change it or hold it in. And I know, *I know* who he is and what he's done and who he used to

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November 30th, 1998

MCGONAGALL ASSURES HER THAT IT'S JUST A FORMALITY.

Still, her hands are cold and shaking, crusted with dried blood — every inch of her arms beneath the elbows is stained red. The front of her blouse, too.

She doesn't know what possessed her in that moment. What absurd, cautionless, lawless entry took control of her and pushed the Imperius Curse off her tongue. What was she *thinking*?

The truth of it is she wasn't thinking. She'd been looking — at him. Watching him grow paler with each second and imagining him with one less limb. Imagining him losing *one more thing* as a result of this war.

And then everything Madam Pomfrey was saying about Dark Magic just took root in her head and grew like a weed. Dark for dark, light for light.

It was only logical.

But it'd taken the Ministry no time at all to trace the Unforgivable, and now, despite McGonagall's avid defense of her actions — despite Madam Pomfrey's and Zabini's and even bloody *Parkinson*'s witness accounts — she's being led through the Ministry atrium, with Theodore Nott, of all people, as her companion.

"You'll be required to make a statement," the Ministry escort is explaining, "and then a twenty-four hour stay of magic will be placed on your wand."

She's numb to it. To all of it.

She can't take her mind off of that gruesome wound.

"*No use lying on my account*," Malfoy had said. Which meant it hadn't been an accident.

Another attempt at suicide.

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It sends her into a tailspin. Of guilt and confusion and rigorous overthinking. Was it the boathouse? Was it what she'd said and hadn't meant?

Was it her fault? Again? *Again?* Again?

"Oi, Granger," Nott snaps and yanks her out of the way before she can walk into one of the black-tiled walls. "Pay some bloody attention."

Nott has been enlisted to serve as a neutral party — someone who won't defend her blindly, like McGonagall, but also who doesn't openly despise her, like Parkinson, although Hermione has some doubts about that. He's been fairly *open* in his distaste regarding her and Malfoy.

Still, he's there to speak in her defense, and for this she allows him to treat her like an imbecile at every given opportunity as they make their way to the hearing.

A small part of her brain unhelpfully floats the possibility that she's just obliterated any chance of working for the Ministry. Of becoming an Auror or a Healer.

For Malfoy.



News travels too quickly at Hogwarts. Again, she has Parkinson to thank for that.

Still, she's been blindly hoping during the entire journey back from the Ministry that she'll be able to slip into bed undetected. To deal with yet another round of heavy scrutiny in the morning, when this headache has subsided.

Luck is not with her. Hasn't been and never will be.

And when she steps through the portrait hole and into the common room, at least half a dozen pairs of eyes are waiting for her.

"Hermione?"

"Mione?"

"What happened?"

"Mione, *bloody hell...*"

Her shoulders slump. She heaves out a breath and collapses into one of the

Her breath hitches at the thought of it. "Last night. Maybe early this morning." And she closes her eyes, balling her hands into fists until all the blood is forced out. "In the Hospital Wing."

There's a deafening silence.

She risks a glance, and Ginny's face is drawn up with confusion, brows furrowed. She squints at her. "The Hospital Wing..." she echoes. And then, like a match striking — like the snap of fingers, like the crack of a cue ball hitting the billiards — she puts it together.

It's obvious, because the next second she snatches back her mug and downs it one go. Coughs as she sets it down empty.

And she fixes a tortuously unreadable expression onto Hermione. "Malfoy?" she asks, but it's more a confirmation.

Hermione bites her bottom lip. Frees it. "Malfoy."

Moments later, Ginny is sliding out of the booth. Getting to her feet.

Panic flies in all directions from some sort of catalyst in Hermione's chest, and she reaches out for her. "No — no, please. Wait, Gin. Where are you —"

She squeezes Hermione's shoulder.

"I'm getting us another round."

that Ron isn't her type either. That sweet and funny and warm aren't it. That it's somehow become coldness and depth and an absolute lack of safety and blindly platinum blond hair.

"I'm sorry," she manages, bringing herself back to the present. "I didn't want to lie to you."

"Then why did you?"

"You...I..." she struggles for a moment. Takes another desperate gulp of Butterbeer, the sweetness warming in her stomach. "I felt like I had to. Parvati was so sure. *So sure* it was him, and you — you looked *relieved* when you heard his name. I just..." another deep sip, "it was better than the truth."

Ginny's face goes through a subtle assortment of emotions as she considers this. One red eyebrow quirks. "Going to tell me the truth now?"

She keeps the mug at her lips for safety. For comfort. Sips and says, "I think so, yes." She drops her eyes from Ginny's face, staring at the deep brown of the table instead. Tracing the dirty grooves absently. "Please try very hard not to hate me. I don't think I could stand to have you hate me."

"Mione."

Ginny's tone draws her eyes up.

"I won't hate you."

Hermione gathers a thick, unsteady breath.

"I swear it."

She finishes off her Butterbeer. Slides the glass away and tangles her thumbs together. Picks at her cuticles.

"Who is he?" Ginny coaxes. "...Or she?" she adds after a moment.

Hermione huffs a laugh. "It isn't that. Bloody hell, I wish it was that."

"Tell me."

She can't force it off her tongue. Tries, feeling like she's choking on it.

Ginny tries to help her along. "Did he do that to you?" She gestures to the bruises scattered over the expanse of her throat.

Hermione nods.

"When?"

armchairs by the fireplace. Harry, Ron, Ginny, Dean, Seamus, Neville, Parvati...every Gryffindor she can possibly imagine at this point. They're all gathered around her like children expecting a bedtime story.

And for a long moment, it feels safer just to stare down at her own hands. But they're still covered in Malfoy's blood.

"I'm sure you already know what happened," she manages at last. She pulls out her wand to cast a charm for her headache — waves it uselessly until she remembers.

Ginny catches on quickly. "They put a stay on you?"

"A what?" asks Ron around a mouthful of Turkish Delight he's eating from a box.

"A stay — a ban. She can't use magic," Ginny explains, and as she does Harry leans forward. Pulls out his own wand, green eyes gentle and cautious.

"Mione," he says quietly, "can I...?"

For a moment, she doesn't understand. But he points the tip of his wand at her hands, and she's suddenly reminded of how uncommonly kind Harry is.

Malfoy's blood vanishes.

"Thank you," she murmurs.

"Go on, then — what happened?" Seamus says, and he's instantly hushed by Dean.

"Give her a bloody minute, mate."

"No, no...it's fine," she says primly — smooths her skirt, now that her hands are clean. "It was a warning. The Ministry gave me a warning. That's all."

"That can't be *all*—"

"Shut it, Seamus."

"It makes sense, though, doesn't it?" says Parvati over them. Hermione turns to look at her, watching her twist her braid around her finger as she talks. "I mean...you're a war hero, Hermione. Malfoy's a Death Eater..."

"Ex-Death Eater," she mumbles, surprising herself. She's relieved no one seems to hear.

Parvati continues. "No one can really fault you for using whatever force

needed to defend yourself.”

“Yes, well, it was an Unforgiveable, so there are certain procedures that—” she stops as Parvati’s words register. Thinks for a moment she might’ve misheard her. “Force? What do you mean force?”

They trade confused glances. Harry shifts uncomfortably.

“We heard you and Malfoy had another, erm...” he searches for a word, “altercation. And you cast the Imperius Curse. But we know it was self-defense, Hermione — don’t w—”

“Oh, *bloody hell*,” she snaps, lurching to her feet, and all of them lean back, startled. Ron swallows too quickly and chokes a bit on the Turkish Delight.

“Mione—”

“This is *unbelievable*.” She storms toward the dormitory stairs, but as Ginny rushes to follow, she whips around. “Malfoy didn’t *attack* me. Don’t you see? Don’t you realize how unfair you’re being? It’s *prejudice*. It’s *bloody prejudice*. Don’t you see it?”

“Hermione, what on Earth are you on about?” says Ginny, gently, cautiously. She reaches out as though to grab her shoulders and calm her down. As though she’s a mental patient. The others stare from behind her.

Hermione gathers a thick breath — lets it stream out through her nose, suddenly uncertain at her own fury. “Malfoy’s Dark Mark was wounded,” she bites out at last. “They brought him to the Hospital Wing. He didn’t attack me, he was half dead. I used the Imperius Curse so Madam Pomfrey wouldn’t amputate his arm.” And she turns her back on their surprised eyes, starting up the stairs. “Stop reading into rumors.”



She keeps her curtains drawn tight until she hears the other girls get into bed — listens for each individual pair of feet and the creaks of each four-poster.

She’s restless. Knows already she won’t sleep tonight. And for the past hour, she’s been going over each and every reason she shouldn’t go to the Hospital Wing in her head.

“Two Butterbeers, please.” And she glances over her shoulder at her as he waves his wand around and grunts, getting them started. “Trust me, you’ll need it.”

“Tell me what’s going on,” Ginny pleads, and now Hermione can see her gaze flitting up and down from her eyes to the bruises. The concern is plain on her face.

Grudgingly, the barkeep tells her the drinks are on the house as she turns back and tries to hand him a few sickles. She takes the warm mugs and leads Ginny to a secluded corner booth, sliding one across the grimy table to her.

“Tell me,” Ginny says again.

“Sip first.”

She lets out an incredulous little huff but puts the glass to her lips, watching Hermione’s eyes and drinking until about an inch is gone — until Hermione nods.

“Happy?”

“Yes.” And Hermione gulps down at least twice as much of hers before wiping her lips and clearing her throat. “You have to swear not to tell anyone. Even Harry.”

Ginny looks offended. “You really think that’s who I am?”

“No, no,” Hermione pinches the bridge of her nose, “Gin, you know I don’t. I just — I have to say it anyway, for...for my own sake. Just to know that I’ve said it.”

“Fine, then. I won’t tell anyone. Talk to me, ‘Mione, you’re scaring me. You’re in *Slytherin* robes, for Merlin’s sake.” She pushes away the Butterbeer. Leans closer, gaze gentle — again with that frightened animal complex.

Hermione doesn’t want to see that expression anymore.

Isn’t some wounded deer.

She blurts out, “I was never seeing Zacharias.”

Ginny blinks slowly, pursing her lips. “I think I knew that,” she says after a tense silence. “Sensed it, I guess. I mean, he doesn’t seem like your type, does he?” It sends her mind elsewhere for a moment, and she wonders if Ginny realizes

“Mione, where are we going?” she asks at last, and Hermione can hear the other unanswered questions in her voice. By now, she’s undoubtedly noticed her Slytherin robes, unless she’s completely oblivious, and Ginny Weasley decidedly is *not*. She isn’t sure whether she’s seen the bruises yet, having followed behind her all this time, but it’s inevitable.

She has no wand to Glamour them away. At least not for the next several hours.

“Hogsmeade,” she answers after a long silence. “I need a Butterbeer.”

“Hermione, it’s nine in the morning. It’s *freezing*. We have class.”

“We aren’t going.”

This quiets Ginny immediately — holds her tongue for the rest of the trip. Inwardly, she sighs, because yes, of course, the only way for Hermione Granger to truly seem off-kilter is for her to fall behind in her studies.

Even after a bloody war, she’ll always be the know-it-all.

“You’re squeezing too hard,” says Ginny.

“Sorry.”

As they pass through the village, rather empty at this time in the morning, blanketed in a light snow, Ginny casts a warming charm over the both of them. And Hermione finds that when she can no longer focus on the cold — focus on the shivering, her attention returns to the indescribable soreness below her hips. It isn’t how she’d thought it would feel, the day after. Painful. Intrusive. Like her body had been invaded.

Instead, it’s the way a muscle feels after being stretched for the first time. That pleasant pain that somehow tells you you’re growing stronger.

Unless that’s entirely in her mind.

The Three Broomsticks is practically vacant — just opened, and Madam Rosmerta clamps down on what was likely a scowl upon seeing them. Realizes who they are and flushes pink, disappearing up the stairs.

War heroes have some privileges, it seems.

“Two Butterbeers, please,” she tells the groggy barkeep.

“Oh, no, I’m alright. I don’t—” Ginny starts, but she speaks over her.

There are almost too many reasons. Seemingly endless reasons. But she keeps seeing Malfoy’s last glance behind her eyelids, and it proves to be a powerful reason all its own.

And as soon as she hears Ginny’s breathing even out with sleep, she’s swinging her legs over the side of the bed. She doesn’t bother with robes. Pads off towards the dormitory door in her lavender-striped pajamas.

This is a bad idea. She knows.

She’s perfectly cognizant of the similarities between her and an addict. Mentally goes through them again as she makes her way through the dark castle, easily avoiding the memorized routes of Prefects.

Nothing positive has come from interacting with Malfoy. He’s detrimental to her health — pulls her from sleep every other night with vivid dreams. He reminds her of the Manor. He’s rude and arrogant and a sinking ship all his own. He’s destroying her friendships.

And yet she can’t keep from going back to him.

What’s the difference, really, between Malfoy and heroin?

What are they but two shipwrecks, entangled by the same tide? How fucking poetic.

She’s one hall away from the Hospital Wing when she hears voices. Thinks for a moment that it might be Madam Pomfrey and Flattens herself to the wall beside the entrance.

But the voice is too youthful. Too high-pitched.

“I’ll come back in the morning,” it says, and all too soon, she recognizes the simpering tone of Parkinson. “Keep you company.”

Hermione peeks her head around the entryway’s arch. The Wing is dim, but she can see Pansy draped over Malfoy’s cot — watches as she leans in and plants a kiss on his forehead.

And there’s a sudden, inexplicable sourness on her tongue.

Malfoy says nothing as Pansy gets up to leave, and Hermione doesn’t have time to conceal herself before she’s rounding the corner.

She startles, letting out a ridiculous little squeak upon catching sight of her.

Then her face sinks into a dirty sneer.

“What are *you* doing here, Muddblood?”

Pansy hasn’t changed at all, even after everything that’s happened. It’s sort of remarkable, really.

“Madam Pomfrey asked me to check on him overnight.”

She’s changed though. Lies come so easily to her now.

“No, she didn’t,” snaps Pansy.

And Hermione just shoves past her, knocking their shoulders. “And how would you know?”

She feels Pansy’s dark eyes follow her through — hears her angry little sniff before she stalks away.

Malfoy doesn’t look surprised to see her. He’s propped up a little awkwardly on the stiff pillows of the cot, laying on top of the covers, the beds around him empty. The Wing is silent, save the quiet breathing of the comatose Quidditch player at the far end — a Ravenclaw who’s been here several days.

“Pomfrey didn’t send you,” he rasps, tone as bored as ever. “She’s releasing me tomorrow afternoon. There’s no reason for you to be here.”

Hermione pauses at the foot of his cot, unfazed by his coldness. She doesn’t sit by his side. That feels too intimate. She leans instead on the bars of the foot-board.

“Was there a reason for Parkinson to be here?”

Malfoy blinks slowly at her. His eyes are hooded with exhaustion, rimmed with purple lines, and he’s still pale from blood loss. “To comfort me, obviously.”

“I didn’t think you liked Parkinson.” Hermione adopts his bored tone as well, although inwardly his words sting, and she doesn’t know why.

“She likes me.”

“Clearly.”

Malfoy’s eyes tighten. He shifts, adjusting his arm in its off-white cotton sling. “Going to fault me for seeking positive attention, Granger?”

“No.”

“Human beings fucking need it, you know?” He gives a frustrated huff, again

Harry flashes behind her eyes first, and she considers him. She really, really does. He’s her best friend. She knows he won’t judge her.

But he despises Malfoy too deeply.

She doesn’t want to break his heart.

Well — it’s that, and the thought of describing last night to Harry makes her itchy and uncomfortable.

Ginny is...*safer*. Calmer. More neutral.

And so here she finds herself, hiding in an alcove by the Great Hall, dressed in Slytherin robes, covered in love bruises *again*, with a useless wand, waiting for her. Last week, this scenario would’ve seemed like a fever dream.

She watches Ron and Harry head in to breakfast, and her nerves begin to awaken. Palms begin to sweat. Ginny can’t be far behind.

*Please.*

*Please understand.*

*Please.*

Ginny’s flash of red hair startles her so much, Hermione almost trips out of the alcove.

“*Ginny!*” she whisper-shouts as she sees her step off the stairs.

Her head whips to the side, scarlet hair flying, and for a moment she squints around.

“Ginny!” she calls again, a little louder, tucking herself further into the shadows as Dean and Seamus pass behind her into the Hall. Ginny steps off to the side, curiously following the sound until she’s close enough for Hermione to yank her into the alcove.

“*What in—*”

“It’s me, it’s me — it’s Hermione,” she rushes.

“*Mione, what—*”

“Come with me, please. *Please*. I need to talk to you.”

For Ginny’s part, she does a fair job of holding back questions until they’ve branched far out onto the castle grounds, towed along by Hermione with a rather fierce determination.



her she's busily scribbling with her quill.

But as she leaves the Wing, it becomes clear there was no need to kiss Malfoy in front of her.

Pomfrey calls out an afterthought just as she passes beneath the archway.

"And I'll want to speak with you about contraceptive charms when you return."

In her panic, she'd forgotten about the bruises.

*December 1st, 1998*

*Diary,*

*Prompt: What is the most important part of your daily routine?*

*Sitting by the lake. In the morning. In the cold.*

*Draco*

*December 1st, 1998*

SHE DOESN'T KNOW WHY, BUT SHE GOES STRAIGHT TO GINNY.

She doesn't get far from the Hospital Wing when something low in her gut twists and makes a snap decision. Decides that it's time.

Maybe before. Maybe before last night, she could've shouldered it herself.

But not now.

There are too many emotions, so many of them conflicted and complicated, bubbling over like a cauldron inside of her. Too many to sort through on her own. Too many to keep tucked away.

And she forces herself to admit that a part of her just wants someone to *know*. Wants someone to talk to about it. Wants to try to put into words how the previous hours altered her physically. Chemically.

trying to adjust himself more comfortably. Failing. "Even Death Eaters," he murmurs, staring at the bedsheets — an afterthought.

"How is your arm?" she asks, because the topic feels too poisonous.

"Still connected to me."

"You're welcome."

Malfoy sits up suddenly — so abruptly she starts a little. "I'd rather it was fucking gone," he says through gritted teeth, either with pain or anger. She isn't sure. "You didn't even fucking ask."

And for a moment, she can't believe what she's hearing. "You're joking," she says flatly.

A glare is his only answer.

"You ungrateful bastard," she snaps, unconsciously leaning forward. "I saved your arm — your fucking life. Which, I might add, you tried to waste. Again."

Malfoy's face floods with something. He splutters with confusion for a moment, incredulous and furious all at once. "Merlin, you know fucking *nothing*, do you?" he manages at last.

"*What? What do I not know?*"

Their shouts are echoing off the high ceilings. She's surprised they haven't roused the portraits.

"NOTHING! You know *nothing*!"

"You tried to kill yourself!"

"*I DON'T WANT TO DIE!*"

It echoes for what seems like an eternity, stunning her into silence.

And Malfoy dissolves into pathetic, humorless laughter. "You stupid, stupid bitch. You don't know anything. Fucking nothing. I didn't try to kill myself. I don't want to die. I'm scared. I'm so fucking afraid to die."

Hermione grips the bars of the footboard in a vise, knuckles going white. "The lake..." she whispers numbly. Feebly.

Malfoy forces out another laugh, and it sounds more like a cry. "*Merlin*, you really thought—? Bloody hell, Granger, do you know how much this burns?" And he rips the thin fabric of the sling out from around his neck before she can

even think to stop him. Yanks his arm free of it, hiding a wince as he displays the slow-healing Mark. “Do you know how hot it gets? I feel like I’m boiling. I’m on fire. I’m always, *always* on fire.”

She puts it together quickly, but not before he spells it out for her.

“I needed to cool down. The lake is below freezing at night.”

“Don’t lie to me,” spills out of her mouth instinctively.

“I’m not fucking lying, Granger.”

“And *yesterday*?” she snaps, suddenly aware of tears welling in her eyes. Confused by them. Furious at them. “How do you explain yesterday?”

Malfoy gathers an unsteady breath, falling roughly back onto the pillows and wincing again. “I didn’t want to look at it anymore,” he says to the ceiling. “Didn’t care how much it would hurt. I didn’t want to look at it.” Then his eyes flit down and meet hers sharply. “And if you know? For one fucking second, I thought — maybe. Maybe I wouldn’t have to. When Pomfrey made that *tourenquet*.”

A heavy dread sinks into her stomach, weighing her down.

“But you had to fucking ruin that too.”

And then he shakes his head and closes his eyes, practically dismissing her.

She stands, still as stone, for a good minute or two, unable to move. Unable to form words. Tears unable to fall. Her mind frantically tries to reorganize the last several weeks, months, around this new information. Tries to make sense of everything in a different light.

The cold of the bars fades, growing warm in her grip, and an apology sits on her tongue.

But she finds herself swallowing it, and when she moves she doesn’t feel like she’s in control. Feels hypnotized. Doesn’t fight it.

Letting go of the bars, she moves around to the side of the bed, sitting exactly where she told herself not to. Malfoy’s eyes snap open — shoot to her, sharp and untrusting.

She shoves back the striped satin of her sleeve and takes him by the wrist of his injured arm, leaning over so he can see both scars.

his head without undoing the buttons. The same way he took it off...

“No one will,” he says, snatching up his trousers. “Her pride will see to that.”

She looks to him, but his eyes are down, his playfulness from moments ago completely evaporated. It’s a stark contrast. Gives her mental whiplash.

“What is it?” she asks, crossing her arms.

He doesn’t look up, fumbling angrily with his belt. “What is what?”

“What’s wrong?”

His eyes are icy when they flit up, but he paints over it quickly with the usual look of boredom. “Nothing, Granger.”

“You think I regret it,” she says flatly.

He throws his legs off the side of the bed, yanking on those fancy black dress shoes he’s always wearing. He tugs at the laces like he wants to snap them. “It’s pretty absurdly fucking obvious that you do.” He mimics her as he ties one knot. “*Everyone will know.*”

“What did you want me to do?” She waves a hand at the entryway. “Kiss you in front of Parkinson? In front of Madam Pomfrey?”

Laces done, he drops his feet and meets her eyes abruptly, glare sharp. “Maybe so, Granger. Maybe fucking so.” He stands. “Pomfrey, can I go?”

Pomfrey shoots him a sour look for his rudeness. “Yes, Mr. Malfoy,” she waves him off, “go.”

He brushes past Hermione, faint scent of what’s left of his cologne washing up against her. Reminding her how close they’d been less than a few hours ago.

“Draco,” she finds herself saying before he can get too far, and it must be his first name that stops him.

He doesn’t look back. Just stops. Waits.

“I don’t regret it.” Her voice is quiet, but certain. “Truly.”

For a moment, he does nothing. Then he turns to the side — presents her with his profile. Stands motionless. And a moment later he’s gone.

She folds and unfolds her fingers for what feels like several minutes, staring after him until Madam Pomfrey rouses her from her daze.

“Go to class, Miss Granger,” she says curtly, and when Hermione turns to face

mean, I've been fucked."

Madam Pomfrey looks scandalized, and Hermione thinks she might just take that window option, but Malfoy continues.

"Because this thing's still stuck on my arm, of course. I've been royally screwed, so to speak."

She can do nothing, even as her face stains red, growing hotter with each second.

"But I'm lounging in the afterglow of Granger's uniquely stellar healing abilities." And Malfoy shoots her a sideways grin, obviously pleased with himself. She digs her nails into his skin as she smiles up at Madam Pomfrey. "Who'd have thought?"

Poppy isn't a moron, though, and even as she nods and walks away to her desk, head nurse in tow, Hermione can feel her suspicion.

"*Merlin*, Granger." Malfoy yanks his arm from her grip as soon as they're out of earshot, massaging the little half-moon indentations she's left.

"What is the *matter* with you?" she snaps, trying to keep her voice down. "Are you out of your mind? Don't answer that. *Don't*. Just — bloody hell, fix my robes. *Fix them*."

"I think you look better in green, actually."

"*Malfoy*."

"*Draco*," Pansy sing-songs from the doorway.

Hermione watches him go pale. Paler, anyhow. All of the humor slides off his face like butter from hot toast, and in unison they turn to look at her.

Parkinson, for her part, goes violet. Purple like a beet. And even from this distance, Hermione can see her putting the pieces together. Connecting the dots, having seen Hermione here last night, and now finding her still here.

In Slytherin robes.

Pansy blinks once and turns on her heel.

Slowly, Hermione gets to her feet. Exhales deeply. "Everyone will know," she murmurs.

Malfoy finds his bloody shirt on the floor by the bed, tearing it down over

"If I have to live with mine, then you have to live with yours." And a tear falls, finally. Just one. It hits the skin of her bare thigh where it's tucked under her on the edge of the cot.

"Fuck you, Granger," he spits, but the venom is weak, and her response is soft. Dazed, almost.

"Stop that." She lets her eyes trace him, sliding over the bloodstains on his dress shirt — the few inches of bare, alabaster skin she can see of his chest, above the top button. "Stop doing that."

"Doing what?" And now the venom is entirely gone, replaced with uncertainty.

Cautionally, she runs her fingers over the mottled ink of the Dark Mark. Gooseflesh fans out across the skin of his arm, quick and yet she doesn't miss it. "Pretending to be cruel."

"I'm not pre—"

And something strange and stupid and courageous overcomes her. She shifts quickly, and suddenly her knee is between his, her other bracketing his thigh — and she's leaning over him, palms beside his shoulders. His words die in his throat.

Usually, she doesn't have time to think like this. To take him in, like this. His cold blue eyes flit desperately between hers, uncertain, perhaps even a little afraid. Her hair falls down around them, brown curls brushing against the edge of his jaw.

"You don't have to do that with me," she whispers.

The muscles of his throat constrict as he swallows. She leans lower. Close enough to smell the peppermint. Always peppermint.

He's so much like heroin.

And she forgets she should be afraid, too. Forgets all her rules. Forgets about the boathouse.

Forgets on purpose.

She says, "I see right through you." And she kisses him.

His mouth is dry. His lips are chapped. Her tongue grazes the sweetness of the

mint he's sucking on, moments before he swallows it.

"Stop doing this to me," he says against her lips, even as his hands snake their way into her hair — fist in it. "Stop," his teeth catch her bottom lip — trap it. "Stop, stop," he murmurs, pulling her closer, and when her body flattens against his, it feels so right it's almost wrong. Too right.

A frantic part of her brain tries to set off alarm bells. Tries to remind her why she swore never to do this. But the rest of her is sinking into a gelatinous surrender. Drowning slowly. Happily.

Malfoy sits up against her, grip tightening, one hand abandoning her hair to belt around her waist and yank her close. Locking them together. That foreign, forbidden tingle flutters to life low in her stomach — *lower*. The one she's only felt a handful of times. The one she discovered in Third Year, under her sheets with her own fingers. The one she never felt with Ron.

Malfoy pulls her hair — drags her neck back, exposing it. For a moment she stares at the upside down Hospital Wing behind her, but then he latches onto a perfect spot and bites down, and her eyes flutter shut, a sound she didn't know she could make escaping through her teeth.

Slowly, his other arm works her hips into a gliding rhythm against him, and it brings color to her cheeks. That tingle becomes a steady pulse, and her shaking hands mirror his, threading through platinum strands, damp with sweat. Malfoy mouths a searing path up the side of her throat, leaving bruises in his wake — she can feel them. His hand cradles her skull — holds her head steady as his lips find her ear.

"I *hate* you," he rasps as he sucks at the lobe, tracing his tongue along the shell of her ear. "I fucking hate you."

"No, you don't," she breathes, her pulse skipping and stuttering in her chest, the blood loud in her ears. She pulls away — finds his lips, wanton and unashamed. "You don't," she says around his tongue, silenced when he flicks it up against the roof of her mouth.

Both of his hands find her hips — shove them back — and her head misses the bars of the footboard by a fraction of an inch as he drops her roughly to the

"Merlin, woman, just conjure yourself some clothes!"

"I can't! My wand isn't working."

The voices grow louder. Closer.

"What do you mean your wand isn't—"

"*Draco!*"

He sighs childishly — moves too slowly. But eventually he pulls out his wand and conjures her some robes.

"Thank you," she breathes out. "Thank you." Her pulse has only just begun to slow when she notices. "Wait — *no*, Malfoy these are *Slytherin* robes."

He shrugs. "Suppose they are."

"Oh, you *git*." She balls up the sheet and throws it in his face, frantically pulling up a chair from nearby and shoving the remnants of her pajamas under the covers. "Give me your arm."

He raises an eyebrow. The voices are just around the corner.

"Oh, you must be joking — *please*. Please, give me your arm."

"Very nice, Granger. Manners are very important."

He gives her his arm and she yanks on it intentionally, smirking when he winces. Part of her can't believe they're already back to bickering, after—

Poppy and her head nurse round the corner.

"Yes, there'll be some scarring, some soreness, but otherwise it's healing well," Hermione says, a little too loudly, as she pretends to study his Mark.

"Subtle," Malfoy murmurs.

She squeezes his arm hard. Makes him jolt.

"Miss Granger." Madam Pomfrey sounds surprised, coming to a stop beside them, her shrewd gaze setting Hermione on edge. "I didn't expect you this early. Certainly not after yesterday."

"I just wanted to check on it," she says, feeling her heart race. She tries to hide the green and silver tie by leaning further over Malfoy's arm.

Madam Pomfrey makes a little 'hmm' sound and bobs her head once. Turns to him. "And how are you feeling, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Potent," says Malfoy, and Hermione coughs. "You know — *virtile*, even. I



*December 1st, 1998*

SHE FELL ASLEEP.

She realizes it in the middle of her dream, as she sits in the center of a tornado of butterflies, and the panic wakes her up instantly.

So instantly, in fact, that she falls off the cot — lays sprawled, naked, on the cold flagstone of the Hospital Wing for several seconds, utterly confused.

Then it all starts flooding back to her at an alarming rate, and her body reminds her too. The soreness between her legs, the tenderness in her neck, the swelling in her lips.

Malfoy's sleepy face appears from over the edge of the cot.

"Did you sleep on the floor?" he mumbles, voice thick and groggy.

She flushes as his eyes widen a little — trace over her naked body, on full display now in the sunlight. But before she can get a word out, voices sound from the hallway just outside.

"Oh no," she breathes. She shoots to her feet so fast she almost elbows Malfoy in the face. "*Oh no, oh no, oh no.*" She searches desperately for her clothes, finding the scraps of her nightshirt before she remembers him tearing it in half. Her cheeks flame and she rips the sheet off of him to wrap around herself. "Bloody hell, what do we do?"

Malfoy hasn't moved much. He pulls his knees up to his chest, naked save a pair of boxers. Casual. Always so fucking casual. "I dunno. You could leave."

"There's only one exit"

He gestures to one of the windows and yawns.

"Oh, for goodness sake, Malfoy — *help me!*" She whacks at him with a section of bundled up sheet.

*George and Elmer*

mattress, reversing their positions. The cot creaks angrily beneath them as he drapes himself over her, hooking her thigh up around his hip.

For a moment, he goes still, staring down at her. Their breaths are short and heavy, nearly gasps. He searches her eyes. Releases a sigh like a surrender. "No, I don't."

He props himself up with one arm so he can trace his fingers over her jaw — up over her lips, toying with them. Parting them and sealing them. The pulse in her abdomen triples, but her eyes can't help but catch his injured arm shaking.

"Aren't you in pain?" she whispers against his fingers.

"Of course I'm in fucking pain," he hisses and parts her lips with his thumb. Dips low to kiss her hard. "Be quiet."

He pulls away in enough time to catch her glare and then surprises her with a huffed laugh. A real laugh. It thaws her anger in instant. He leans back slightly, resting his weight on his knees. His eyes lock onto hers, and both their smiles fade as he watches her carefully. Watches while he runs his hand up along the line of buttons on her nightshirt, sending a shiver through her.

He's waiting for her to panic.

She realizes it soon enough — even takes a moment to search herself, search her nerve-endings for any sense of it, but they seem to have given in at last. She wonders what's changed between this moment and the boathouse, but when he frees the lowest button with two fingers she forgets to care.

"Fucking ridiculous pajamas, Granger," he says, going for the second button.

"You realize you're covered in your own blood."

His mouth curls up on one side — the way she's admitted to herself she likes — and with a sharp yank, he rips open the rest. Buttons fly as she gasps, arms rushing to her chest to cover up instinctively.

"Don't," he says, voice low as he leans in again. "Don't." He pulls at her forearms as he brushes his nose against hers. Kisses her once. Twice. "Show me."

He opens his eyes inches from hers, and again they stare at one another. His gaze is challenging, and for a moment she has to grapple with just how well he seems to know her. Enough to know she can't resist a challenge.

She lets him pry her arms open. Let's him pin them down on either side of her head.

And he looks.

Stares at her naked chest until she feels so much heat building in her cheeks she's tempted to fight to cover herself again. She's plain. She knows that. She's always known. In fact, Malfoy himself made sure she was quite aware of it in earlier years.

She's thinking about reminding him of this when he says, "Fucking hell, look at you." It's so quiet he might be saying it to himself.

And he says nothing more, but she stops being embarrassed when his tongue glides over the space between her breasts. Her breath hitches. His eyes find hers from beneath his lashes, and he adjusts his course, mouth closing over her left nipple.

She gasps — jolts so abruptly she kneels him in the thigh.

"Fuck, Granger — *ow*," he hisses, dropping his forehead to her chest for a second.

"Sorry, sorry, I'm sorry," she splutters, trying to sit up, but his grip remains tight and he keeps her pinned. He shakes off the pain. Laughs at her, settling himself down again and pressing their hips together. The hardness she feels stops her breath. Enhances her blush.

"You'd think no one had done that before," Malfoy murmurs, biting down on her lip.

"N-No one has," she breathes, realizing too late what she's admitted.

He pauses. Goes completely still for a moment. And now she does feel panic. It spreads like a wildfire through her stomach, along with doubts and second-guesses. Insecurity. Fear.

He pulls away from her lips, and she risks a glance — opens her eyes expecting disappointment or something similar.

Instead, his expression is calm. Serious. Deep in thought. She'd give anything to know his thoughts in this moment.

She considers asking.

Say it. Fucking say it. *Say it.*"

"*Draco.*"

The tower collapses.

Her body jerks, and she grabs onto him for support as the sensation wracks its way through her, thighs shaking, hands trembling. Her eyes roll back into her head.

He sighs — groans in approval, and then he loses himself in her, gasping against her lips as he carries himself through his own collapse.

Then his full weight sinks against her, heavy and warm, for once, the sweat of their bodies mixing. The sudden silence is thick — weighted with what they've done, filled only by their gradually slowing breaths.

"Fuck," he murmurs into her neck, but it doesn't quite cover it.

Doesn't quite encapsulate losing herself to the boy who tormented her for years for the sport of it, here, in the Hospital Wing, on a cot soaked with his own blood.

It doesn't.

She stares up at the ceiling.

They've definitely woken the portraits. From the corner of her eye, she can see that most of them have vacated their frames. All but one. The portrait of a chambermaid, who peeks at them from between her fingers, blushing.

"Fuck," Hermione echoes, looking back to the ceiling.

Because it was him. It was him and it was the last thing she should've done. The last thing she'd ever thought could happen as a result of coming down here tonight. The stupidest, most reckless, most un-thought out thing she's ever done.

And it felt right.

before. Vulnerable.

He starts to move. Slowly. Deftly.

He rocks his hips against hers, pushing in and out, in and out, and the string fades away into nothing. In its place, a slow-burning friction starts to build. A tension. The only tension she's ever known to feel impossible, inexplicably *good*. Better than good.

But it's the noises he makes — the quiet moans and the hitches in his breath, the way he kisses her — lazily, a tangle of tongues and gasps, the way his hand curls into hers against the sheets. It's this that starts to tip the tower of sensation that's stacking up inside of her — has it teetering, ready to fall.

"*Malfoy*," she breathes, free hand tangling in his hair, drawing him closer.

He thrusts hard suddenly, making her gasp, eyes flying open.

"That's not my name," he growls. He thrusts in again — hard, deep. It's overwhelming, and yet it isn't painful the way it was before. "Say my fucking name."

Her lips lock shut. She doesn't know why. An infinitely small piece of her doesn't want to fully give in to him yet.

Malfoy growls again and dips his arms beneath her, yanking her up as he sits back and holding her in his lap. The friction is twice as powerful at this angle, and for a moment she sees white spots. Loses her concentration as he rocks up into her.

"Say it."

She shakes her head, letting it fall back, eyes closed. That tower is swaying dangerously.

Malfoy bunches her curls in his fist and forces her forehead against his.

"Please...please say it."

In and out, in and out...

"No," she whispers feebly.

"Please." He bites down on her lip. "Say it. Say it, please."

She can only whimper.

He throws her back down, the old mattress squealing in protest, and he yanks up her thigh again, driving in deeper, sending her reeling. "Admit it to yourself.

But before the words can leave her throat, his hand is sliding up her thigh. He keeps his eyes on hers, blinking slowly, expression unreadable as his fingers ghost, featherlight, over the front of her satin shorts.

"What about this?" he asks quietly.

She feels her knees shaking. Her heart is struggling to pump blood fast enough, her mouth dry. "What?" she says, barely a whisper.

He twists his hand — slides his fingers between her legs over the fabric, and it takes all of her strength not to let her thighs clamp together at the intensity of the sensation. "Has anyone ever done this?" He nips at her bottom lip. "To you?"

Her eyes flutter shut. "No." Her voice is hoarse.

"No?" He adds pressure. Careful, practiced pressure.

"No," she gasps, trying to come to terms with what her body's telling her. With the fact that she's never wanted anything like this. Never felt hungry like this. Starved like this.

Her hips rise to meet him without her permission.

It was supposed to be Ron. She was supposed to feel this Ron. Want this with

Ron.

Or with Harry.

Or with Dean.

With Seamus, with Cormac, with Viktor.

With anyone but him.

"And this?"

He cuts off her thoughts abruptly when his fingers dip below her waistband — slide beneath her underwear and over where she's never, *never* been touched. "Never," she says aloud, voice trembling.

His mouth finds her ear again, sucking gently and doubling the sensations shooting through her veins like sparks. "Just me?" His fingers slide back and forth rhythmically, purposefully, hitting spots she never knew about. Never read about. Never thought about.

"Just you," she gasps out.

Malfoy groans, and the sound of it sends shockwaves straight to the place his fingers keep teasing. It's tortuous. Incomplete. Unfair.

"Please," she hears herself whisper. Can't believe what she's saying. Can't believe what he's reduced her to in a matter of minutes, when she'd thought her resolve was so strong.

He relents. Just barely. Dips his finger inside, but only for a split second before retreating. It forces out a moan — another, "*please*." All these sounds she never imagined she'd make.

"I'm a bad choice," Malfoy says against her ear, even as he slides his finger in deep. Holds it there. "Fuck, you're tight. You've really never — I'm a terrible fucking choice. Dammit, Granger. The fucking *worst*." He twists his finger even as he says this, making her back arch, making her mind hazy.

"I don't care," she hisses, and it morphs into a desperate keen when he adds a second finger. "It's my choice. It's my choice. Please."

And she finds herself reaching for his belt buckle. Malfoy yanks his wand from his pocket as she struggles with it, and she sees his hand shaking. Is glad for it, if only to know he's as affected as she is.

He casts the contraceptive charm, and for a moment her bare abdomen glows pink. The color reflects off of his eyes as he glances up at her, uncertain.

"*It's my choice*," she says again firmly, before he can speak.

He tosses his wand to the floor with a heavy exhale, hooking his thumbs in her waistband and yanking her shorts and underwear off — throwing them somewhere. He divests himself of his shirt and trousers just as quickly, and she's surprised at herself, but she's too shy to look. Keeps her eyes glued to his.

Malfoy lowers himself over her slowly, sensually. A small part of her recognizes that he's good at this. Must've had practice. It's almost painful to think about.

But just as she feels him at her entrance, he pauses. Brushes his nose against hers, eyes closed. "How can I trust you?" he whispers. "How can I trust you not to regret this?" Her heart constricts. And it guts her to say it, but she tells him the truth. "You can't."

He breathes out. A short, angry breath.

And then he thrusts in.

White hot pain shoots up through her stomach. Tears prick at her eyes. She lets loose a little scream, hand fisting in the starched sheets.

He isn't being gentle. He's trying to hurt her. His thrusts are angry. Punishing. He slams into her with what feels like years of pain and anger, with no regard to her inexperience, and as the tears roll down her cheeks, she sees his face. Sees the tilt of his brows and the way his eyes are squeezed shut. Sees the raw hurt. All of it.

A sob wracks its way out of her chest. "No."

His painful rhythm cuts short. He opens his eyes slowly, reluctantly, as he goes still inside of her, and for a moment all she can focus on is the sting.

"What?" he asks quietly, coldly — pretends he doesn't know what he's doing. It awakens her own anger, hardening and determining her, and she reaches up to twist her hand in his hair. "No," she says again sharply, giving his head a jerk. "I'm not letting you do this. I'm not letting you ruin this on purpose. You don't get to make me regret this on purpose. You *don't*."

"I—"

"Shut up," she snaps and she kisses him silent. A furious kiss, at first. But she forces it to soften. Forces his jaw to unclench as she runs her tongue gently along his bottom lip. Nips at it. "Don't do it," she whispers. "Because this?" And she clenches her stomach muscles, despite the pain — squeezes around him. He lets out a hiss, eyes sobering as they find hers. "I want this. With you."

Something fractures in his gaze. Some wall falls.

And watching it crumble is as erotic as the way their bodies are interlocked. "Do it right," she demands. "I know you can."

He doesn't speak. His eyes speak for him, flying from one emotion to the next as he stares at her, more lost and more desperate than she's ever seen him.

"Show me."

His mouth falls on hers — collapses. His muscles go slack as he kisses her deeply, hungrily, and he melts into her the way he's never allowed himself to