

Draco narrows his eyes, looking down into the cup suspiciously. He removes one glove with his teeth — an unexpectedly distracting action — and then dips his pinky finger in the whipped cream, cautiously doting it on his tongue.

“Oh, yes, certainly check for poison,” she snorts, raising her own cup to her lips. And finally he follows suit, taking a measured sip.

It’s immensely gratifying to watch his eyes widen. To watch him instantly tip his cup back for more and then burn his tongue.

She doesn’t say *‘I told you so.’* Doesn’t say anything. Just quiks one brow and smiles triumphantly before turning and leading him off to the next tent. They smell scented candles and study the craftsmanship of unique Christmas decorations — well, she studies. He critiques. He’s inordinately confused and enamored by wind-up toys, having had all his toys charmed as a child.

She catches him paying special attention to a small mechanical carousel.

“You like it?”

“It’s nonsensical,” he says, too loudly and right in front of the shopkeeper. But his eyes are glued to it as he watches it spin. Watches the little gears turn as it plays a music box form of Silent Night.

“You like it,” she says again, no longer a question.

Draco huffs and straightens his shoulders, striding away with what’s left of his pride, and she buys it while his back is turned, slipping it into her bag.

“We’ll have to go to Diagon Alley, you know,” he says as they peruse the display of gingerbread houses — part of a competition.

“Why?” A small flutter of uncertainty awakens inside her. Is he really that uncomfortable around Muggles?

But then he says, “To go to Gringotts. I have no Muggle money and I want another one of those flimsy hot chocolates and you are not paying for anything else.”

The urge to kiss him is suddenly almost overwhelming. She turns away to hide her wide smile as she hooks her arm through his and spins them around, back toward the hot chocolate stand. “I asked you on the date. Surely, you have some respect for tradition. I’m paying tonight.”

How she’s feeling.

Ginny’s poker face is quite impressive as well.

“Gin,” she urges after another long silence. “Please.”

“What?”

“Just say it. Whatever you’re thinking. Say it.”

Ginny finishes off her whiskey — leans her head on her hand. “Mione, I...I don’t really know what I can say to make you feel better. I hate him. I’m sorry, but I hate him and I think I’ll always hate him. He’s flesh and blood of the woman who murdered my brother. His *father* is the reason I —” She breaks off. Clears her throat, “First Year. He’s the reason for what happened in First Year.” “I know,” Hermione breathes, inwardly cursing herself. How could she have been so stupid and selfish not to consider Ginny and Tom Riddle’s diary? How much more deeply this might affect her? She’s not a neutral party. Not by a long shot.

But Ginny continues. “The way you talk about him, though...it worries me. It sounds as if you’re very far gone, Hermione. You’re very deep in this. What happens if you come to a point where you need to crawl your way out? Will you? *Can* you?”

Hermione huffs. Glances down. Away. “Probably not.”

Ginny says nothing.

Slowly, the Three Broomsticks grows busier with the late morning crowd. Hermione watches her whiskey grow murkier by the second, clouding in the glass. She’s swirling it around when Ginny speaks again.

“So...last night then?” She doesn’t need to finish.

Hermione chews her lip, not looking up. Nods.

“Are you alright?”

Now she does meet her eyes, feeling color flood to her cheeks. “Better than alright,” she admits. “I know, though. I know you don’t want to hear it.”

“Hermione.” Ginny’s tone is suddenly stern, and she sounds somehow older than her years. Wiser. “I may hate him. But it is none of my business who you see. It’s not in my control, nor should it be. I’m sorry I can’t say the same for

others —”

She means Ron.

“ — but you can always talk to me. And while I may judge Malfoy — *will*, will judge Malfoy — I will never judge you.”

Hermione feels tears well up in her eyes again.

“Do you understand?”

She nods, and it shakes a few of them free, sending them streaming down her face. Ginny conjures her a tissue.

“Thank you,” she says through the thin fabric of it as she wipes her eyes. Hopes Ginny knows how broadly she means it.

Ginny orders one more round of the tamer Butterbeers, along with some pumpkin pasties to soak up all the alcohol. They sit together well into the lunch hour, talking things over. Hermione tells her about Zacharias’s threat and about Pansy. Tells her about stealing Draco’s journal and about Theodore Nott.

In turn, Ginny tells her what she hasn’t seen. Tells her how it’s looked from the outside.

And she’s slightly horrified, because from the outside, she’s behaved like a complete sociopath.

“And we miss you, ‘Mione,” she says as well. “We want to be there for you, but you don’t make it easy. With this, I understand. But with everything else — we can help you. You don’t have to do it on your own.”

She finds herself holding back more tears. “I know. I know, I’m sorry.” But all she can promise is, “I’ll try.”

Walking out of the Three Broomsticks, though...she feels like a tangle of impossibly heavy chains has been taken off her feet. Feels fifty pounds lighter.

Ginny should’ve known all along.



She crawls into bed that night having not gone to a single class and feeling thoroughly unlike herself.

It’s nice.

It’s very crowded, couples and families with small children milling about in all directions, all in high spirits.

“Is this a test?” asks Draco quietly, staring straight ahead when she glances sideways at him.

“What?” She almost laughs.

“A test,” he repeats, deadpan. “Are you testing me?”

She’s silent for a long moment. Then she scoffs. “Yes. This is a test. I wanted to see if you’d go on a massive Muggle killing spree.” She releases his hand and gestures widely in front of them. “Have at it.”

Draco raises an eyebrow at her. Huffs.

And she laughs again, shaking her head. “You’re ridiculous, you know. Utterly ridiculous. No, this is not a test. I wanted to take you somewhere we wouldn’t be bothered. Somewhere pretty and Christmassy. I brought you because I thought you’d like it.” And she’s pleased with herself for having put it so simply. Even more pleased when his brow smooths out and she feels him take her hand again.

“Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, Granger.”



They spend hours there.

She takes him first to a small hot chocolate stand, rolling her eyes as he gripes about having to wait in line.

“There are lines at Honeydukes. At the Three Broomsticks. You have to wait in the wizarding world, too,” she counters, turning to order as they reach the front.

“Yes, but their hot chocolate is hand-stirred and melted down by Elves! And it’s served in a silver flagon, not some flimsy paper —”

She shoves the flimsy paper cup in question into his hand, effectively silencing him.

“This is Swiss hot chocolate,” she says, guiding them away from the line. “Don’t say another word before you try it.”



They apparate from Hogsmeade, hand in hand — and even through the fabric of their gloves, the contact sends shivers up her arm.

When they arrive, appearing in a dark, snow-dusted alley, he lets go immediately. Puffs out a steamy breath, turning a small circle as he tries to figure out where they are.

She injects herself with courage and reaches for his hand again, squeezing onto it tight. Doesn't wait to see his reaction — isn't *that* brave, not yet — before pulling him along after her out of the alley.

Soon enough, they're weaving through crowds of people along sidewalks.

She's taken him to London.

His fingers flex against hers in her hand, almost nervously. "Are we going to Diagon Alley?"

She squeezes again, glancing sideways at him at last. "No."

And the relief in his eyes is clear as day.

She'd thought about taking him there. About a proper wizarding date. But then she'd considered that most members of the wizarding society weren't likely to treat him with a great deal of kindness.

And this was meant to be an escape. For both of them.

Seeing his eyes now makes her doubly glad she planned things the way she did.

"Where then?" he asks.

"Trafalgar Square. There's a Christmas market there."

She analyzes his reaction carefully as they walk, seeing the slight hesitation. The uncertainty. "A Muggle Christmas market?" he murmurs.

"Yes."

They're only a block away. And neither says another word until they've stepped around the corner and into the bright and colorfully lit square, its centerpiece a massive tree beside the fountain, glowing like a beacon. Canopies of Christmas lights hang from above like stars, and little tents that look like log cabins are set up in rows, filled with sweets and gifts and wonders.

Madam Pomfrey hadn't said a word to her about Draco when she came in. She'd simply asked her to perform the contraceptive charm three times with her newly working wand, *hmmph-ed* when she'd done it right, and then dropped the subject.

Poppy has never been one to pry.

This, though, is the first moment she's had all day to be alone with her thoughts. She stares up at the vibrant red canopy of her four-poster, and for the first time since waking up, she opens up the floodgates.

Her thoughts run rampant. Her legs grow restless. She lets herself retrace every memory in her head without restriction, and it starts to feel real. Like it truly happened.

She's partly shocked at her behavior last night. Surprised by her nerve and her assertiveness. Certainly, she's always maintained those attributes with vigor during everyday life, but she'd never imagined they'd cross over into the bedroom. Never imagined she could be so forthright about what she wanted.

And what's more, who could've *ever* expected *Draco Bloody Malfoy* to listen? She makes a mental note to ask his middle name. Is abruptly wildly curious and surprised she doesn't know.

But these are suddenly things she wants to know. Almost should know, considering what's happening between them. She can in no way put a label on it, but she can at least be sure that she wants to know him better.

Childishly, she makes a list in her head — twenty-one questions with Draco Malfoy.

And she wonders whether she'll ever get to ask them.

December end, 1990

Diary,

The fuck do you mean my last entry was too brief?

I answered your weekly prompt, you mouth-breathing halfwits. What more, by law — if you've even actually read my fucking

changes — do I have to do?

The answer is fucking nothing.

I can read, I read it.

I know all the loopholes.

Have a pleasant evening,

Draco

December 4th, 1998

IT'S FRIDAY EVENING WHEN GINNY FIRST BRINGS IT UP.

The Gryffindor common room is tamer than usual, and Hermione's working on an essay in the armchair by the fireplace while Harry and Ron fill out Preliminary Auror Training forms on the floor by her feet.

Ron didn't want to be an Auror. He wanted to play for the Chudley Cannons. At least, that was the last she'd heard.

But she hasn't really spoken to Ron in months — not like she used to, and it seems things have changed.

Ginny's been working at drawing her back into their social circle, quite casually and without any ridiculous grand gestures, thank goodness — but it's an adjustment all the same.

She tries to remember the last time the three of them sat like this. Worked in silence in each other's company. Not since before the war, she reckons.

Malfoy has been a blur since that morning. She's only caught glimpses of him coming and going. He's skipped several of their shared classes. She doesn't know why it makes her tense, but it does.

Ginny sits across from her in the other armchair, reading, and she says it without looking up, "Any developments with Jackson Pollock?"

Hermione's quill slips, and she draws a thick, black line down the empty quarter left on her page. Ruins it. She flashes wide eyes at Ginny, but she still hasn't looked up from her book.

"Plans?" He echoes the word like it's foreign.

"Yes. Are you busy this evening?" All of her phrasing feels childish. She can't remember anything she planned to say or how she planned to say it.

"Why?" He shows his first small flicker of emotion, quirking a thin brow.

And she breathes out slowly through her mouth. "I'd like to go on a date with you."

There's a long, painful silence. Her eyes flit over him, trying to avoid his penetrating stare at all costs.

"A...date?"

She hates it when he repeats her.

"Yes," she says. Folds her arms over her chest, forcing her gaze to meet his.

The other brow quirks now, and he adjusts his posture, leaning back languidly against the wall. "You realize, Granger, that the word 'date' tends to have romantic connotations?"

Her heart pounds. She's almost certain this is his way of rejecting her. "Yes," she says anyway. "Which is why it's...appropriate."

And finally — *finally* — she sees emotion in his eyes. Sees the faintest glimmer of surprise.

But then, less than a second later, he's sinking back through the wall.

Her chest throbs. Painfully, like she's been struck with a mallet. She glances down at her feet. Feels suddenly idiotic in her sweater, tugging at its hem as she turns to walk away.

The logical part of her brain had, of course, accounted for this possibility.

But the emotional part had not.

She lets out a shaky breath. Starts to walk fast. Wants to run. Run away and hide. Except, there's another pair of footsteps echoing hers — catching up. And she whips around to see Draco closing their distance as he tugs on a long black peacoat, a pair of gloves in hand.

Her pulse stutters. Stumbles and trips over itself.

"I assume we're going someplace cold, judging from you." His eyes give her a sweeping once over, hesitating on her shocked face. "Lead the way, Granger."

“Erm — hi,” she manages at last, collecting herself. “Hello.”

“Did you just...*knock*?” he draws, and her earlier thoughts are confirmed.

“Yes, I did, I...” she thumbs the hem of her sweater, “I was hoping to speak to Draco.”

A thin seam of panic starts to widen. She hadn’t really accounted for Nott being the gatekeeper. She’d been too distracted by her relief that Parkinson was going home for the holidays. And she can’t be sure he won’t just scoff at her and slam the door — well, wall — in her face.

“What for?” asks Nott, and she pulls herself out of her thoughts.

Indignation is certainly not the best way to go in this moment, but old habits die hard. “That isn’t really any of your business, is it?”

Nott’s eyes tighten. He adjusts the collar of his sweater as he considers her. “Actually, it is, Granger, as I’ve explained to you countless times at this point. But I’m bored of it, so I’m not going to explain it again.”

And then, to her utter disbelief, he steps back — disappears, and moments later Draco materializes in his place.

He’s in all black. A black cable-knit jumper. Black trousers. It’s stark against his pale skin, his platinum hair. But, for the first time in a long time, he looks rested. The deep, defined rings of purple beneath his eyes she’s grown so used to seeing have diminished some.

And his eyes themselves have snapped instantly to her neck. To where her fingers still play nervously with the pendant.

The sentence she’s so carefully rehearsed evaporates in her head.

“Granger,” he acknowledges, and she can’t discern anything from his tone.

“It’s Christmas Eve,” is all she can think to say.

“Well spotted.”

She clears her throat. Tries to reorganize her thoughts. Tries to remember why she’s even *here*.

“It’s...well, it’s Christmas Eve,” she says again, “and I...I wondered if you had any plans?” Her heels knock together. She itches the back of her ankle with the toe of her boot.

“Who’s Jackson Bollocks?” asks Ron, yawning.

“*Pollack*,” Hermione corrects automatically. Adjusts herself in the armchair, pulse suddenly quite fast.

But Ginny explains before her thoughts get too far away from her. “He’s a famous Muggle artist — abstract. Hermione’s doing a research project on him for Muggle Studies.”

Her pulse slows...just a fraction.

“Yes...” she murmurs after a moment, uncertain and suspicious, “I...am.”

“Pretty in-depth, the way I heard it. Lots of work.” Ginny turns a page, still not looking up.

“Yes,” she says again, catching on.

Harry looks up from the floor through his messy mop of hair. Smiles implicitly. “Hermione’s probably already finished it.”

And Ginny looks up finally, tossing Hermione a complicated glance. She thinks she understands. “Not at all,” she says, continuing when Ginny subtly nods. “It’ll take me months, I expect.”

Ron has already lost interest. His face is screwed up as he scribbles on his form.

Harry is only half-listening.

“So?” Ginny asks again. “How’s it going?”

And she gets it.

Ginny really is a brilliant witch. In under two minutes, she’s perfectly crafted a way to talk about Malfoy in front of Harry and Ron. In front of anyone, really. She hides a smile. “No new developments. Just preliminary research at this point.”

Ginny winks when no one’s looking. “Well, let me know if you need any help.”

And all of the tension in her body seems to ease in that instant.

Finally. Finally, an ally

23

December 14th, 1998

Diary,

Fickle is a good word.

With only two syllables, it somehow captures just how absolutely fucking volatile people are. Undependable. Untrustworthy. It's this pathetic little word — it even sounds pathetic, and it's so fitting. People are fickle. Everything is fickle. Every aspect of my life.

Even I am. I'm sure of it.

But if you really fucking think about it, expecting everyone to be fickle makes them not fickle at all. I can depend on their undependability. Countermeasures.

Yeah, it might not seem like much, but it brings me comfort.

I like knowing what to expect, for fucking once in my life, and at this point I can comfortably expect to have the rug pulled out from under me at every given opportunity.

Prompt: If you could change one choice you made in the past year, what would it be?

Almost too easy. My appeal. Mother insisted on it, but if I could go back, I'd plead guilty and accept all of those initial charges.

Rebaban sounds like a lonely paradise.

Draco

Certainly, she'd put a great deal of effort into her reveal at the Yule Ball. But it had been just that — a reveal. Her chosen moment to display herself as more than just the mousy know-it-all. And it had been for everyone. And for herself.

This, though — she's never done this with one person solely in mind.

It's...oddly exhilarating.

And equally terrifying.

Every time she thinks she's finally comfortable with how she looks, something flips like a switch and she decides she looks absurd. And it eventually becomes so frustrating that she smacks her hand against the mirror, snatches her bag off the foot of her bed and practically throws herself down the stairs from the dormitory.

She's timed everything meticulously. She cannot afford to waste precious minutes fussing over meaningless details.

But the nerves really start to set in as she walks the deserted halls, decked with holly just as the carol suggested. She has no gauge for Malfoy's reaction, and she's spent the last several days working herself into a frenzy thinking of all the possibilities. Her resolve is firm, though. She's going to go through with it, even if her knees wobble the whole way.

And they do.

By the time she reaches the Dungeons — reaches the spot Harry and Ron once told her hid the entrance to the Slytherin common room — she's pretty sure the tremors are visible.

Even so, she adjusts the pendant under the scarf and takes out her wand. Performs three magical taps on the wall — a loud knock.

Idly, as she waits, she wonders if anyone's ever *knocked* for Slytherin House. She pulls the pendant out from under her scarf and toys with its sharp edges between her thumb and forefinger.

And then, all too quickly, a confused and suspicious Theodore Nott materializes a few inches in front of her, like he's stepped through the wall.

She jumps back. Catches her breath.

"Granger?" His dark brows arch up like small mountains.

December 12th, 1998



December 19th, 1998

Diary,

Is there a fucking spell to make sense of things?

Dreco

December 24th, 1998

SHE SPENDS DAYS PLANNING IT.

Puts in the same amount of devoted effort as she would a term essay in First or Second Year. Except, it's almost harder, because she can't expect an Outstanding. She can pour as much concentration and careful consideration into this as possible and still not be able to depend on an outcome.

Can't even be sure he'll let her finish her sentence.

It's Christmas Eve, though. She can't wait any longer. It has to be tonight. She stands in front of her four-poster for a good twenty minutes, staring at what must be three quarters of her wardrobe strewn out across the bed. She doesn't have Ginny or Parvati here to consult. She's the only Seventh Year who chose to stay.

And warding off that nagging part of her brain that keeps insisting this is utterly ridiculous proves to be quite an undertaking.

Eventually, she settles on a pale blue chenille jumper — the forest green piece she'd had in mind seemed too pretentious. She pulls it down over a pair of simple jeans, wraps a white silk scarf around her neck and tugs on her boots.

It's only as she struggles to magically pin her hair beneath a knit cap that she realizes she never did this for Ron.

OVER A WEEK.

Over a week and they haven't exchanged a word. Haven't traded so much as a full glance or shared the same ten feet of air. Not only has he skipped the majority of the classes they have together, but on the rare occasions that he *has* appeared, it's as though he believes it'll physically hurt him to look anywhere near her direction.

She swaddles herself in the belief that what she feels is little more than irritation. Annoyance. Exasperation that he's behaving like a typical, childish boy in this situation, when she prides herself on repelling typical, childish boys.

Except beneath all of that, she knows what she feels.

Slighted. Hurt. Used.

And also proven right, and she *abhors* proving herself right in situations like this. But there was that little voice in her head all along, ringing its little alarms and nagging its way through the dark recesses of her mind, telling her Malfoy was bound to do this.

Not just bound.

Almost *required*.

Everything she knew about his old nature would've practically *demand*ed that he do this, and yet...that's just it.

His old nature. She'd felt certain, growing more and more positive by the day over the past several weeks, that his old nature was dying. Giving way to something new and ultimately more.

But perhaps, after everything, the only constant with Malfoy is his unpredictability.

And ninety-five percent of her had not predicted this.

She wasted it. She *wasted* it.

Everything she confessed to Ginny in a drunken haze feels childish and embarrassing now.

What a waste.

"Hermione, your tea," says Luna calmly, in her way, and Hermione glances down to find it boiling in its dainty little cup.

She shakes herself free of the anger, and the bubbles subside. Ginny is watching her carefully when she looks up, a question in her eyes, but Hermione shuts it down quickly, forcing a smile at Luna.

"Sorry. Lost in thought, I suppose."

They're taking tea in the Astronomy Tower, an affair Hermione has just learned that Luna hosts every weekend. Ginny's encouraged her to come, and thankfully it's just the three of them today, although Luna has mentioned twice how Parvati and Padma usually make an appearance.

Idly, Hermione wonders if she's scared them off.

Who'd want to take tea with moping Granger?

The conversation shifts to the latest edition of the Quibbler, but Ginny's eyes still flit her way every now and again as Luna talks.

"Still nothing?" she asks as they descend the stairs later.

Hermione shakes her head mutely. Is afraid if she opens her mouth, all of her hurt and all of her fury will pour out.

They pass into one of the main corridors, lively with students the way it always is on weekends during the winter.

"Maybe you should approach him first?" offers Ginny. "Maybe he's waiting for—"

"I will *not*," she snaps immediately. "I don't care how old-fashioned it is. Just this once, I want things to go the way they go for everyone else for me. I will not go chasing—"

She breaks off.

Can't fathom what she's seeing.

But she can feel Ginny's gaze shoot to her from the side, wondering why she's stopped, and then it shifts to follow her stare.

Malfoy is walking arm-in-arm with Pansy Parkinson.

They're at the far end of the corridor, passing in and out of view through the

throat, brushing down the silk of her deep maroon robes. "I am in no position to pass any judgement — wouldn't have any judgement to pass, even if I were. Mr. Malfoy had a more complicated and unstable upbringing than I believe anyone else within these walls could imagine."

Hermione sucks hard on the lemon drop, eyes glued to her. McGonagall is looking off ahead.

"I am also not surprised that you have been so quick to understand this. To see past it. And I must say, I am quite proud to witness it."

Now her eyes tilt down, to the side. Find her.

"But I feel obligated to warn you, Miss Granger. As you have seen today, there are many who will not see it this way. Some who never will. It will not be easy for you. Mr. Malfoy will be faced with a great deal more than name-calling and petty accusations...as will you, if you choose to tie yourself to him."

She places a warm, weathered hand on Hermione's shoulder.

"I know how difficult it has been for you to cope. I would expect nothing less, after what you have been through. But are you certain this is something you can handle? Right now, on the road to recovery? Are you certain you are prepared for the complications? The ramifications?"

Hermione stares up at her for a long time after she goes silent. Considers her words carefully, all the while feeling an odd sensation building up in her chest.

Then she clears her throat, slowly getting to her feet. Feels suddenly resolute.

"I understand, Headmaster. Thank you for your concern."

She weaves her way out from around the chair, smoothing down her skirt as McGonagall regards her curiously a few feet away.

"I've just come to realize how little it matters what anyone thinks."

And then she dips her head and excuses herself, McGonagall watching as she leaves with what might possibly be the beginnings of a smile forming on her stern lips. Halfway to the office door, Hermione pulls the broken pendant from the pocket of her skirt.

She fastens the clasp around her neck.

expectation as to the direction of this conversation evaporating within milliseconds. How does she —

“Poppy mentioned it to me,” McGonagall answers before she can ask. “Voiced a bit of concern. But even if she hadn’t, Miss Granger, I’m afraid it is quite obvious to eyes as old as mine.”

Her cheeks feel like branding irons. Probably look like them, too. She tries to form words, but McGonagall continues before she can work up the courage.

“As your longtime Professor, and now as Headmaster, I feel it is my duty to —”

“*I know the contraceptive charm*,” she blurts out. So quickly it all sounds like one word. She bites down on her tongue the moment it’s free, furious with herself, and when she can meet McGonagall’s eyes, she finds her visibly flustered.

Her brows furrow and she purses her lips. “Yes, I am quite certain that you do.”

And it becomes humiliatingly clear that this was not at all the direction in which she’d been headed.

“Sorry, Headmaster,” Hermione mutters, eyes falling into her lap as nowhere else seems bearable.

There’s a long moment of deafening silence.

Then McGonagall stands. Strides silently around to the front of the desk, and when Hermione can muster the courage to look up, she’s holding out the dish of Dumbledore’s lemon drops.

McGonagall speaks in a raspy voice, as though something is caught in her throat. “Albus...always knew the best moment to offer these. Seemed to know exactly when a bit of sweetness was needed. I believe this may be one of those moments.”

Something painful throbs in Hermione’s rib cage. She reaches delicately into the dish, almost afraid to disturb the arrangement of the candies as she plucks one out. Its tart flavor is a welcome distraction.

McGonagall sets the dish aside, resting back against the edge of the desk, hands clasped in front of her. “Frankly, Miss Granger, I am not surprised. Not in the least. Wayward souls have a way of finding one another.” She clears her

crowd, but his white-blond is unmistakable, as is her laugh.

“Mione...” says Ginny softly. A warning.

Someone steps out of the way and she can see Pansy stretch up on her tiptoes and press a kiss to his cheek.

“*Mione*—”

She charges forth, hands balling into white-knuckled fists at her sides.

“Mione, *don’t* — oh, bollocks,” Ginny mutters from behind, but she doesn’t follow.

And Hermione slips through the crowd with a thousand different curses on her tongue, the outline of her wand a comfort against her palm through the fabric of her skirt.

No one would assume anything if she hexed Draco Malfoy.

That’s — that’s what she *should* be doing. What she’s *expected* to be doing.

She’s about halfway across the corridor when he spots her, and she sees a muscle in his jaw twitch. Sees him straighten up like a child caught out of bed after midnight. He says something to Pansy — she can’t read his lips — and then he excuses himself, starting off at a rather brisk pace down the perpendicular hall.

And Hermione charges right through Pansy’s noxious cloud of powdery perfume as she rounds the corner after him.

She keeps her eyes low. Focuses them on the shiny black heels of his pointy dress shoes, following them around several twists and turns and down several flights of stairs. Follows until no other pairs of shoes accompany them.

Until the halls they’re walking through are filled only by their out-of-step treads.

She realizes he’s headed for the Dungeons. For Slytherin House. His pace has doubled, though he’s not quite running. Not yet.

Her eyes pan up — catch him throwing a glance over his shoulder, and when he sees how close she is he seems to realize that Slytherin will be a dead end. He panics and cuts a sharp turn down another corridor, then down two more flights of stairs.

She has her hand around the base of her wand.

Malfoy slips around one last corner, throws a desperate, “Sod off, Granger,” at her and then yanks at the iron of a wall sconce, producing a hidden doorway. He throws himself through with fervor, as though he thinks she won’t make it across the threshold in time.

But she does. Of course she does. It’s almost too easy.

And the door closes behind her, leaving him in precisely the worst situation he could ask for.

“*What is this?*” she demands, wand out at her side. Malfoy turns to face her. Backs himself into a table.

A beat of silence.

“This is the Kitchens,” he says.

Hermione hesitates — coughs and splutters at him, “*No, of course I know this is the — what is this, Malfoy? What are you playing at?*”

Malfoy runs a hand through his hair, looking anywhere but her eyes as he leans back against the table. As he so astutely pointed out, they are, in fact, in the Kitchens. It’s vacant. Dinner isn’t for another several hours, and the House Elves are otherwise occupied throughout the castle, no doubt. Dishes are laid out behind him in rows — plates and goblets and serving platters — in various classes of material. Some bronze, some porcelain, some crystal.

She’s never actually been in here. Students aren’t supposed to know about it, lest they think to go snooping around when midnight cravings strike.

She wonders why Malfoy knows the way in.

She has more important things to wonder about. She collects herself and reinvents her penetrating stare, hoping to stir answers out of him.

“Is there some sort of game we’re playing that I’m not aware of, Granger?” he asks, and he’s adopted that bored tone.

She sees red. “Don’t you *dare* stand there and act casual — like you weren’t running away from me less than a minute ago.”

“I was *not* running—”

She raises her wand. Points it firmly at his face.

He goes temporarily silent, only to cross his arms over his chest a moment

a slight flicker in McGonagall’s eyes. Until she’s certain she understands the gravity of it.

McGonagall steps in it for a moment. Threads her fingers together. Then she turns to Nott, her expression catlike — not so different from her Animagus form. “Mr. Nott, I urge you to remember that violence is never a suitable solution to a problem.” She pauses, then adds, “Regardless of how cruel the situation may be. Twenty points will be taken from Slytherin, and you will be serving two detentions with Professor Sprout.” She sits back. “You may go to your dormitory.”

Nott stands, looking a little confounded. He deals a curt nod to McGonagall, but his eyes linger on Hermione as he steps past her to leave.

She wonders if he’ll always hate her this much.

When the door closes, McGonagall shifts her eyes to Draco. “Mr. Malfoy, you are free to go as well.” But when he stands, she says, “And I do apologize for Mr. McLaggen’s behavior.”

If Nott looked surprised, Draco looks absolutely gobsmacked. He turns to leave, eyes sweeping over Hermione in a way that makes the blood rush to her cheeks.

She does her best to hide an absurdly large, victorious grin.

But when she makes to follow him out, McGonagall stops her.

“Miss Granger. A word?”

Her stomach drops. The smile melts off her face. And for a moment, dropping down into the velvet seat takes her all the way back to First Year. Reminds her of all the trouble the three of them used to get into.

She braces herself for a lecture.

“Miss Granger,” McGonagall says again, and from the way she adjusts her posture, Hermione can tell she’s trying to think of way to phrase whatever she’s about to say. A bad sign. “I feel I’ve known you long enough to speak plainly.”

Hermione swallows and nods.

“I understand you have developed an affection for Mr. Malfoy.”

She feels her mouth drop open. Shuts it immediately, any semblance of

Havershim scoffs. “And where’s your—”

“Proof?” Hermione takes a step forward. “Would you like me to show the Headmaster the records I’ve kept? All the instances I’ve made note of in which you’ve imposed unjust detentions on Slytherins? Or the grade discrepancies between their House and others? The appalling series of false accusations you’d made against reformed survivors of the war? The five separate occasions specifically involving Draco Malfoy? The Headmaster was present for one of them, after all.”

Havershim’s eye twitches rather comically. She opens her mouth. Shuts it. Opens it again several seconds later. “Now *see here* —”

“Professor Havershim,” says McGonagall calmly. “Would you excuse us for just a moment?”

Now Havershim shifts her gawking to the Headmaster, looking quite a bit like a fish trying to breathe out of water.

“I will be with you shortly,” McGonagall adds when she doesn’t move. She doesn’t speak again until Havershim walks dazedly to the door and closes it behind her.

Then she turns sharp, inquisitive eyes on Hermione.

“As I’m sure you are aware, those are very serious accusations, Miss Granger.” Hermione gathers a steady breath. “Yes, Headmaster. They are also true.” Her eyes jut involuntarily towards Draco — catch his expression for just a moment, finding a cocktail of emotions staring back at her.

“And what can you produce as proof?” McGonagall folds her hands neatly on the desk in front of her.

“You can search my memories. But Headmaster, it isn’t just Professor Havershim.”

She receives another brow quirk in response.

“It’s become something of an epidemic, I’m afraid.”

And then, in what feels like one breath, she explains the events of the past thirty minutes as they really transpired. Describes past instances she can remember off the top of her head. Talks and talks and doesn’t stop talking until she sees

later and fire back, “Do you have any idea how fucking *terrifying* you look when you charge at people? Merlin’s right tit, Granger, you’re like a bloody *Hippogriff*!” But even as he eases into the comfort of arguing, there’s still an undercurrent of nervousness. She can see it in his eyes. Hear it in his voice. “And now you’ve got your bloody wand in my face.”

She doesn’t lower it.

“You looked very cozy with Parkinson,” she deadpans.

And like a threatened snake, Malfoy recoils, then strikes, loading as much venom into his attack as possible. “Oh, I see. Right, right, of *course*, Granger. Of course. You’re jealous. You thought giving up your virginity would be some sort of grand affair. Something bloody *meaningful*. Isn’t that what they teach you Gryffindor girls? What — did you expect me to show up outside your dormitory with flowers? Take you for a stroll? Write you a few love notes? Did you really think that was the kind of person I was when you decided to fuck me?”

The hex flies out of her wand wordlessly, shattering half a dozen long-stemmed crystal goblets about an inch from his elbow. He jerks away. Hisses and looks to his forearm, plucking a shard of glass out.

“You’re doing it again,” she says flatly. She refuses to let any of her emotions show, even as they quiver, throb just beneath her skin.

“Doing *what*?” he sneers, but she doesn’t look at his face — can’t. She watches a rivulet of ruby blood run down to his wrist instead.

“Being cruel,” she murmurs. “Pretending.”

And when she finally glances up, his lip is curled — vicious. “Always so sure of yourself, aren’t you, Granger? Always so certain you’re right.” He pushes off the table, taking two measured steps toward her. Her wand arm stiffens. “Ever considered that you were actually wrong about me? That, maybe, by some wild stretch of the imagination, I’m as rotten on the inside as I am out.”

Her eyes narrow to slits, and another wordless hex does away with a porcelain serving bowl just over his shoulder. Malfoy doesn’t flinch this time, even as shards of porcelain sprinkle against his back.

He huffs a laugh. “Yes, very good, Granger. Break another.”

Her eyes widen a fraction. A furious breath streams out through her nose. And then she flicks her wand with intention, decimating a stack of clear glass plates. “Not like that,” says Malfoy, and before she can think to do anything about it, he’s got his hand around her wand.

“How *dare* y—”

He slides it free of her grip like a knife from warm butter. Her fingers twitch around the new emptiness.

“Not like that,” he says again. He tosses her wand aside — a hollow clatter she doesn’t see. Her gaze is locked on him, the expression in his eyes something unfathomable. Inscrutable. A riddle to solve.

Malfoy takes a few steps backwards, jolting his eyebrows like a challenge before turning away towards the table. “Watch. Like this.”

And then he takes hold of a large, cut-crystal compote and launches it at the wall.

Hermione jolts. Throws a hand up to shield her eyes as microscopic shards mist over the room.

“See?” says Malfoy proudly. He takes up three china plates at once and throws them down at her feet in quick succession.

She jumps. Skips around the flying pieces, shoulders tense, fingers splayed out at her sides. Trembling, but just slightly.

Their eyes meet again.

Malfoy drags a wide porcelain soup bowl off the corner of the table. Stalks toward her, glass crunching under his feet. He shoves it into her hands.

“Try it,” he demands.

She lets out an unsteady breath. Her fingers flex against the bowl’s cold curve.

“You know you want to, Granger. Go on. Do it.”

He dips his head, just slightly, forcing their eyes to connect. Ice and earth. His narrow, and that vicious smile from before is gone, replaced with a somewhat competitive smirk.

“Do it.”

She releases a cut growl. Grinds her teeth and condemns the bowl to the

And Hermione is out of her seat before he can finish his sentence, narrowly dodging Ginny’s hand. “Enough of this.”

“Mione?” several of them say at once.

“Have a wonderful Christmas, all of you. I have something to take care of.” She charges off after Havershim without another word, leaving them gaping.



She’s fortunate the wards outside of McGonagall’s office aren’t active. It allows her to make the dramatic entrance she’s been planning the whole way.

She bursts in and marches up the stairs, eyes settling on the scene.

Draco and Nott are seated in the two chairs across from McGonagall, who is eyeing the blood splattered all over Nott’s shirt with great concern. Havershim is standing next to McGonagall’s desk, waving her hands about madly, mouth open wide with whatever rubbish she’s been spilling.

But Hermione’s entrance is loud — distracts her, draws all attention.

“Headmaster,” she says, slightly out of breath, trying not to lose her train of thought when Draco’s eyes snap to her.

McGonagall quirks a brow. “Miss Granger..”

“I don’t know what she’s said to you,” Hermione jabs a finger in Havershim’s direction, “but I can assure you she’s lying.”

For a moment, the office is silent.

And then Nott lets out a snort, biting down on his lip and looking away from everyone to keep from laughing out loud.

“*I beg your pardon!*” Havershim fumes.

“Miss Granger, that is hardly appropriate—”

“Forgive me, Headmaster, but I assumed you would want to be made of aware of any acts of prejudice being committed on school grounds.”

“Prejudice?!” Havershim swishes her skirts angrily. Posts her hands on her hips. “And upon whom, pray tell, have I been inflicting this *prejudice*?”

Hermione doesn’t skip a beat. Finds her words coming even more smoothly than normal. “On them.” She nods to Draco and Nott.

good with a wand. When's the last time you were good at anything?"

Hermione's wand is out, aimed carefully at him under the table. But she hasn't even thought up a proper hex before there's a muted, sickening thud and Cormac's sprawled out on the ground, a panting Theodore Nott standing over him with a bloody fist. Cormac's cronies scatter like vermin as Nott grabs Cormac by the shirt collar and lays into him again and again and again.

Gasps ring out through the hall with every hit. Two Prefects scamper off to alert a professor.

And then, finally, Draco stands up, sighing loudly. "Nott, I think you've broken his jaw. Move off it, yeah?"

Theo pauses with his arm raised, breathless and splattered with blood. He glances up at Draco. "One more punch?"

Draco huffs, maybe a laugh, as he closes his journal. "Yeah, alright."

Nott follows through one last time, and there's an extra thud as Cormac's head drops to the stone. Hermione can hear a few little outraged squeaks throughout the hall, likely from the girls she always hears doting upon Cormac's "cherub-like" face.

"Why don't you take that crooked nose home to Mummy for Christmas, yeah?" Nott spits at his unconscious form. "Happy Holidays, you fucking knob-head."

"Mr. Nott, good *gracious!*" shouts Havershim from the entryway, having just arrived, and all heads swap to her like they're watching a tennis match.

Nott straightens up and sighs. Puts his wand in her outstretched hand without question and prepares to be led off to detention.

But then Havershim snaps, "Mr. Malfoy, your wand."

Hermione gasps audibly.

And when Draco hesitates, Havershim shouts, "This *instant!*"

She snatches away his wand before he can even fully remove it from his pocket, and Hermione watches his face cycle through a number of complicated expressions as Havershim leads them away.

"Bloody hell," Ron snickers, turning back to his plate. "What a show."

flagstone. Something almost erotic fans out across the tense slopes of her muscles at the sound of it smashing, the sight of the pieces scattering around their feet.

A full smile spreads across Malfoy's face, accentuating the sharp curve of his chin. He doesn't say another word. Takes her wrist instead and pulls her forward — over to the table.

He slips behind her, and her skin prickles — either with warning, or something else. She isn't sure.

But her thoughts jumble and glitch when his free hand finds her other wrist, chin resting against the curve of her neck, his skin cold. He crowds up against her, his chest flush with her back. And as her breath hitches he guides her hands to a fresh stack of china plates. Maneuvers her like a puppet, making her fingers caress the smooth glass and only letting go when he sees her latch on.

He steps back just as she launches two or three of them at the wall to their right.

She gasps as they fly apart. Fights a smile.

Malfoy laughs low from behind her. Then he stalks away along the length of the table, collecting a group of goblets by their stems. He twirls one about between his fingers — throws it to the ceiling, backing out from under the rain of shards. Laughs louder. Starts to juggle them, breaking them against one another.

Hermione finds herself lifting the rest of the plates — hugging the heavy stack to her chest and stepping back to let them fall lazily from her grip, creating a mountain of cracked quarters and halves below.

A laugh flies unbidden from her lips. She glances to Malfoy, flushed, and he's got his arms out in front of him. Claps his hands three times for her. Curt. Sharp. Applause.

She can't stop herself now. She marches to the far corner, finding a china hutch — tearing open its doors to rip out the neat rows of gray boats and teacups, listening and laughing as they shatter.

"Brilliant, Granger — fucking *brilliant!*" Malfoy calls over the raucous, going for another stack of plates and one by one smacking them to pieces against the edge of the table.

She empties the cabinet and starts on the one next to it, decimating the goblets and bowls in every creative way she can think of.

"Granger, here — this one," Malfoy tears her attention away, beckoning her with the sight of a large crystal vase. He tosses it over the table to her.

"How should I...?" she finds herself asking.

"There." He points to the little chandelier above their heads. "That."

Another laugh bubbles out of her throat and she takes the vase by its thin neck, pulling it back to send it careening into the fragile fixture. They laugh together as it swings violently to one side. Dislodges and crashes down to the table.

Malfoy's eyes are alight. "Come here," he says, and then he sweeps aside an arrangement of at least fifty cups and saucers to hop up onto the table. Holds out a hand for her on the other side.

She doesn't even hesitate. Takes his hand and lets him swing her up next to him.

Together, they stare across the table's long expanse, still crowded with unbroken dishes.

"First to the end?" Malfoy proposes, breathless.

She laughs. Nods.

"On three! One—"

She breaks forth on one, giggling and kicking her way through the array of goblets as he shouts after her.

"Cheating *braz!*"

But he's laughing and he catches up quick. In absurd unison, they smash their way through the rest of the table, kicking plates and bowls against walls. Screaming encouragements at one another. Laughing like she doesn't think she's ever laughed before.

The floor crowds with tiny shards of crystal and large pieces of china, until there's no safe space to walk.

And in some wild fever dream, the two of them hop down off the table. Laugh and scream and jump around in it like they're splashing through puddles

"Ease off?" Harry snaps, and Hermione jolts a little on the bench. Harry very rarely loses his composure.

She glances up to see him leaning in to whisper something to Ron, and she tries in vain to scrape her knife against her toast so loudly she won't hear. But she does.

"Her parents, Ron."

Hermione clears her throat, rushing out, "Luna, what are your holiday plans?" and turning to her. Plastering a smile on her face.

Luna beams, as does Neville beside her. "Neville is coming to meet Dad."

"That's wonderful," says Ginny, going along with the subject change, and Hermione feels yet another endless swell of gratitude for her. "Are you up to date on the Quibbler, Neville?"

He goes a bit red in the face. "I, erm — might be, I dunno, a *few* issues behind..."

But as they laugh, Hermione hears raised voices from the far side of the Great Hall. The Slytherin table.

Malfoy — *Draco* — is sitting at his usual end, purple journal out, and Cormac McLaggen is standing over him, backed by two Gryffindors she doesn't know the names of.

"No one to go home to, eh, Ferret?" Cormac jeers.

Hermione's gut wrenches.

"What? Mummy doesn't love you anymore? Or is Mummy in a work home with the other House Elves now that the money's gone?"

They've all turned to look now. Students have stopped mid-step with their trunks in the aisles. Cormac's making quite a scene of it, and Hermione is already halfway out of her seat before Ginny pulls her back down.

Draco glances up at Cormac like he's just noticed him talking. Adopts the classic bored expression. "Would you like a wand up your arse, McLaggen? I can be very accommodating."

"Oooh," Cormac feigns fear, and the two behind him laugh. "See, that's the problem, Ferret. In order to properly threaten people, you have to actually be



December 18th, 1998

Diary,

I've never stayed before.

This is bloody strange. I mean, I used to literally have nightmares First and Second Year that I'd miss the train and be stuck here.

And now I—

Oh, for fuck's sake, here we go...

December 18th, 1998

"YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS, 'MIONE."

"I can and I am, Ronald." She butters her toast without looking at him, trying very hard to keep her tone steady. "I need some time to myself. Time to think. Relax."

All around them, people are hugging goodbye and lugging suitcases through the aisles between tables. The train leaves from Hogsmeade in a little over an hour.

She's staying.

"Come on, it'll be fun, 'Mione. Mum wants to see you," Ron urges. "And you're *always* alone."

"Ron..." Harry starts.

"It's true, she is!" Ron practically shouts. "I mean, blimey, Hermione. It's like you don't *want* things to go back to normal."

202

George and Elmer

in the rain. Jump until they can hardly breathe.

Until they're hunched over, gasping and red-faced.

Hermione closes her eyes. Heaves out smiling breaths at the ceiling. Then she shuffles her way through the mess, feeling sharp edges prick at her ankles and not caring a bit. She kicks aside the debris next to the wall and collapses into a seat against it.

Malfoy joins her moments later, sliding down and leaning his head back against the stone.

Together, their panting slows. Fades to quiet, simultaneous breaths.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" he murmurs, foot playing with half a teacup. "Destroying things."

"Yes," she answers instantly. She can't think clearly in this moment. Doesn't want to. She hasn't felt a release like this since long before the war.

And for a good ten minutes or so, the two of them sit in complete silence. Comfortable with it. Not feeling the need to break it, unlike everything else.

Then she watches Malfoy lean forward. Pluck something from one of the piles of glass.

It's a teardrop crystal from the chandelier, cracked in half in a way that makes it look more like a half-moon. He twists it around in his hand for a while, inspecting it. Then he pulls his wand from his pocket, and she watches him transform it into the pendant of a necklace, conjuring a black leather cord for it to dangle from.

He sits back against the wall. Considers it in his hand a moment longer before holding it out in front of her.

"For you."

Something throbs in her chest, both pleasant and exceedingly painful. "Shouldn't you be giving that to Parkinson?" she asks flatly, stripping all emotion from her voice.

Malfoy huffs. A different kind of laugh than what they've been sharing. Colder.

"Think what you will of me, Granger. I can't stop you."

199

A beat of silence.

Then he adds, “But consider, for one moment, what it might feel like to be me. If you even can.” Another laugh, this one dark, dejected and pathetic. “Imagine you’ve fucked up your life so badly that you’ve started to expect literally everything to fail. Imagine waking up every morning knowing that when you leave your room, people are going to look at you like they want to kill you. Seek you out and repeat the names of the people they think you murdered. Just chant them at you over and over again, at every given opportunity, even though you had absolutely fucking *nothing* to do with Lavender Brown’s death. Or Fred Weasley. Or Crevey or Bones. Imagine dealing with that every fucking day. And then imagine that somehow, accidentally, you stumble into something that possibly, maybe, just maybe makes leaving your room in the morning easier.”

She finds herself holding her breath.

“Yeah? Got that? Now imagine wanting that thing so bad. So fucking bad. Imagine being so fucking proud that you’ve managed to earn that one thing. Win that one thing. Imagine being so proud that you can’t fucking wait for the world to see.”

A bead of sweat slides down the side of her neck.

“And then imagine that one thing feeling just as passionately about you. Except instead of proud, they’re *ashamed*. So ashamed and so full of regret at the same things that make it possible for you to get out of bed.”

She bites down hard on her lip, feeling his gaze shift to her from the side.

“Now look me in the eye and tell me you’d blame yourself for seeking affection. For wanting it to look like someone still loved you. For wanting to feel like someone loved you, or even wanted to be near you.”

Reluctantly, her eyes slide to his, and the image of him is blurred by tears.

“Pansy’s a lot of things. But she isn’t ashamed.”

He drops the pendant into her lap.

“That though..” He gestures to it. “That is for the person who told me she’d pick me out of a room of hundreds. If she ever decides to mean it.”

Glass clinks — skids against flagstone as he gets to his feet.

“Until then,” he says as her eyes follow him, “excuse me while I soak up every drop of affection Parkinson has to offer. I can’t tell you how much I fucking need it.”

Then, with a flick of his wand, the mountains of shattered glass and porcelain vanish, and he leaves her in an empty room.