

top of him. Knocking the breath out of him with a muffled ‘oof!’

“I’m sorry!” she whisper-shouts again, struggling to get off and find her footing, but he just coughs and belts her down, pulling her over him so that knees are no longer on stomachs and elbows are no longer jabbing into shoulders.

“Sometimes I swear you’re not worth the trouble,” he mumbles into her neck, tipping them sideways so she’s squeezed between him and the back of the couch.

“What are you doing?” She continues to struggle, even as her body folds comfortably against the familiar planes of his. “I shouldn’t stay here.”

“No one gives a damn, Granger. Least of all here. Everyone already knows.” She thinks it’s sleep talking. Is fairly certain he’d feel differently in the light of day, with a bunch of angry Slytherins staring down at them. But the way his breath whispers across the sensitive skin at the crease of her neck makes it hard to argue. Hard to resist.

The couch is still slightly damp and so is he. She shivers as the residual cold leeches into her and slowly lets her muscles go slack. Gives up.

Draco sighs sleepily when he notices. He sinks down deeper into the leather cushions and drives his knee between hers, sliding it up to rest against her inner thighs. Too close. Much too close.

“Not here,” she breathes, suddenly tense again. Trembling, but not with cold.

“Not doing anything,” he says against her throat. Clearly doesn’t realize that, no matter how still he is, she’ll never be able to relax in this position.

She lays there, breathing shallow, listening to the clock tick for a good five minutes or so. Isn’t sure if he’s fallen back asleep or not. Will in no way be able to herself. She’s wide awake, now.

And she’s thinking.

Thinking about his knee, just inches from where it shouldn’t be. Thinking about this room, so unfamiliar. Thinking about Nort and Zabini and Parkinson, and then about Ron and Harry and Ginny. Thinking and overthinking, as always.

“Tradition?” he splutters. “If you’ve any respect for tradition, then the man — being me, unless there’s something you haven’t told me, Granger — would be paying for everything. But you *blindsided* me.”

“How wonderfully sexist — two hot chocolates, please.”

He continues to argue with her even as he eagerly takes the offered cup, and they sit on the edge of the fountain, sort of absentmindedly people-watching as they drink.

“Your thoughts?” she asks, a little afraid to know the answer as she gestures to the market as a whole.

Draco sips deeply from his cup, unknowingly painting a white, whipped cream mustache above his lip. “Crowded and bizarre...and yet not entirely unpleasant.” He turns to face her, flashing that sideways half-smile she can’t get out of her head at night. “And this flimsy hot chocolate is—”

She kisses him. Intends to kiss him quickly, to clean the whipped cream from his lip, but now he tastes of sugar and chocolate and always that faint tinge of peppermint and she finds she can’t stop. She turns more fully to face him, the cold of the skin of his neck leeching through the wool of her gloves as she pulls him closer.

She hadn’t realized how much she’s missed this. Hadn’t realized how impossibly *hungry* she’s been since that night in the Hospital Wing.

And if she has any ability to read body language, he seems to feel the same. His hand finds her thigh, dragging her closer, hot chocolate forgotten somewhere as his other hand fists in her hair.

Someone whistles at them.

Draco breaks away instantly, cussing under his breath, and she laughs as she feels him reach for his wand. Kisses him again until he forgets to care.

Later, he asks about the possibility of a third hot chocolate, but instead she takes him to dinner. To one of her favorite restaurants from childhood, where she and her parents would go after the theater.

She’d thought about not going there. Thought it might be too hard. But then she’d considered the possibility of making new happy memories

there, and it had won out.

They talk about their childhoods. Talk about their favorite things and their least favorite things and the things they've done — everything they should've known about one another years ago, had they not been so preoccupied with hating one another. She becomes intimately acquainted with Draco's sweet tooth, hiding another smile at his excitement over the mince pies for dessert.

He loves Quidditch and she can't stand it.

She can cook a four course meal and he doesn't know what a colander is.

He's mastered every Potion in the Hogwarts curriculum, and so has she.

She's afraid of snakes — and so is he.

They have nothing and everything in common.

Throughout the meal, she catches his eyes flitting to the pendant around her neck over and over again.

"What does this mean?" he asks at last, spoon playing with the melting pistachio ice cream they're sharing. He gestures with his free hand between the two of them. "This."

She leans on her palm, and one of the only things she'd actually prepared to say this evening — planned and wanted to say — crosses her lips.

"It means I want to grow up — and start going after what's good for me."

Draco lets the spoon sink into the ice cream. Sits back, eyeing her pensively.

"I'm not good for you."

She plays with the pendant, not taking her eyes off him.

"Actually, I think you are."

He breathes out audibly and she continues before she loses her nerve.

"I'm stubborn and selfish and I've been too prideful to admit it, but I think I've needed you for a long time."

His eyes darken, turning gray like steel. His foot glides up the side of her ankle under the table.

She gets the check.

The clock on the mantle is the only sound. Ticks endlessly. She twists and squints up at it in the dark. Four in the morning.

She lets out a shaky breath. Propped up on her elbows, she can see the vague outline of Draco on the adjacent sofa. His chest rises and falls with sleep, but not slowly. Not evenly. With each inhale, it seems to hitch in his throat. Trapped. The arm he has thrown over his head twitches, hand flexing — into a fist, out of a fist, into a fist, out.

She guesses he sleeps just as restlessly as she does.

Swallowing to moisten her dry mouth, Hermione sweeps her curls from her face and struggles to her feet, swaying a little with the remnants of the Firewhiskey.

At this time in the morning, no one will be awake in Gryffindor. No one waiting to ridicule her. She can sneak into bed, likely without issue.

And then she'll sleep for a day. Sleep through classes.

Sleep until it all goes away. Forever, if she must.

Vanishing the blanket she vaguely remembers him conjuring, she tries to step carefully past the table between the couches. Overestimates her balance and the steadiness of her knees.

She trips dizzily, legs wobbling, and she knocks against the edge of the table, toppling a goblet.

"*Bollocks*," she whispers, but Draco's already shot up off his back.

"What in—"

"Shh..." She waves him silent through the dark. "It's just me."

Draco sits panting for several extended seconds before flopping back down on his back. "Merlin, Granger. You're taking years off my life." He wipes a hand down his face.

"I'm sorry. I'm leaving. I'm sorry," she whispers, feeling foolish.

She tries to skirt around his couch toward the exit, still struggling with her balance — but she only makes it to the armrest before his hand shoots out and grasps her by the thigh.

She jerks. Trips again, this time yanked sideways by his hand and landing on

Draco looks at these same stairs doubtfully for a moment, adjusting Hermione against him each time she teeters. Then he sighs and seems to decide to put her back, this time on the larger chaise lounge.

“Oh, no...careful,” Hermione slurs as he lays her out on it, hands strong. She likes his strong hands. “This is Pansy’s couch.”

“Every couch is Pansy’s couch.” Draco’s voice is stern. Like a parent dealing with a naughty child.

It makes her frown. She reaches up desperately as he pulls away, taking hold of both his forearms after missing several times. Yanking him in close so he comes into focus. Water drips from his wet hair onto her face. “Do you hate me now, too?” she asks. Finds it to be a perfectly logical question.

Draco huffs at her, expression difficult to read in her state, although perhaps any other time it might be obvious. He pulls out of her grip easily and taps his fingers against her lips — a very gentle *shut up.*

He conjures a blanket, throwing it over her. Conjures a waste bin on the floor by her head as well, an afterthought. Then he makes his way to the couch Zabini and Nott had occupied, stretching out on it.

She thinks she tries to reach out for him one more time before the exhaustion floods through her like anesthetic. Before her consciousness collapses into dark.



She startles awake to methodic ticking and pitch black.

Forgets where she is.

Her head throbs like never before — has her grasping desperately for the wand in her pocket. She casts a charm to dull the pain, sitting up as her eyes adjust to the dark.

The faint glow of dying embers in the fireplace starts to illuminate her surroundings.

And her heart feels like lead.

It wasn’t just a vivid nightmare. She’s really here, in the Slytherin common room, with nowhere else to go.



December 25th, 1998

IT’S HALF PAST ONE IN THE MORNING, AND SHE FINDS HERSELF MAKING NO ATTEMPT TOWARDS GRYFFINDOR TOWER AS THEY SNEAK BACK INTO THE CASTLE.

And he makes no attempt to let go of her hand.

But he doesn’t lead her towards the Dungeons, either — and she’s admittedly a little disappointed. Has always been curious about the Slytherin common room.

“Nott will be there,” he says when she mentions this, pulling her along after him through several dark corridors.

Excitement bubbles in her chest. Being Gryffindor’s resident know-it-all — and therefore, by extension, its resident prude — she rarely gets to feel the exhilaration of sneaking around and doing what she shouldn’t.

And this — tiptoeing hand in hand with Draco Malfoy through the castle in the middle of the night, desperately seeking out a place to be alone — is the epitome of that.

Her cheeks ache from smiling, her face flushed with thoughts of the dark possibilities she’d seen brewing in his eyes at dinner.

She is so tired of relying on self-control.

Now, she only wants to rely on free fall.

Soon enough, Draco is dragging her up an all too familiar spiral staircase, both of them out of breath.

“You can’t be serious,” she gasps out, stifling a laugh as they come to a stop at the top before the door. “*Abominora*,” he whispers, then yanks open the heavy latch and pulls her inside by the waist.

“The Divination Classroom?”

She spins in a slow circle, surveying the dark, deserted room as he turns to lock the door behind them.

“Needed somewhere with pillows,” he answers, and with a flick of his wand, he lights every candle in the room, illuminating the floor pillows in question in front of the Divination tables.

She quirks a brow at him. “I’m not certain Trelawney goes home for the holidays. What if she’s in the castle somewhere?”

Draco shucks his coat — stalks toward her. “Then she’ll have seen this coming and made herself scarce.”

Hermione laughs. “She was never fond of me.”

“Making this absolutely fucking poetic.” And he takes hold of her with a familiarity she didn’t know they were allowed to have yet. Like he’s been doing it for years. Like he knows exactly where to touch her and how much pressure to apply.

He kisses her once — a languid, melting kiss — before shoving her off her feet and onto the heap of floor cushions. Follows her down.

She laughs again, tossing away her bag as he crawls up over her. Pauses. Stares.

The candlelight flickers over him like little threshing waves of gold, and she sort of realizes that this was how she’d always pictured her first time. How she’d imagined it would feel. Probably not in the Divination Classroom, and never in her wildest dreams with Draco Malfoy, and for the *second time*, no less, but...the candles, the pillows, the look in his eyes...

It’s the stuff of fantasies.

She wonders if she should be afraid of waking up.

He stays leaning over her for the longest time, just looking at her. Seeming to drink in the situation — possibly the absurdity of it. They hadn’t had much time for thinking the first time around.

She reaches up and runs her fingers over the cold swell of his lips. Feels him press back against them in a kiss. And then he’s sitting back — tugging his sweater over his head, messing up his hair.

One of these things is not like the others.

“The fuck?” he says flatly, all of the shock manifesting itself in his eyes. He hesitates where he stands, half-turned towards the stairs.

Hermione manages only a pathetic little wave with her goblet, spilling more whiskey.

“Good timing, mate — I think one more and she’d be sick,” says Nott, lurching to his feet. Zabini yawns and follows suit, and Hermione drunkenly realizes they’ve been keeping her company. Can’t really fathom it, though it seems to be the only explanation.

“What is this?” Draco makes his way over to them, brandishing a hand, incredulous. He sends droplets of water flying in every direction.

“Didn’t they teach us drying spells in First Year?” asks Zabini around another yawn, apparently too bored to stick around for whatever comes next. He disappears up the dormitory stairs.

“Nott, what the fuck?” Draco says again, voice tight and low. He’s sort of fuzzy to her eyes from where she’s slumped on the sofa. She squints up at him, trying to form a proper outline.

It feels like the adults are talking.

“House turned her away,” says Nott. “Found her a sobbing mess just outside.”

“He gave me lots of whiskey. He was very nice,” Hermione hears herself announce. She spills some of this whiskey down Draco’s already soaked trouser leg and hiccups an apology.

“Bloody hell,” he murmurs.

Next she knows, Draco’s hooked an arm around her back, pulling her from the couch by her underarms.

“You are wet,” she informs him as he leans her weight against his side.

“She’ll be fine,” Nott says, running a sleepy hand through his chestnut brown hair.

Hermione just barely catches the interaction between the two of them. The way Draco taps the back of his hand against Nott’s shoulder, almost in thanks, before he too disappears up the stairs.

Pansy's lip curls up. "Does it look like I give a shit what you believe?" And with that, she swings her legs over the side of the chaise, sweeps up the bottom of her lace dressing gown and stalks off toward the stairs, tossing, "She can't stay," over her shoulder.

Hermione sinks a little deeper into the sofa once she's gone. Doesn't know why.

"She's just sour you managed to get Malfoy to come back for seconds," says Zabini.

The crassness of it makes her nose wrinkle up. Makes her almost, *almost* feel for Pansy. She finishes her second goblet.

"I'm rather surprised, though, actually," Zabini continues. "They really turned their backs on you?"

She feels fresh tears prick at her eyes. Forces them to evaporate by digging her fingernails into the heel of her hand.

"I thought Gryffindors were the high and mighty sort. Forgiveness and honor and all that bollocks."

"So did I," says Hermione, staring straight ahead at the far wall.

Zabini leans back on the armrest. Closes his eyes and smiles contentedly.

"Don't we all love hypocrisy?"

And it just sums up everything perfectly. Flawlessly.

Nott sighs. "Eat a tart, Granger — you look like you're going to cry again."

She only just manages to catch it before it hits her in the face. Gives him a tucked lip non-smile but doesn't eat. Doesn't think she can stomach anything right now and doesn't want to compromise the strength of the whiskey burning in her gut. She just turns it over in her hands.

It's half past one in the morning when Draco finally returns.

She's been drinking herself into a stupor with Zabini and Nott for over an hour, in relative agreed upon silence.

Draco strides in soaking wet and faintly blue with the beginning stages of hypothermia. He's making his way purposefully towards the dormitory stairs, tossing a nod of acknowledgement to the three of them before doing a double-take.

She sits up, letting her coat fall from her shoulders as he starts unbuttoning his undershirt. Their eyes stay locked, watching each other as they undress.

He's...sculpted.

That's the best way she can describe it. Thin, but broad and tall, with expertly rounded shoulders and sharply carved edges. Gleaming alabaster.

But he's also scarred.

It'd been so dark in the Hospital Wing that she hadn't noticed at all. Now, though, with the candlelight and the moon's glow in the windows, it's only too easy.

And she gasps. Stops fumbling with the fasten on her jeans and sits forward fast to press her hands against his chest.

He seems confused for just a moment, then tenses a bit with realization. "Ah, yeah..." he murmurs with a forced casualness. "Saint Potter made a right jigsaw out of me."

She runs her fingers over the dark purple slashes, so long and thick they must've been gruesomely deep. Harry hadn't lied about what happened that day, but he certainly hadn't described it like this.

"How do you know what a jigsaw is?" she hears herself ask. Can't think of anything else to say.

"I'm not *brainless*, Granger. I do know what Muggles *are*. All of us had to take Muggle Studies."

She's relieved to hear the familiar snark in his tone — is afraid she might cry, otherwise. Instead, she presses her head to his chest, closing her eyes and letting out a slow, deep exhale. She needs him to know that she understands. Needs him to know they'll get through this — both of them — somehow. But she can't put it into words, so she just leans against him for a few endless minutes. Sighs when his hand snakes up to bunch in her curls.

Draco Malfoy will never be the sort to pet her head and whisper sweet nothings, but she finds she prefers the sharp pressure of his fingers tangled in. Like he's holding on for dear life.

Then she feels his free hand play with the lace strap of her bra, and the sadness

in her chest sinks away as though down a drain, that forbidden burn bubbling up in its place.

She pulls away — finds his gaze glued below her throat, and she's absurdly glad she'd had enough wishful thinking earlier to dress accordingly.

"This is fun," he says, voice low as he traces the rough pads of his fingers along the pink lace edges of her bra. Gooselflesh fans out across her skin.

"I'm not always boring," she murmurs, smiling a bit sheepishly when his sharp eyes flit up to meet hers. "It's part of a set."

He lets out a short huff, an expression almost like pain, but not quite, passing over his face. In the next instant, he shoves her back down onto the pillows.

"Move, Granger. You're in the way." And he starts yanking at the bottoms of her jeans, trying valiantly to get them off over her feet.

She laughs. Never thought she'd be able to laugh so much in a situation like this. Feel comfortable like this.

But then her jeans are off and everything becomes very serious very fast.

He looks almost *feral* as he eyes the pink lace shorts, completely see-through. Completely revealing. Her face feels hot.

Draco makes a noise she can't quite describe, and then he's scooped his hands beneath her thighs and yanked her toward him. She realizes she shouldn't like how much he yanks her around, but she does, she *does* — and she can't think about that right now because he's leaning in with all sorts of intentions she has in no way planned for.

"Malfoy, wait—"

He pauses with his head lowered between her knees, fingers leaving imprints on her thighs — clicks his tongue. "I've told you that's not my name."

And she's grateful for the burst of irritation — it calms her down. "I will not be calling you that until you call me by my first name."

His head knocks against her thigh and he groans in exasperation. "So many fucking syllables..."

"Oh, you poor thing."

"Her-mi-o-ne," he sounds out, voice vibrating against her skin, "I mean, it

He and Zabini exchange lascivious grins as Hermione fights to hide her surprise.

Pansy's is plain as day though, and she goes a dark shade of livid purple. Glares at Nott.

"What brings you to the dark side?" asks Zabini.

"Kicked out of Gryffindor," says Nott around another tart.

"Ooh, well done indeed. Very impressive."

It's impossible to tell whether he's being sarcastic. She's hardly ever spoken to Zabini — possibly never. She has no notion of his personality. Only knows he was once very firm in his beliefs about blood purity, and was only days away from being Marked before the War, according to his criminal trial.

"She's *not* staying," Pansy stresses, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Why not?" Zabini sends another dark smile Hermione's way. "She kept Malfoy from losing an arm. Saved this one's arse from fucking expulsion, I'll bet." He kicks a tart out of Nott's hand. "Seems pretty handy to have around. What if I accidentally trip another First Year? Detention is mind-numbingly dull."

"*She's not staying!*" Pansy practically shrieks.

And perhaps it's all the Firewhiskey, but Hermione hears herself ask, "Why do you hate me so much?" in a quiet voice.

Pansy goes still. Everyone does. The silver clock on the mantle ticks loudly in the fresh silence.

Hermione continues, deciding it's most definitely liquid courage guiding her words. "I know I'm a Mudblood and a member of the Order. I know you despise my cause. But me...specifically me. Why do you hate me? Not once have you and I ever had an altercation."

Pansy's expression twitches — a stony, pursed look of wavering fury and uncertainty.

"It's like you said," she answers at last, primly. "You're a Mudblood. What more do I need?"

"Somehow, I don't believe you."

bloody patch on her jeans. She doesn't want to play Pansy's game. Not right now. Doesn't care about arguing or witty comebacks. Just diverts her stare to Merlin's proud, aged face and says, "By my best friend, actually." She goes to take another sip, but finds the goblet empty.

Nott juts his chin in the direction of the nearest bottle, on an end table to her right, and she's enormously grateful to have something to occupy her hands. To have more alcohol to numb her senses.

"I'm not exactly welcome in Gryffindor as of now," she adds blandly as she pours to the brim.

"What makes you think you're welcome here?" snipes Pansy.

Nott sighs. "Pans..."

But Hermione just shakes her head. "I don't think I'm welcome anywhere." And it's the cold hard truth, sinking into her gut like a bowling ball.

"Well, this can't be good," says a new voice suddenly, and Hermione jerks, sloshing Firewhiskey into her lap.

It'd been just the three of them until now, but Blaise Zabini is strutting over from a curling set of stairs she guesses leads to the dormitories. He's barefoot, yawning his way over in an expensive looking black velvet bathrobe.

"Wait, wait," Nott says, stretching both arms out behind him in the vague direction of Zabini. "Don't sit down." He waves his hand as Zabini reaches the arm of the couch. "Grab me the box of tarts from the table, yeah?"

Zabini wipes an aggravated hand down his face and backtracks — lobs the box none too gently at Nott's chest a moment later before stretching out languidly beside him. Tosses his feet into Nott's lap.

This entire situation is absolutely surreal.

"So, Granger's in the Dungeons," he says, folding his arms behind his head and flashing gleaming white teeth, a stark contrast to his smooth, black skin. "First Gryffindor ever — what a treat." Though he says it rather viciously, like she's trapped prey.

"No, no," Nott says casually, eating a tart. "Romilda Vane, in Third Year...though I doubt she remembers."

takes ages to say it."

"Yes, well, Draco has that hard consonant that isn't any fun at all. Takes a lot of effort."

"Are we really arguing about *phonics* right now?"

"You started — oh *my god*!"

She suppresses a shrick as he dives forward and closes his mouth over the lace front of the shorts. Her thighs jerk against his hands — jut inward instinctively — and an electric shock shoots up her spine. She fists her hands in his hair, desperately trying to yank him back as he soaks the fabric with an unexpectedly hot, wet tongue.

"Stop, stop!" she gasps, pulling so hard she's sure it hurts.

He does, but only to hook his thumbs under the lace and yank the shorts off entirely, sinking back between her legs impressively fast before she can lock them shut.

"No, wait — *no*," she babbles nervously, reaching for him and kicking her feet out and squirming.

He yanks hard on her thighs. Spreads them so wide it stings — strains the muscles for a moment. She gasps and her eyes shoot to his and he's just staring at her, inches away from where she'd never expected or planned for any boy's face to be.

"Hermione?" he says, raising his eyebrows, and hearing her name for what must be the first time on his lips silences her quite effectively.

They stare at each other for a few tense seconds.

"Yes?" she manages, and it comes out a squeak.

"Shut the fuck up."

And then he buries his face between her legs, tongue going on the instant offensive and laving its way across nerve endings she didn't know she had. Her head falls back against the pillows like it's weighted down, a moan ripped forcefully from her throat, and all she can do is helplessly jerk and twitch against him as he kisses her *there* with the same fervor he uses when he kisses her lips.

Her mind makes a choice out of two options. She can either fall into a drug-

like state and let her thoughts turn to mush, or she can over-analyze everything. She decides the first option is too vulnerable.

So she thinks. Thinks and thinks and overthinks as Draco Malfoy goes down on her.

Every time the late night conversations in the girl's dormitory would shift in this direction, oral sex would come up, usually proposed by Parvati.

From the way the experienced girls had talked about it, it had seemed like a lot of tongue-flicking and alphabet-tracing and general tentativeness. Romilda had said it was quite difficult to climax, as the boys performing it had rarely applied enough pressure.

And now Hermione is thinking those girls did her a great disservice, because she is absolutely not prepared for the way Draco Malfoy performs oral sex.

He is absurdly un-shy.

The tentative licks and snake-like tongue effects she'd expected are nowhere to be found — he's placing wide, wet, open-mouthed kisses on her like he's trying to clean every drop of ice cream from a bowl, with no regard for trying to find specific spots or trace letters. Instead, he sucks. *Sucks*. Licks and sucks and closes his lips hard over her, again and again and again, and by god, the *sounds*.

She's absolutely not prepared. Her thighs are shaking and her breath has abandoned her and she's desperately searching for that lack of sensation Romilda had mentioned and instead finding an ever-building tsunami of quivering energy.

But then her mind takes a horrible turn down a back alley and she starts to wonder how she tastes. Remembers Parvati talking about certain boys making her self-conscious. Saying they didn't like the way she tasted. Does she taste bad? She can't imagine she tastes *good*. Bloody hell, she's been nervous and sweating and she hadn't expected his tongue to be anywhere *near* there. What if he's —

"Hermione," he says against her suddenly, and she's pulled out of the back alley and somehow thinking how inordinately pleased she is about the four syllables in her name.

"Yes?" she croaks when she realizes it's a question. She forces her head up,

face, making the skin feel tight. Swollen. The goblet still shakes a little in her hand. But a third sip emboldens her enough to sit up a little straighter, so she can look around.

Harry and Ron had said the Slytherin common room was dark and creepy. Had said it was cold and smelled damp. No light, no warmth. No comfort.

But now she thinks they only saw what they wanted to see. What they expected to see. And she pushes them from her mind, the thought of them too painful.

She takes in every inch.

Large, diamond-paned windows line the stone walls, lit with the serene, blue-green glow of the Black Lake. Dark shapes float past every now and then. Fish. Glimpses of Mer-creatures. Beside the windows, sconces hold gently flaming torches, each illuminating a different portrait.

Merlin, in his regal robes, hangs above the fireplace, his painting so large it's almost a shrine.

Her eyes sweep low. Take in the black marble study tables. The suits of armor. None of the furniture matches. No two pieces are alike. Velvet, leather, suede, marble, wood, granite. And yet it all goes together somehow.

The flagstone walls arch up, carved like a cathedral, columns and all.

It is more warm and comforting than she could have ever imagined. Regardless of all the decor she's certain comes from Borgin and Burkes.

Nott is watching her when she's finally looked her fill.

"Too gothic for your Gryffindor sensibilities?" He quirks a brow.

She sniffs. Wipes her nose with her sleeve and takes another sip, enjoying the slow burn in her stomach. "It's nice," is all she can think to say.

Pansy scoffs again and rolls her eyes dramatically. She yanks a bottle of Fire-whiskey off a table behind her chaise — there seem to be bottles sitting just about everywhere. An endless supply.

"So what's gone hopelessly wrong for you now, Granger?" She yanks the cork free and knocks it back with prowess. "Get called names by a Hufflepuff?"

Hermione shifts where she sits, uncomfortable. Her skinned knee stings, a

and with her muscles feeling like gelatin, it seems to consume her. Swallow her up.

“What the hell’s the matter with her?” Pansy shifts across her eye line. Just a glimpse of black lace.

“Panic attack, I’m guessing,” says Nott.

Hermione forces herself to focus intensely on the tremble in her fingers. Uses the focus to stop them — to make them still. And slowly, though it feels like mounting an impossibly steep hill, she begins to come to her senses.

Just enough to ask, “Where’s Draco?” in a barely audible rasp.

Pansy snorts from somewhere off to the left, and Hermione turns to her. Watches her slowly come into focus as the tears stop flowing. She’s draped herself across a deep green, tufted velvet chaise longue. Looks almost like a painting.

“Went for a swim,” answers Nott from behind her. He comes walking around the edge of the sofa a moment later and hands her a black crystal goblet.

Idiot, she thinks to herself.

Why hadn’t she gone to the Lake? Why hadn’t she put any actual thought into Draco’s usual habits and considered where he was most likely to be?

Why had she thrown herself into this situation for no reason?

She glances down into the goblet, a mess of emotions — dazed and angry all at once. Firewhiskey stares back up at her, and for the first time in her life, it’s impossibly appealing.

She takes a generous sip. Grimaces at the burn. The spice.

“Yeah, that’ll put you right.” Nott collapses down into the adjacent sofa, the three of them arranged like the points of a triangle.

He’s being very...amicable. Has been for a few weeks now. She doesn’t know why. Doesn’t question it in this moment.

“Thank you,” she mumbles, goblet already at her lips for a second sip.

“You can’t stay.” Pansy’s words slice through the air. “Hope you know that.” Hermione glances over at her again, cheeks red. Mortified by every second of the past fifteen minutes. “I know,” she says.

Slowly, her heart rate falls to a normal level. Her tears dry stickily against her

unprepared for the sight of him looking up from between her legs, chin and lips wet, glistening. Her cheeks flame.

“When I said *shut the fuck up*, I meant that overlarge brain of yours as well.”

“I...I just...” she splutters stupidly, breathlessly, “what if I taste—”

He yanks on her thighs again — his way of silencing her. “You taste,” he starts, then makes her watch as he presses a wide, sloppy lick against her, his eyes falling shut, a groan tumbling from his open mouth. “You taste like fucking *opium*.”

Hermione jerks against him, suppressing another shriek even as she overthinks some more. “Opium is bitter.”

“Stop taking everything so literally and being a fucking know-it-all for two fucking seconds, please,” he says, even as he pauses to suck on an extremely concentrated collection of nerves. “I did a lot of opium. I fucking *love* opium. You don’t know how much I love opium.” She can’t believe he’s having a conversation with her as he’s doing this. After every sentence, he stops and sucks and licks at her until she sees white spots, then continues. “But the tossers in the Ministry’s psychiatric division have decided that I don’t *deserve* any more opium. Can you believe it?” His tongue dips low, teases her entrance. She bucks up against him — *wuhnes*, or at least that’s what it sounds like. “And I was very, very...” He lets his tongue sink into her, briefly, then pulls it out when she moans, “*very* upset about that, as you can imagine.” One of his hands releases its iron grip on her thigh and snakes around to where his mouth is, fingers toying with her like he knows exactly where all the sweet spots are. “Now, though...” Another open-mouthed kiss. “I don’t think I could care less, because this...” His finger slides inside of her. Her head flops back onto the pillows, toes curling against the cushions by his hips. “...*you*...” He adds a second finger — starts to pump them rhythmically as his tongue sets to work on that same collection of nerves. “...are so much better.” And then he adds a third finger, sucks hard and curls one of the digits up against a spot inside of her she was previously unaware of, and it’s too much.

She screams. Yanks away from his mouth and his grip and curls herself into the pillows, bucking against them and squirming as she rides out the waves of

almost painful pleasure. Hides herself from him, tucking her face into the cushions.

She stays that way, gathered up in a fetal position, until her breathing slows and the shaking stops. Even then, can't bear to look at him.

She feels the cushions adjust beneath her, accommodating his weight as crawls up over her. Feels his cold hand curve around her chin, pulling her face from the pillow and forcing her to look up at him.

"I thought you were a Gryffindor," he smirks. Then he licks his lips purposefully. Licks the moisture off his chin, grin widening when her breath hitches.

"You...you are absolutely a Slytherin," she whispers, voice shaky. But she jolts when she feels his hand slide between her legs again.

She reaches down to push at it. "No, stop — no, I'm...it's too sensitive." And she realizes she sounds like she's begging. Flushes.

"Does it look like I care?" he growls, other hand dragging against her hip to flatten her on her back again. She hears the telltale clink of his belt buckle. Sees a flash of purple fly to the side as he tosses away his trousers, the journal in the pocket thudding loudly against the floor.

Her stomach glows pink suddenly, startling her, and then she hears his wand clatter somewhere off to the other side.

"You're a...bastard," she murmurs feebly, even as her arms betray her, weaving around his neck — inviting him in, wanting him closer.

His tongue flicks against her lips. He spreads her legs. "I know."
And then he sinks in deep.



They lay in a tangle of velvet cushions, discarded clothes and sweat, both unable to sleep.

Their position is not quite affectionate, and yet intimate all the same. She's never expected to cuddle with him. Doesn't need to. Doesn't care. This — lying facing one another, with only their ankles tangled together, is more than enough. With the way his sweat-soaked hair sticks up from where her fingers

She feels like a cauldron left sitting on a flame, abandoned for far too long. And the pewter is finally melting. She's finally boiling over.

Here, in front of Pansy Parkinson in her nightgown.

If that isn't bad enough, a moment later she's sobbing in front of Theodore Nott, too.

He appears at Pansy's side, smelling faintly of Firewhiskey and eyeing her passively. "Told you it'd be Granger," he says. "She's the only one who knocks."

She feels like she might be sick. Feels like the epicenter of all ridicule.

"Is she having a seizure?" asks Pansy.

Her knees buckle. It all keeps getting worse. Can't possibly keep getting worse. *So much worse.* She skins herself on the flagstone, shins hitting hard, but the sting is nothing compared to the throb in her chest.

Nott's voice is muffled by the roar of blood in her ears.

"Possibly," he says. And then suddenly she feels hands looping under her shoulders. "Right, Granger. Up we go," Nott grunts, heaving her back onto her feet.

"Theo, no," Pansy snaps.

"You know we'll get blamed if they find her convulsing in our corridor."

Hermione sags against him. Can't think. Can't see through her tears. Can't breathe.

"We've never let a Gryffindor in," Pansy argues. "And she's a *Mudblood*. That's a terrible place to start."

Nott isn't listening to her. That becomes clear when Hermione feels herself being led through the nebulous, filmy sensation that is the false wall.

"She's going to bleed all over our carpet," is Pansy's last feeble protest.

Vague hues pass before her watery eyes. Deep emeralds and blacks, the orange glow of a fireplace. And even in her shaking, incoherent state, she's furious with herself for not being able to see better.

She's wanted to see this for ages.

"Right, here we go — yes, let go, Granger. Let go. Down. I'm sitting you down." Nott struggles to drop her into the soft depths of a black leather sofa,

No, all I got was an owl from my solicitor, informing me that this was possibly very good for my image.
 Ha. Good one, *Attabush*. If only you could see the way the Gryffindors are looking at me now.
Draco

January 3rd, 1999

SHE ISN'T PREPARED THE SECOND TIME SHE KNOCKS ON SLYTHERIN HOUSE.

Isn't thinking. Not about anything but Ron's last words.

"You're nothing."

And so it's really no one's fault but hers when Pansy Parkinson appears through the wall, because anyone in a rational state of mind would have seen this as a possibility.

She's dressed in an elaborate black negligée and an unexpected pair of fluffy green slippers. Her raven hair is drawn up into a bun and she has some sort of sheen on her face — likely an anti-aging potion.

Hermione is subconsciously thinking how pretty she really is, until her face scrunches up at the sight of her.

"What do you want?" she hisses.

How can she answer that? She doesn't know herself. Doesn't know anything, anymore.

So she just stands there like a fool, tear-stained and disheveled, staring at this girl. This girl who couldn't be any more different than her. Any more her opposite. Staring at her and gasping through a sudden attack of wracking sobs.

She hasn't felt this pathetic in a long time. Perhaps ever.

But it's all coming to a head. All of those dirty looks, coupled with the look in Draco's eyes — Harry's silence, Ginny's absence. The cold, clinical smell of Malfoy Manor. The itch of her scar.

twisted in it and with the blissful ache, the heavy soreness between her legs.

He huffs a laugh at one point, reaching out to tug on one of her curls and watch it bounce back. "Happy Christmas, by the way."

Something warm throbs in her chest. "Happy Christmas," she echoes quietly. Doesn't tell him it's the best she's had in a while.

Then she remembers.

"Oh," she says, unable to help a smile as she sits up suddenly. "I almost forgot."

He watches lazily from the pillows as she finds her bag, gaze searing across her nakedness and making her blush when she notices. She comes back quickly to lay beside him again, if only to hide most of her body against the cushions.

And she pulls the wind-up carousel out of the bag. Holds it out to him, suddenly a little self-conscious. Uncertain. "Happy Christmas."

He laughs.

Loudly. Unexpectedly.

To the point where she's embarrassed and starts to pull it away, thinking he's making fun of her. But then he takes hold of the toy in one hand and yanks her in for a kiss with the other.

A moment later, he's on in his feet — leaves her laying there confused as he finds his jacket on the floor, absolutely unashamed of his nakedness. When he collapses back down next to her, he pulls the exact same carousel from his coat pocket. "Happy Christmas," he says wryly, laughing as he hands it to her.

"I—*what?*" she splutters, laughing too. "How did you — I thought you didn't have any Muggle money?"

"I didn't. I stole it. Happy Christmas."

And he kisses her before she can even start to argue.



The Christmas morning feast is one of the best, or so she's always heard from Harry and Ron. A sort of gift to the few students who have no reason to go home for the holidays.

But it's even better than she imagined, because she's sitting next to Draco Malfoy at the Slytherin table while she eats it, completely soaked in the afterglow of the night before, with not enough students in the Great Hall around them to notice or care.

She sneaks sideways glances at him as he drinks his tea sleepily. He drinks it black — strange, now that she knows about his sweet tooth. But his plate is stocked full of sugary treats like candied gingerbread bonbons and almond cream tarts, so she supposes that makes up for it.

They eat in pleasant, coexistent silence. He scribbles in his journal and she bites back on her curiosity. But then the mail arrives, and he spits his tea all over it — curses and tries to mop the dark stains off the purple cover. He yanks the Daily Prophet up off the table, almost ripping it in his haste.

Hermione sips her tea quietly.

“Bloody hell,” he sighs at last, wiping a hand along his face — warping it into a grimace. He hands the Prophet to her dejectedly so she can see the front page.

WAR HERO AND FORMER DEATH EATER SPOTTED ON ROMANTIC CHRISTMAS EXCURSION

Below it is a massive, moving photograph of the two of them kissing on the edge of the fountain in Trafalgar Square. “Fucking Skeeter,” Draco groans, angrily shoving a bonbon into his mouth. “Probably fucking followed us the whole night.”

“Yes,” says Hermione quietly, setting the paper down. “I paid her to.”

He chokes again on his tea. She just laces their hands together on the table, glancing sideways at his appalled face.

“Figured you deserved a grand gesture.”



January 3rd, 1999

Diary,

Well, it would appear the Golden Trio is not all it's cracked up to be.

Fool's gold, if you ask me, considering how quickly two-thirds of it was ready to drop the last third on her arse.

I don't feel guilty, though. And a good portion of it is entirely Granger's fault.

She's indecisive and impulsive.

Things would've gone over much more smoothly, I'd warrant, had she told the lot of them ages ago. I'm under no impression that they wouldn't have tried to hex me at every given opportunity, but they wouldn't have been able to play the betrayal card so easily. And then, of course, when she did finally make up her fucking mind, she decided her best option was (a)ha Fucking Skeeter.

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for shock value — and I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy it immensely. But it was stupid and impulsive, like Granger is.

No, she's not stupid.

She's a lot of things, but she's not stupid.

Mother hasn't written, which I find odd, but then again maybe they've taken away her access to the Prophet.

like Ginny.

Hope that maybe Harry, at least...

She can hardly see through her tears. Only knows when she arrives that she's stumbled her way to the Dungeons — the last place her past self would've sought out for comfort or safety.

And the only place she has now.

December 25th, 1990

Diary,

The Muggle date — as a concept — is not wholly ridiculous, as it turns out.

The lines are ridiculous, and Muggle London is highly overrated, but their hot chocolate is good and their toy craftsmanship is...tolerable.

No, forget all that. Muggle dates are probably fucking ridiculous all the way around.

But Muggle dates with Grangers are—

Fuck.

Well. Brace yourselves.

Things are about to get very fucking ugly for me.
Draco

January 3rd, 1999

SHE'S LEFT EVERY LETTER UNOPENED, SAVE A VERY BRIEF, SCRIBBLED MISSIVE FROM GINNY WHICH READ:

I'll be there soon. Don't panic.

It was dated from Christmas, but hadn't arrived until the next day, along with most of the others. Included in the envelope was the clipping from the Daily Prophet, which Hermione had ended up tucking away in her nightstand.

But she'd been very careful not to look at the senders on the other letters. Had seen one written in Ron's furious scrawl and stopped checking after that. There was likely one from Harry — maybe more than one. Definitely several from Parvati. Romilda. Eloise. Maybe even Neville, if she had to guess. Likely not Luna — she tended not to pry. She winced at the thought of one from Molly Weasley, but she had to accept that it was probably somewhere in the pile, too.

Thankfully, not many students had stayed at Hogwarts over the holidays, and hardly any from their year. What immediate attention she and Draco did get from the article came mostly in the form of ogling First Years — "*isn't it romantic?*" — and the occasional, haughty disapproval of some Fourth and Fifth Years who knew more about their history.

Draco, though — she'd been very apprehensive about his reaction. Didn't know what to expect. And he'd stared at her with that alarmed expression for a concerning amount of seconds. Had her doubling and second-guessing, the way he always does.

Now, though, he's got his head in her lap as she reads Merida Swoglor, so she figures she must've done something right.

They're in the Divination Classroom, again. It's become their regular haunt. And as she reads, he casts lazy variations of Charms spells above their heads, yawning. Over the past several days, no longer hindered by the need to sneak around, they've discovered how much they enjoy one another's silent company. No need to talk. No need to entertain each other.

Just mutual, undemanding silence.

She doesn't usually break it. Hates to. But today she feels she must.

"What time does the train get in?"

Draco's paper dragons hesitate in midair. Start to fly counterclockwise.

"Noon," he says, examining his wand. "But you already knew that."

"Can you blame me for being nervous?" She glances down at him over the



Walking into the Gryffindor common room that night reminds her of Fifth Year, when Harry was facing all that backlash for speaking out about Voldemort. Only this time it's her they're all staring at.

She knows instantly she's unwelcome.

It's in the air.

Their stabbing gazes follow her with every step she takes, and she can't find Ginny. Can't even find Harry or Ron, though they'd be little comfort.

"Is this like a research project, Granger?" asks Cormac from the corner. She notices his face hasn't completely healed. "Shag the Death Eater and then write an essay about it?"

"What are you playing at?" Seamus cuts him off, and for one painful moment she thinks he's defending her. But he's not — he's adding on. "Whose side are you on, Hermione?"

She feels like she's been cornered. Like every direction holds another face she doesn't want to see. "The war is over..." she says quietly. "There are no sides."

And it's as though she's combined Fiendfyre with the Draught of Living Death. An explosion.

From all sides, people shout.

"That's rubbish!"

"Have you gone mad?"

"Bloody hell, Hermione!"

"Who *are* you? Can you even hear yourself?"

And she loses all of her courage in that moment, stumbling backwards and staring down at her escaping feet as she runs away like a coward. Chased from her own House like a pariah.

She'd known this was a possibility.

A probability.

McGonagall had warned her about it.

But she'd been consumed by hope. Hope that there was more to all of them than petty prejudice and bad blood. Hope that more of them could see past it,

“Oh, don’t you fucking—” Ron steps in closer, pushing against Hermione, and an instant later she watches Draco’s pale arm shove Ron back several feet. Just slam into the center of his chest, until he almost trips over his own trunk.

Draco steps smoothly in front of her, obscuring her view, but not enough for her to miss Ron ripping out his wand as he rights himself.

“Let’s go, Weaselby. See how you do against me when I’m conscious, yeah?”

“I swear to Merlin, I’m going to—”

“Stop right now.”

It’s Harry. Of course it is.

He has his wand out, too, and he’s stepped between them, alternating who he points it at. “Stop. We’re not doing this. Stop.” She doesn’t think she’s ever seen Ron this furious. He’s practically foaming at the mouth, hunched over like he could lunge at them any minute. She steps out from behind Draco to get a better look, almost dazed by the whole scenario. And Ginny seems to take her cue. Grabs Ron by the collar of his sweater with the prowess only a sister can have, starting to tow him backwards out of the hall.

“You—” Ron spits even as he stumbles over his feet. His eyes are locked on Hermione, venomous. “You’re nothing. You’re *nothing*.”

And he’s gone.

Then it’s just Harry, staring at the two of them. His hand flexes around his wand, and he drops it to his side. Walks over to his trunk — to the one Ron’s abandoned. Glances back once to say, “I don’t understand,” and his expression is flat. Empty.

Then he’s gone, too, lugging both trunks behind him. She doesn’t cry. She turns off that reaction mechanically, like a switch, even as she feels somewhere deeply that she’s just lost a lot of things at once. She’s glad Draco doesn’t try to comfort her. Expects she’d shrink away if he did. Flinch. But she watches the tension in his body loosen beside her, and ever so slowly she releases her own, unclasp her sweating, bloodless hands. “Could’ve been worse,” he says quietly. She bites down on her tongue until she tastes blood.

“Could it have?”

edge of the book. He doesn’t look at her.

“No. But I don’t particularly want to talk about it.”

“Shouldn’t we have — I don’t know, a *plan*, or something?”

Now he does glance up, and it’s with an expression she’s becoming increasingly familiar with. A look that seems to say, *Really, Granger?* without saying anything at all.

“What?” She snaps the book shut. “It’s not a terrible idea—”

“People don’t usually have to *rehearse* conversations with their friends,” he draws.

“Oh, please — as if you didn’t rehearse what you wanted to say to Nott.”

He flattens his lips and shakes his head innocently at her — pompously. “No. No, actually, you’ll find I went into that one completely green. No script.”

She huffs at him. “You’re telling me that Nott’s sudden...*tolerance* of the two of us is the work of your exceptionally skilled improv?”

He flashes those sharp teeth she never expected to know so well. “I’m that good.”

The large sun dial clock on the wall chimes once, with a certain finality. Eleven-thirty.

She tenses up, and Draco shifts uncomfortably in her lap. Sighs and lets his paper dragons fall away to ash. A moment later, he’s sitting up — turning to face her.

“You did the hard part,” he says. “In fact, you *overdid* the hard part.” He gets to his feet and holds out his hand. “This is just the encore.”

Hermione tucks the book beneath her arm, grumbling unintelligibly under her breath as she lets him heave her off the floor.

“I don’t believe for one second that you aren’t as nervous as I am...”

Together, they vanish the evidence of their presence in the classroom.

“...and I *hate* your metaphors.”



They don’t hold hands.

Both of them seem to subconsciously agree that that would be too jarring.

No, they don't even touch. Instead, she sits at the corner of the Gryffindor table's bench, facing the doorway to the Great Hall, back straight. Jackknifed. Her hands are folded, twisting in her lap. Draco sort of looms behind her, sitting on the table itself. Elbows on his knees. That bored mask on his face.

From an outsider's perspective, it might look like the sort of awkward posing of a portrait.

But there is no conceivable way to act natural right now. And as students start to mill into the Hall with their trunks, back from holiday and altogether more spritely and energetic, she starts to wonder whether she made a terrible, terrible decision.

She tosses a nervous glance over her shoulder at Draco. Watches him jut his lip out and blow a stray strand of hair out of his face over and over again.

No. She looks back to entryway a little emboldened. No, not a terrible decision.

Just possibly terrible execution.

Because Harry, Ron and Ginny round the corner, and it is absurdly easy to tell they were just talking about her. The way Harry trails off and mutters nonsense. The way Ron stiffens. The look Ginny shoots the two of them.

Hermione tries to pretend she doesn't notice, instead leaning back on the oldest and worst defense mechanism she has and acting like nothing's amiss. She smiles broadly and gets to her feet, pulling Ginny into her arms.

Ginny hugs her back, all wool and mittens — hesitantly, nervously. But at least she does.

"Hi, hi — how was your Christmas?" Hermione rushes out, eyes flitting to Ron and Harry so quickly they're nothing but a blur before shifting back to Ginny, where it's safer.

Ginny says something about monogrammed cardigans and backyard Quidditch, but she's looking distractedly over Hermione's shoulder. At Draco.

He hasn't moved from the table, watching them — expression guarded, emotionless.

Hermione glances back at him too, unsure how to proceed. Her pulse throbs in her ears. Draco quirks a brow at her, just barely.

So she turns back. Closes her fists at her sides to hide their tremors. Bows to fate.

"So, I..I'm sure you've all seen the Prophet."

Ron drops his trunk. Let's it thud on the ground loudly — echo through the hall, making them jump.

"Yeah," he says roughly, pushing through Harry and Ginny's hands to stand in front of her. "We've seen the Prophet. Owls stop delivering over the holidays?"

She feels sweat start to build between her clenched fingers. "I wanted to speak to you in person."

"Well, here we are," Ron snaps, splaying his arms out wide. "Go on."

"Ron," Ginny tries, but he waves her off, stepping sideways and in front of her, as if he consciously knows he's cutting off her one line of support.

"I can't talk to you when you're being unreasonable like this," Hermione says cautiously, voice low.

She isn't surprised. In fact, he's being less aggressive than she expected. If she can talk him down, maybe she can —

Ron crowds her suddenly. Steps into her space, blasting fuming breaths against her face and lording his height over her. "*Unreasonable?*" he hisses. "I want you to consider, for one second, waking up on Christmas morning to find out that your best friend chose to stay behind for the holidays to shag the person you hate most." And he's got his finger in her face. "You — you're a traitor, that's what you are."

"*Ron!*" It's both Harry and Ginny this time, but they don't move to stop him. No, instead Hermione sees the shadow cross over her. Feels his presence from behind — and suddenly she's trapped between two tall bodies. Draco, taller and leaner. Ron, broader and stockier.

The fury in Ron's eyes inflames at the sight of him, his chest rising and falling like a bull panting for breath.

"Step back right now," says Draco, voice vibrating against her back.