

“Fifteen points from Gryffindor,” Hestia says, as though it matters. As though anyone still cares about the House Cup. “And you are dismissed for today.”

Now *that* — that matters. That is much more meaningful.

She feels her face go hot with shame, swallowing thickly as she turns and collects her book bag. She’s careful not to look Malfoy’s way as she makes a hasty exit, head down.

What’s gotten into her?

She never would’ve pulled something like that in previous years. Had to duel Malfoy on more than one occasion for classes and always managed to keep her temper in check.

She’s being careless. *He* makes her careless. Makes her emotions run too hot and too high, always on the verge of boiling over.

And as she makes her way down the staircases, unsure what to with herself for the next half hour, she’s even more convinced that removing him from her life is the only solution. The best option.

She’ll cut him out like a cancer if she has to.



They’re leaving Potions when it happens.

Despite being off to a particularly bad start, the rest of the day has been good to her. Ron, having loved seeing Malfoy land on his arse, is in high spirits. He’s been more open and talkative — he’s even made a few jokes.

She wonders if it’s possible that Ron’s only happy when Malfoy isn’t, but doesn’t linger on the thought.

As they ascend from the Dungeons, Harry, Ron and Ginny split off to play an informal round of Quidditch before dinner. She decides she’ll spend the next hour in the Library — possibly drafting a written apology to Hestia and practicing some spells. She has loads to catch up on, after all.

But as the corridors clear out around her and she rounds a corner into an empty hallway, there’s a flash and a little crack and then the tripping jinx has

her nerve. The more likely she is to lose Ron...lose Harry, forever.

And the fear of that is much stronger.

Gathering her fingers into bloodless fists, she swallows the knot in her throat and takes the few remaining steps into the light. The warm glow of the fireplace is almost caustic as it pulls her from the protection of the shadows.

But her presence isn’t immediately noticed.

And she can only stare.

Ron is...

Ron is in *tears*.

He’s slouched in one of the armchairs, hands matted into his scarlet hair, and he’s listening to something Dean’s trying to say to him. Some form of comfort or sage advice — *something*. His eyes are rimmed with red, his breathing shallow and panicked, and wet tracks mark the lengths his cheeks.

She — she’s only seen Ron cry once.

For Fred.

The sight of it knocks the breath out of her. And the sound it makes exposes her to them.

All of their heads whip to the side — a pack of wolves setting eyes on a threat — and she actually falters. *Falters*. Stumbles one step back at the sheer force of it. Of the expressions on their faces.

Furious. Protective. Poised to fight.

Like she’s dangerous.

Except for Ron.

His gaze is broken. Gone is all of the violence and aggression she’s seen over the past week. Gone is the disgust and the rage. What’s taken its place is worse. Far worse.

Because he looks like a child.

Like this confused, hurt little boy who doesn’t understand. Doesn’t understand, and cannot understand, and he looks *desperate*. Desperate and betrayed.

“You need to *leave*,” snaps Seamus, and suddenly he’s cutting off her view. Standing in front of Ron. And *there* — there’s that Gryffindor courage, only she

never expected it to be aimed against her.

"I need to speak to him," she says, and her voice is barely there. A wheeze. All she can manage.

"No. No, you don't. You need to leave."

"Seamus, *please*..." How did she get here? How is it that she's pleading? Pleading with Seamus Finnegan to speak to her closest and dearest friend?

"*Leave!*"

"Seamus..."

Ginny's voice. Ginny's voice is a — it's like a salve on a third-degree burn.

"Move out of the way," she says. Hermione can't see her behind him.

"You're *joking*."

"Come on, Seamus. Just...just move."

Seamus's face wrinkles up and he breathes hotly, angrily, in Hermione's direction for a moment more before throwing up his hands and charging a few feet away to one of the bookshelves.

And Ron's wrenching face comes back into view, but so do Ginny and Harry behind him, leaning against the mantle. Ginny's expression is a complicated mixture of pity and uncertainty, and Harry's — Harry's is blank.

She's known him long enough to know how well he can hide his emotions.

Something Ron has never been capable of.

Her eyes find him again, reluctantly — afraid, afraid of the agony it sends rippling through her chest.

"Ron..." she says. It's a whimper, at best. She takes a few unconscious, stunted steps forward, but her heart rate kicks up, because the animosity of the gathered Gryffindors is palpable. Like a black cloud.

She pushes through it.

Comes to stand in front of Ron's armchair. His hands slide from his hair down the sides of his face, warping his features before pressing together in front of his nose, as though in prayer.

"You..." she starts, but her voice cracks. Forces her to start again. "You were never meant to see that." She fights back tears, but they prove heavy and

A bizarre and rather intense wave of pleasure rips through her as she watches him slowly find his feet, rubbing the back of his head where it hit the stone. A few students turned and watched it happen. Seamus is laughing, and she thinks she sees Ron and Harry exchange smiles.

Maybe they thought she'd go easy on him.

Maybe they thought he still had her wrapped around his finger.

Her thoughts fly unbidden to the night of the Hallow's Eve Ball. To Theo's words. She pushes them away, fingers going white and bloodless around the base of her wand.

Malfoy is watching her warily, his own stance much more defensive than it had been before. And she sees they've also caught Hestia's attention; she's always on the lookout for situations in which she might need to intervene.

Hermione wonders whether this will be one of them.

But then Malfoy calls out, "*Expelliarmus!*" and her mind goes blank as she blocks it — blocks the second that follows.

"*Rictusempra!*"

Malfoy blocks that one right back. She grits her teeth. If it worked before, it'll work again.

"*Flipendo!*" she cries, and then quickly as he blocks it, instinctively blurts out,

"*Incarcerous!*"

Hestia's cut gasp from the corner is overshadowed by Malfoy's, and before she realizes what she's done he's writhing on the ground in the ever-tightening bind of her conjured ropes.

She falters. Steps back and lifts her wand to stop it, but Hestia is much faster.

"*Finivel!*"

Malfoy remains panting on the ground for several seconds after the ropes are gone, but Hestia steps in front of him and blocks her view.

"That is not a spell we use during classroom duels. Surely, you are aware of that, Miss Granger."

Hermione can only bring herself to nod. The rest of the classroom has gone silent.

Aside from losing her virginity to Malfoy, on what now appears to have been a whim. And then proceeding to go back for more. Which is a terrible direction for her thoughts to go.

Other pairs have already started their duels, the room alight with the glows and crackles of different spells, but she can't even bring herself to look at him. Hears him awkwardly clear his throat as they find an empty spot over in the corner.

"Which do you —" he starts, but she cuts him off.

"Offensive." That, at least, she's certain of.

There's a drawn out silence. She finally forces herself to glance his way, finding him a tall, lanky shadow a few feet from her, wand loose in his hand.

"Right," he eventually replies. As usual, she can't read his tone. He's flattened it out, like an iron to a shirt. And she's already glanced away, but she sees the shape of him settle into a dueling stance in her peripheral. "When you're ready."

It isn't meant to be condescending, but she chooses to take it as such, eyes tightening as she meets his eyes once more. She uses the anger to fuel her first spell.

"*Stupefy!*" she shouts with a rough flick of her wand, unduly disappointed when his casual *Protego* bats it away.

She sinks into a better stance, facing him head on now. Casts it again, this time with more strength. Again, he deflects it, but he has to move quicker. Seems a little surprised.

She likes the look of that.

"*Stupefy!*" she casts once more, hoping to lull him into a false sense of comfort. Hoping he'll think that's all she intends to work on today. But his protective charm has only just escaped the tip of his wand when, in quick succession, she rattles off, "*Reducto! Flipendo! Levicorpus!*"

Shocked and unprepared, he's only able to deflect the first one, fumbling for a tighter grip on his wand. The second knocks him back, and then he's catapulted several feet into the air with the third, hitting the ground hard on the way down.

adamant. Start to roll down her cheeks. "I...I never meant for you to see that."

Ron blinks hard up at her. Once. Twice. She's never seen his eyes like this.

"Why are you doing this?" he whispers against his hands. "Why? Why are you doing this? Why?"

She shakes her head desperately — sends tears flying off the edges of her jaw.

"I didn't — I didn't choose to. I swear, I never wanted this. I tried...I tried to tell you, I couldn't choose—"

"You're breaking my heart," he rasps. His hands fold into one tight, collective fist.

And a sob wrenches free of her lips. She chokes on it. Chokes back another. "No, I never wanted this — I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. Ron — I can't, I'm so sorry, I never wanted—"

He shoots out of his chair so suddenly she almost falls over, staggering back. "*He doesn't love you!*" Ron shouts, throwing a hand out to his side — startling her. Startling everyone. "He doesn't! He never will. I — I am the one who loves you." And he jabs a finger so hard into his own chest that it has to hurt. "I have always loved you!"

She backs into the opposite chair, thighs knocking painfully against its arm. "Ron, I..." She can't see through her tears.

"Why am I not good enough?!" he cries. "What does *he* fucking have that I don't? What does *he* — why does *he* get to — why..." He can't even finish a sentence. His words are coming in desperate, panted bursts. His chest is puffing in and out, and he's panicking. He's — "What's wrong with *me*? What's wrong with *me*? Why not — why — why not *me*, I don't—"

She can't stop herself.

She rushes forth and yanks him into her arms. Buries her head in his over-warm shoulder and hears him release this agonized little howl — feels it rip out of his chest.

And then his hands are fistng in her curls and he's dropping his face to her crown, and he cries. He just *cries*. She holds him and he cries and he holds her like he's going to fall through the floor if he lets go.

The space around them is deathly silent. It's only the two of them. Only their ragged sobs and uneven breaths.

She knots up the heavy knitting of his sweater in her fingers, soaking the space on his chest with her tears. She isn't sure what will happen when she lets go. Isn't sure whether she'll ever get to feel this again. So she doesn't. Won't. Holds on and presses into him and fills her nose with his familiar scent — his warm, sweet, musky scent she knows so well and misses so dearly.

And it's minutes. She doesn't know how many. Doesn't know how long they stay like this.

But they stay until Ron's chest stops jerking against her and her shoulders stop shaking.

When she feels him start to loosen his grip, she panics. Can't let go until she's sure he knows — until she's sure he understands.

And she pulls her face free of his chest and stretches up on her tiptoes and says into his ear, "I will *always* love you." She takes his shoulders in hand and gives him a little shake. "Always. Know that. You have to know that."

And then she lets him go.

Her fingers ache instantly at the emptiness — at having held on so tightly for so many minutes. Her face is swollen and hot and her eyes sting. Her head aches. She forces herself to step back, and the room swims back into focus.

Ron is in a similar state, face wet with tears, nose running. But his brows are sloped like ski jumps and his expression is — it's sad. It's heartbreakingly sad.

But it isn't angry.

Everyone around them is staring. They're shuffling uncomfortably and whispering things to one another, and they clearly have no idea what to do. What to say, if anything.

She doesn't know what to say, either.

Nor does Ron.

But she finds her sore gaze pulled almost magnetically to Harry.

And his face is no longer blank.

It's a combination of sadness and confusion and uncertainty, but it also has

Dungeons, and together they reached the conclusion that nothing positive could come from this. That Jackson Pollock was a dead end. Period.

She's decided.

She finally takes her seat. Jackknives herself against the back of the chair, staring straight ahead and fruitlessly trying to force all of her attention onto Hestia.

She has to start breathing through her mouth as soon as his scent gusts up against her.

It reminds her of too many things. It's too easy, now, for her to pinpoint exactly where each subtle aspect of his musk comes from. The oaky citrus from his cologne. The watery freshness from the soap he uses. The clean linen from his clothes. And the peppermint. Of course the peppermint, from those breath mints she's tasted on his tongue — the ones she's stolen from his mouth on occasion and swallowed herself.

She flushes a deep red — manually adjusts her attention once more, staring at Hestia with so much force her eyes start to water.

Malfoy hasn't moved. She can sense his eyes are straight ahead as well, and she's relieved at that. Can't be sure what his gaze could do to her at this point.

And she soldiers on through the first half of the lecture by reminding herself that this is one of the last times she'll have to be this close to him. She's decided. From here on out, it'll be easier. And by god, she'll never be late again.

But then Hestia announces the interactive portion of the lesson, and it becomes abundantly clear that all the odds are stacked against her.

"I want nice, clean duels. Pair up with your desk mates. One of you will choose to act primarily on the offensive, the other defense."

Everyone stands, and Hermione feels as though the floor drops out from under her as she follows suit. Feels that all of her strength and conviction vanishes with the desks as Hestia charms them away.

She casts a desperate look in Ginny's direction and finds only sympathy. No bright ideas. No escape plan.

What? What has she done to deserve such bad luck?

*February 1st, 1999*

IT'S ONE OF THE ONLY TIMES SHE'S LATE — AND, CONVENIENTLY, IT'S ALSO ONE OF THE WORST TIMES SHE COULD BE.

But she hasn't been sleeping well.

Therefore, on the rare occasions she does manage it, it's immensely difficult for her to wake back up, and today she's slept through all of breakfast as well as those precious fifteen minutes leading up to Defense Against the Dark Arts.

She scrambles in, hair askew, just as Hestia's going over the day's lesson, and it's embarrassing enough to interrupt with her tardiness.

It's so much worse that the last seat available happens to be next to *him*.

Worse still that now, out of nowhere, he's chosen to start attending classes again. Why today, of all days? Why? After she's resolved — made a bloody *pact* with herself — to stay away from him?

She stops dead a few feet from the door, everyone staring at her — including him. And Hestia.

“Miss Granger, wonderful of you to join us.” There's no real bite to Hestia's tone, but she may as well have slapped her. The whole situation has spiraled so wildly out of control so fast. “Have a seat.”

Malfoy wears a neutral expression as she makes a halting approach, her hand cramping in its fist around the strap of her book bag. Her eyes find his left arm instantly, a safer target than his eyes. Nothing seems amiss — all of her real work is hidden beneath the white sleeve of his shirt and his hand appears to be resting normally on the desk.

Still, though, that's only what it *looks* like. All manner of things could've gone wrong internally.

But she's not about to ask him. Not about to guide herself towards any situation that involves talking to him. She's decided. She's *decided*.

She stayed up half the night talking to Ginny after coming back from the

the faintest tinge of what might be hope. Just might be. Dangerous, indefinite hope.

It's enough.

And seeing it puts the sturdiness into her shoulders and the strength she needs into her voice to say, “I'll go, now. I'll go.”

She leaves behind a silent Gryffindor Tower — more silent than she thinks it's ever been — only this time, when the Fat Lady falls into place behind her, it doesn't feel final.

Doesn't feel permanent.

That night she sleeps on a hard, unforgiving cot in the Hospital Wing, with a stomach full of Dreamless Sleep Potion and a disquieted heart.

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January 11th, 1999

Dearest godless bureaucratic wagsacks,

If there ever was a time to drop your high and mighty principles, grow a soul and send those bloody drugs, it's now.

Because he just walked into the dermatology and asked me to beat the shit out of him.

And that's just —

That's...

If that doesn't prove you're failed him, I don't fucking know what does.

I don't know what happened, the probably won't tell me.

But I can tell you he needs those drugs.

Send them, or I'm going to box his journal so it turns your fingers green for the rest of your miserable fucking lives.

And yes, you can record that as an official threat of violence.

Fucking go for it.

Three

34

January 30th, 1999

Diary,

I forgot.

I didn't think it was actually fucking possible to forget what it's like to feel normal, but I fucking forgot.

And now I have to figure out what to do with myself.

Because I don't know who I am without that pain. For two years now — fuck, almost three — I've based everything off of it. Been making room for it. Accommodating it. Accounting for it. Expecting and preparing for it.

But now, no thanks to you lot, it's gone.

And of course — of fucking course she had to be the one to take it away. Because it wouldn't be my life and my luck if I didn't have to owe her one more thing. Always one more thing.

I feel...blank now, without the pain. None of my other feelings can possibly function as aggressively as it did, have as much power over me as it did.

Fuck, I'm wondering if I actually fucking miss it.

No.

No, that's not what I miss.

I miss the life I had before it.

Draco

leaning in and she is too and it's too hot and her fingers are shaking and she tries in earnest to chase away that creeping fear, that creeping doubt, but—

“Don't,” she breathes, pulling back just before his lips can find hers. She squeezes her eyes shut. “Don't.”

Moments of frozen silence pass.

Then she hears the water lap as he sits back into the bath. Only then decides that it's safe to open her eyes again.

The cotton and wires are in place.

Swiftly and without preamble — without looking at him — she casts the spells she'd practiced before to restitch his skin and give life to his fingers.

He gasps audibly, because the Mark is gone. She made certain of that.

“I cut it out of you,” she says, eyes on the tile. “Figured you deserved at least that.” And then she's standing on stiff legs and gathering her damp, bloodied robe in tight around her. “I'm sure your friends will want to know you're alright.”

She leaves before he can get another word out.

*January 22nd, 1999*

IT REMINDS HER OF THE WAY A BALLOON DEFLATES.

Slowly. Pathetically. Going from full and colorful and smooth to small and dark and wrinkled without much warning at all.

That's what it's like watching him. And it's all she can do. Watch.

In a matter of days, Malfoy has become a mere shadow of himself. He's lost weight. Five pounds, if she had to guess. His cheeks are gaunt, the skin under his eyes a violent and obvious shade of purple. His lips are still blue — she knows why now. But everything else is new. His posture, his behavior. He even blinks more slowly, though she's rather furious at herself for having any idea at what rate he should be blinking.

As far as she can tell, he hasn't attended a single lesson since that night in the Astronomy Tower — which means he's probably failing most of his classes. He doesn't even bother with robes. He cycles through the same three jumpers over and over again — black, charcoal gray, forest green, black, charcoal gray, forest green.

And this is only what she's observed from meals.

She's been sitting next to Ginny, back at the Gryffindor table.

That first morning after, she'd had to will quite the artificial backbone into being in order to get her legs to move in that direction.

But when she'd managed it, Ginny had taken her hand instantly under the table. Squeezed. And even without the verbal confirmation of anyone, it seemed generally accepted that she was allowed to sit there.

After all, they'd never actually *forced* her to leave.

Most of that had been her own doing. Her own fear and uncertainty multiplying and spreading like a virus each time she got a dirty look.

She knows full well it will take time to be on speaking terms with Ron. But Harry did manage a 'good morning' today, and Ginny has been gradually bringing her into conversations.

It's timid. Tepid.

But it's more reassurance than she's had in weeks, and she refuses to push it. Regardless of how childish she finds it all to be.

Malfoy's situation, on the other hand, seems to be rapidly spiraling out of control. If his appearance isn't enough, the behavior of the other Slytherins certainly functions as its own bright, flashing red flag.

They're watching him as though they're waiting for him to detonate.

And she realizes she is too.

Realizes that, at any given moment, all of the trauma and the fury and the abominably bad choices that make up Draco Malfoy could finally culminate into something explosive. Could finally bring him down. Collapse his cracked, teetering stone pillar of stoicism — the only thing keeping him standing. They're all just waiting for it to happen.

This is about more than the Astronomy Tower. Has to be.

But she shouldn't care. Shouldn't be worried or even curious. What he did was vile. Always will be.

And she isn't the sort to forgive easily — if at all.

Besides.

Draco Malfoy doesn't know how to apologize.

"Flint was just arrested," says Dean suddenly around his pumpkin juice. She rips her eyes from Malfoy's pale, expressionless face — turns to listen in, careful not to lean too far forward. Careful not to overuse her welcome. Dean's reading the Prophet. "Picked him up in Marseille."

"Marcus?" asks Harry, glancing up from his breakfast. "What for?"

"War crimes. Aiding and abetting Death Eaters."

"He was already tried for that," says Ginny.

Dean nods, speaking around the rim of his cup. "Retrial. Says they have grounds to reopen the case."

"It's happening," Hermione breathes aloud — doesn't mean to. Most of them turn to look at her, save Seamus, who might never warm back up, and Ron, but...well, that makes more sense.

promised, and idly she realizes he must not be squeamish. He seems perfectly calm as he stares at his own bone.

But perhaps he's in shock.

She's glad to have her hands preoccupied, though, because he starts talking and she knows she'd have nothing better to do than fidget.

"Surprised you came," he murmurs, the water threshing as he pulls out his other arm to sweep back his sweat-soaked hair. The heat of the bath has brought color to his cheeks. It's an unusual sight, and she's careful to only catch a glimpse of it before refocusing.

"Pansy said it was urgent."

"And you trust Pansy, now?"

Hermione sniffs, the spike of usual annoyance almost comforting. "What does it matter?"

She feels him shrug — his arm tugs against her hold. "Suppose it doesn't."

She looks up to compare the size of his other forearm to the shape of the caging, accidentally catching his stare.

"But I'm wondering why you've gone to all this trouble. Certainly not for the sake of morality. I think that ship has sailed."

Her eyes tighten. "Hasn't anyone ever told you how to say 'thank you?'"

His response is instant and unashamed. "No."

She huffs, looking away and starting to tug angrily on the wires. But when his free hand takes her wrist, she starts — accidentally jams her already sore knee into the hard wall of the tub as he sits up.

"I also don't really know how to say that I'm sorry..." he murmurs. "No one told me how to do that either."

She swallows the thick knot in her throat. Wills herself not to look at him.

But it's like a magnet trying to avoid metal.

Their eyes meet once more. The look she finds in those blue-gray depths has the breath whistling out through her teeth. Water drips from his chin and his chest rises and falls deeply, smoothly, white dress shirt plastered to it like tissue paper. The steam billows up around him in curling wisps and suddenly he's



i. He knows what it is.

Hermione sits back on the damp tile, joints aching, head throbbing. “The, erm...the Mark was cursed. It would’ve eaten everything away if I hadn’t removed the entire infection. I think it must have something to do with you trying to tamper with it. The Mark must’ve had some dark magic in place to prevent that sort of thing. I don’t know. That’s my theory. And I — I know it must be a shock, and I’m sorry, really, I am — I didn’t know what else to do. I — I’ll stuff it with cotton wrapped in wire and mend the skin around it, and — and there are a few charms I can cast to keep your fingers functioning, but — well, erm, the arm itself won’t have any feeling. I...I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” She stops her rambling. Gathers a deep breath, looking anywhere but his eyes.

And for a long while, the silence is filled only by the quiet thresh of the water around his body as he breathes. Water she’s drained and refreshed twice to clean all the blood out.

“So...” he says at last, and she’s only slightly relieved to hear some of that regular snark in his tone, “you’ve taxidermied me.”

She bites down on her bottom lip. “Essentially. And only a piece of you.”

He huffs. It might be a laugh.

“How does it feel?”

“I don’t feel anything.”

She winces. Truly, this isn’t her best work and she knows it. But she’d been too panicked in the face of his certain death otherwise, and she doesn’t really want to think about what that means. “I’m sorry.”

Their eyes meet at the same time.

“I don’t feel pain, either,” he says, gaze direct. Uncompromising. Sober. She hasn’t seen his eyes like this in weeks. “It’s not burning.”

She glances away quickly when their stare lingers too long. “That’s...that’s good, then.” And she lets go of his wrist for a moment. Slips off her knees to sit more comfortably, knees stiff and aching from where they’ve been pressed into the tile. Her bathrobe is destroyed.

Malfoy watches on in silence as she conjures the cotton caged in wire she

“What is?” asks Harry.

She covers feebly. Isn’t sure how they’d feel about that conversation in the Dungeons. “Nothing. I...I suppose I just assumed the first trials weren’t the end of it.”

“Serves ‘em right,” barks Seamus, though it’s very clear he isn’t talking to her. “If you ask me, the lot of them got off easy the first time round.” Then he does turn though — meets Hermione’s gaze for the first time in days and shoots her the most pointed look he can manage. “Especially the ones they let back into Hogwarts.”

She bites down hard on her tongue, but Ginny’s hand is on her forearm under the table in a millisecond.

“Oh, shove off, Seamus,” she scoffs, keeping her tone casual. “Is there ever a time when you *aren’t* starting fires?”

Seamus goes an angry red, cheeks puffing out, but Neville quickly changes the subject, talking about how his cactus has grown over a foot this month.

Hermione bumps her shoulder against Ginny’s — a silent thanks.

“So,” she murmurs when the conversation has split off in several different directions, “how’s that Jackson Pollock project going?”

Hermione struggles to swallow a piece of toast. Manages, just barely, and then quickly sips some water. She’d forgotten. It seems like ages ago they’d come up with it. And, she guesses, a part of her hadn’t thought there was a point anymore.

But Ginny can’t support her outright. Not yet. She knows that.

This is the best she can do.

“I...” she says at last. “I think I’ve given up on it.” And she glances reluctantly to the side — meets Ginny’s eyes. She has a fiery brow quirked.

“Why?”

She’s a little surprised by the question. Tries to word it properly. “Because...I don’t think I like writing about him. His work is too messy. Too chaotic.”

Ginny blinks once. “I thought that was what you liked best about him.”

Her eyes slide away — find Malfoy again, in his corner. “So did I.”

He has the journal out on the table, but he isn’t writing. He’s absently tracing

his fingers over the cover. His knuckles are bruised. Scabbed over.

She gathers a slow breath, “But I’ve reached the point where I have to write about the parts of his life that I don’t like. And...and I don’t know if I’m the right person to write about them. I can’t.” *Can’t deal with it. Can’t self-destruct alongside him.*

When she looks back at Ginny, the expression she finds swirling in the deep brown is unnering. An expression that almost says she knows something. Something Hermione doesn’t.

It makes her feel helpless.

And then she says something she could’ve never expected.

“I think you should write the end.” She turns back and starts to butter a fresh slice of toast, ignoring the shock in Hermione’s eyes. “Just to see if it turns out differently.”

January 29th, 1999

IT’S ELEVEN-THIRTY IN THE EVENING AND THE FAT LADY IS SCREAMING.

Hermione shoots upright in bed, yanking aside the curtains around her four-poster. Ginny is already on her feet, and Parvati has fallen from her mattress onto the floor.

“What in *Merlin*—” she shrieks, stumbling up from the ground, tangled in her scarlet sheets.

They yank on bathrobes and rush down the spiral staircase into the common room, Romilda’s hair still in rollers, Hermione’s a bushy, riotous mess.

They almost collide with a good portion of the boys’ dormitory at the foot of the stairs.

“What’s happening?”

“I don’t know—”

“Who is—”

“*What in—*”

Neville shouts over the chaos, ripping his wand from the pocket of his striped

that Pomfrey would amputate it.

But she — she can’t. She *can’t*.

“*Malfoy*,” she snaps again without looking at him. He’s gone quiet. The submerged parts of his body have gradually begun to fade from blue to white, but she’s quickly realizing that the warmer he gets, the faster the Mark decays.

It’s dark magic. A curse, maybe. She’s never read about anything like it. Why him? Why his Mark, and not the others?

But in the time she wastes thinking about it, she watches one of the last tendons in front of the exposed bone of his forearm melt away. She swallows back bile. She has to make a decision.

And the Imperius Curse isn’t the cure for everything.

Swiftly, with shaking fingers, she conjures clean bandages, ditrany and the only thing she can think of — embalming fluid.

Malfoy’s unconscious. There’s no helping it. No asking his permission.

She steadies herself, tightens her grip on his wrist and gets to work.



“Wh—what are you doing?”

His voice startles her, and her wand slips from her blood-soaked grip.

It’s been two hours, and the steam from the now hot bath is making her sweat.

He’s awake.

And he’s staring at her handiwork with wide, weary eyes and she’s trying not to allow herself to be terrified that he’ll hate her for it.

She clears her throat, voice raw from long silence. “I...I did what I had to do.” But she doesn’t blame him for the horror in his gaze. Because Malfoy is looking at the remnants of his forearm, which she’s spent the past hours clearing of all muscle, fat, blood and living tissue. From his wrist to his elbow, all that remains is bone, and she’s rinsing the loose skin around it with the embalming fluid.

From the look in his eyes and the wrinkle in his nose, it’s clear he can smell

only the sleepy glow of the Black Lake past the windows to illuminate the shadows of the beds. They aren't in a circle like Gryffindor, but rather in straight, equidistant rows leading all the way back to a fireplace on the far wall, its flames long dead.

She can only assume the door to her immediate left leads to the lavatory — drags Malfoy towards it as he grows heavier and heavier against her.

The washroom is black-tiled. Reptilian. Cold, when she so badly needs warmth. But there's a black marble tub beneath one of the glowing windows, and she decides her excuse about warm water is hardly the worst idea.

She's running out of options as it is.

Malfoy groans, his face smushed into her shoulder. She can't let him fall asleep.

Quickly, though it's a struggle to prop him up and free her wand arm, she manages to fill the tub with lukewarm water. Anything hotter would surely shock and burn his frozen body.

Shivering, her knees wobbling, she slowly helps him to sit on the tub's rim, and then can do nothing more elegant than give him a push so he slides over the edge. Water sloshes all over the floor at the great splash, and her cold fingers ache as slightly warm droplets strike them.

Right. She needs to focus.

"Malfoy, stay awake," she snaps, prodding his icy shoulder as he settles into the bath, shirt going distractedly transparent. He cracks open one bloodshot eye, though she can't be sure he's really seeing her. "It's very important you stay awake," she repeats, more to herself, as she casts a charm to gradually heat the water.

Malfoy's arm slips off the edge of the rim and splashes into the bath, and instantly both his eyes fly open and his body goes rigid. A cut scream rips out of his throat as she rushes around to the other end of the tub to pull it back out. Blood and pieces of burnt, dead skin start to taint the water.

Her stomach heaves as she holds his arm — so much lighter than it should be, so much flesh already missing. She can't fathom what to do. Knows already

paidia trousers. "I'll investigate," he announces, with all the bravado one could possibly build up from cutting the head off a cursed snake.

Harry and Ron have wands out too, and as they follow behind Neville, Hermione feels herself reaching for her own.

Slowly, a good three-quarters of Gryffindor House crowds into the pitch black hallway leading to the portrait hole. The Fat Lady's shrieks have tripled in volume, and now it's possible to catch fragments of words.

"STAY AWAY! HEATHEN! BACK! GET BACK! DUMBLEDORE WILL HAVE YOUR WAND SNAPPED FOR THIS — I'LL SEE TO IT! THREATENING A LADY! HOW DARE —"

"I'm opening it on three!" shouts Neville. "One! Two!"

He shoves the back of the portrait aside, and the Fat Lady's screams spike up to an ear-shattering level as the light from the corridor floods through the entranceway.

"Fucking *finally*," snaps an all too familiar voice.

Neville's wand is pointed at Pansy Parkinson.

Hermione stretches up onto her tiptoes to see over Harry and Ron's shoulders. Pansy looks ruffled — slightly. As ruffled as she can look, being the way she is. Like everyone in the hallway, she appears to have thrown on her robe in haste. She's barefoot and her raven hair is tousled from sleep. She has her wand out and that usual perturbed expression on her face, but there's an undertone of panic in her eyes that Hermione recognizes instantly.

"Parkinson? What's going on?" demands Neville.

"SHE THREATENED ME!" screams the Fat Lady, though no one can see her — her portrait is pressed against the wall, her cries muffled. "SAID SHE'D HEX ME INTO BLACK AND WHITE IF I DIDN'T LET HER IN, HOW DREADFUL!"

"You have no business here," says Neville, and Hermione can hear without looking that he's puffed out his chest. "Why are you trying to get in?"

"Oh, get the hell out of my face, Longbottom — I've wasted enough time trying to get past this fat oaf —"

“FAT OAF?!”

Hermione casts *Silencio* on the Fat Lady almost instinctively, pushing through the tightly packed crowd until she’s standing at the front beside Neville.

“What’s going on?” she asks. Her heart rate has picked up, and there’s a sinking in her gut. A worry. A fear she can’t quite describe, like a cold hand squeezing her stomach.

“You need to come with me,” says Pansy, face hard. “Now.”

“She’s not going anywhere with you.”

And her heart throbs painfully, because it’s Ron. And he’s trying to protect her and she *craves* that. Wants that element of their friendship back more than anything. But — she knows. She has to disappoint him. She has to go. It’s Malfoy. It’s something to do with Malfoy. She knows. She *knows*.

Pansy wouldn’t come here unless it was her only choice.

She slides past Neville. Steps off the small ledge onto the carpet of the corridor. “Is it...” she starts to ask, but Pansy’s jaw goes tight.

“Now, Granger.” And she whips around, charging off.

Hermione casts a feeble glance over her shoulder at all the confused, staring faces. “I — I’ll be back soon. I —” She manages a helpless shrug. “I’m sorry, I don’t—”

“Granger!”

She jolts and rushes to follow, leaving Gryffindor behind, her thoughts racing a mile a minute.



They’ve made it all the way to the Dungeons, and Pansy hasn’t stopped to say a word. Hasn’t slowed her pace even a fraction or glanced back to be sure she’s following.

Hermione’s slightly out of breath — about halfway down she’d noticed her hands had started shaking. She has them gathered into fists at her sides, sweat collecting between her fingers.

When they reach the false wall, Pansy hisses out a password she can’t discern,

The melting ice is flooding the common room.

It’s soaking the carpets and dousing the fire that keeps resiliently trying to come back to life.

Left and right, Slytherins of all years are casting drying charms in efforts to fight mildew and mold and, well — drowning.

Hermione has Malfoy’s arm slung over her shoulder.

As she’d predicted, the moment the cold started to fade, the pain took its place, and his knees buckled. He’s nearly dead with hypothermia and also with decay. There isn’t time for fancy explanations or decorum.

But she tries her best to keep her word as Pansy, Theo and Blaise swarm them.

“*Mertin’s bollocks*, mate, what were you *thinking*?”

“Draco! *Draco*? Is he even conscious?”

“Mate—”

“I —” She’s forced to think on her feet, even as the blood is rushing painfully back into her extremities. “I need to get him into warm water. Immediately. Where’s the dormitory?”

Pansy, for once, leads the way without a single complaint. Without question.

And Hermione does her best to adopt Madam Pomfrey’s sternest of tones as they enter.

“Get everyone out.”

“Shouldn’t I—”

“Everyone. Out. *Now*.”

Not a moment later, Pansy’s corralled what few boys managed to sleep through that chaos out into the common room, hurling abuse at them the whole way — and then the door is closing behind them. She doesn’t think she’s taken a full breath yet.

Malfoy is slumped against her side, silent. Barely holding up his own weight. And an odd part of her brain is wondering whether she’s seen him near death more times than otherwise.

She tries to gather her bearings. The Slytherin boys’ dormitory is dark, with

her lips sting instantly as the air hits them.

"We all have our problems."

A nervous laugh bucks out of her like a convulsion — perhaps a last ditch effort to stay warm. "R-Right..." she says around clacking teeth. "B-Because becoming a l-living corpse is just — just one of those...things..."

Malfoy cocks his head to the side, studying her passively. "You're cold."

She belts her arms around herself, digging her nails into her skin. "And you're dying."

He blinks. Slowly. He's every shade of blue.

"D-Drop the enchantment. So I can — can help you."

The hand of his good arm flexes at his side. Hers are frozen into a fists against her chest. Numb.

"Thought you hated me. Why should you help me?"

She sucks in a frigid, furious breath through her nose. It stabs the walls of her throat on the way down. "Drop the enchantment."

His stone expression cracks. She sees an inkling of vulnerability spring to the surface, like the last drops of water mined from a drying well. "I don't want them all to see." And he juts his head past her shoulder — past the wall of ice.

"T-Then...then they won't. I'll — we'll find a way to fix it. In private. I-Just drop the enchantment."

She watches his throat constrict as he swallows, all the thick veins visible and darker than ever.

"Give me your word."

She's almost in tears, she's so cold. Can hardly function. "Malfoy—"

"Your word."

She stamps one foot into the ground, desperate to keep it awake. "Alright. Yes. Yes. You have my word."

He blinks at her one last time. A resigned, sleepy blink.

"Finite."



and instantly the temperature drops at least twenty degrees. She gasps audibly as the cold rushes over her skin, passing through the bricks after Pansy and stopping short at the sight.

Her senses are overwhelmed.

It's bright and cold and *loud*.

Several people are shouting, and spells are being cast left and right at what looks to be a solid wall of ice in the middle of the Slytherin common room.

"What took you so long?" someone shouts, and suddenly Theo is crowding in front of her view, and her shocked eyes are struggling to refocus on him.

"Stupid fat bint wouldn't let me in," says Pansy. "Has anything changed?"

"Haven't even made a dent."

"What's happening?" Hermione breathes, struggling to see past Nott's broad form. The wall of ice spans all the way around the couches by the hearth, stretching up to meet the ceiling. It's foggy and blurred, at least a few feet thick, but through its pale blue glaze, she can see a shadow sitting on one of the black leather sofas.

She doesn't have to ask who it is.

"What did he do?"

Out the corner of her eye, she sees Zabini blast the wall with a hearty incendiary hex, the common room glowing red for a moment. The ice cracks but doesn't budge.

"It's the pain," says Theo. "Finally made him lose his fucking mind."

"His arm?"

Theo shoots her a complicated glance. "Mostly," he says.

She stares. All she can do is stare.

Malfoy's shadow is unmoving.

"Well, for fuck's sake, *do something*," snaps Pansy, giving her shoulder a shove. "That's why we brought you here. You're the know-it-all."

"We need McGonagall," she deadpans.

"Use your head." Nott's voice is gruff. "If McGonagall sees he's at this point, he'll be committed. St. Mungo's Psychiatric Ward for the rest of the term, if not

longer.”

“What do you expect me to do?” She couldn’t force emotion into her tone if she tried. Can’t think straight. Can’t feel anything. She can only stare.

Blaise joins them in the corner, sweat beading on his brow. “He’s been in there over an hour. He’ll freeze to death soon enough.”

She shifts her gaze away from the three of them. A group of confused First Years has huddled in the opposite corner. She can’t imagine what they’re thinking.

Nott grabs her arm with an almost bruising pressure, but his voice is gentle — pleading, as he fills her eye line again. Forces their gazes to meet. “Do something. Anything.”

She draws in an unsteady breath. She doesn’t want to help him. In fact, it’s the last thing she wants to do. That look in his eyes, the night in the Astronomy Tower, is stained into her mind. What light she’d started to see him in throughout the previous weeks seems to have collapsed into black.

Nott squeezes tighter. She lets out a little hiss of pain.

“I don’t care if you hate him,” he says through gritted teeth, as though he can read her thoughts. “Do something. Do something, or its murder.”

“Don’t you *dare* try to put his on—”

“Please.” His grip falters. So does his voice. And it silences her immediately.

The whole of the common room is deathly quiet.

“You’re the only one he’ll listen to.”

In the moments that follow, all she’s really aware of is the tense, impatient tapping of Pansy’s foot off to the side.

They’re all like her.

Nott, Zabini, Bulstrode, standing in different places. Even Pucey and Goyle.

All sweating, exerted. All tense.

For whatever it’s worth, he means something to them.

And she tries to keep that at the forefront of her brain as she pushes past them and approaches the wall. Tries to shove her own stubborn feelings back into the dark — tries to pretend they no longer exist.

she’s about to roll her eyes. About to chew him out for using that bloody Mark again as an excuse for all of his vile behavior.

But...

She *smells* it. Smells it before she sees it.

Burning flesh.

Something she hasn’t smelled since they cremated the unidentifiable bodies after the battle.

She recoils instantly, backing away, but her eyes have already locked onto it. Won’t budge. She can’t even blink.

“*What...*” she breathes, but her voice is swallowed up by the icy air. She backs into the wall. Hisses at the cold sting.

What had once been a festering, infected wound has morphed into a rotting, charred, unrecognizable slab of decaying flesh. The top layers of skin on his forearm are eaten away — and for a moment her eyes can’t comprehend that bright white gleam.

The bright white of bone.

His arm is decomposing.

“A cry for help,” he echoes, and she’s only too happy to look away. To have an excuse to look at anything but the gore.

But meeting his eyes straight after has an unexpected effect. Makes her suddenly appreciate how beautiful they are — which is idiotic and distracting and the last thing she should be thinking about right now.

She should be trying not to vomit.

“Wrong again, Granger.” Then he laughs humorlessly and drops his arm away. She’s glad for it. “Do you know, I think the only thing standing between you and genius level intelligence is how much you think you already know. You think you know everything.”

She tries to shake her head, but the cold has cemented her joints — keeps her neck straight. She can’t feel her fingers.

And yet he’s moving so fluidly. His voice doesn’t tremble.

“Why...why didn’t you tell someone?” she manages at last, and the insides of

useless spell trying to *save your life*.”

He blinks at her.

She fumes. “Pansy had to go to *Gryffindor* to get me. She had to threaten her way in. You made her do that. *You*.”

He snorts, then. Examines his fingernails. “Pansy, in *Gryffindor*. That’s an image.”

“*Why don’t you take anything seriously?!*” she shouts, voice bouncing off the icy walls.

And just a fraction of the strange, indifferent fog over his eyes clears. He looks up at her. “Why do *you* always assume I’m trying to die?”

She folds her arms over her chest — a dual purpose, to guard against the cold and against him. “Perhaps because you’re always putting yourself in deadly situations. Correct me if I’m wrong.”

“You sounded much more polite on the other side of that ice,” he says.

“Well, now that I can see how much of a *child* you’re being...” She can’t stop herself. Can’t put any restraints on the anger that’s built up from that night, even though she knows she needs to be more careful. Knows this is precarious. But she can’t stop it. It’s compulsive.

Malfoy cracks his knuckles. Resumes his bored expression. “Isn’t that what you’ve always thought of me?”

She sniffs with fury. “Don’t pity yourself.”

He drops both elbows onto his knees. Rubs one eye. “Why are you here, Granger?”

And she splutters — gestures aimlessly, trying and failing to form some sort of response to that.

“This has nothing to do with you,” he says.

“You’re *joking*, Malfoy.” She starts to pace. It feels like the blood is freezing in her veins, and she’s trying to keep her knees from locking up. “You — look at you, you’re self-destructing! This is a cry for help —”

He wrenches himself free of the couch, and the ice that’s formed around him cracks loudly as he gets to his feet. He drags up his frozen sleeve, and she swears

“Can he hear me through the ice?” she hears herself ask, but she’s operating on autopilot.

“Yes.”

She puts her hand against the scorchingly cold wall, feeling it start to fuse to her skin almost instantly, like dry ice. It’s a powerful spell, whatever it is.

“Draco,” she says loudly. It echoes.

For a moment, the dark shadow doesn’t move — an eerie spot of blurry black. But then she sees his head shift toward her voice.

“I understand this takes away the pain.” She doesn’t sound like herself. “I’m sure it even feels good. But I...” She thinks carefully on her next words. Thinks back to everything she knows or thought she knew about his personality. Because this is that detonation they’ve all been waiting for, and if she isn’t cautious — he could...he...

She swallows back a sudden surge of panic and pain. Her voice is scratchy. A rasp.

“I think something may’ve gone wrong with your spell. Why...why don’t you let me see if we can alter it?” And her own tone reminds her of that way she hates being spoken to. That skittish animal tone.

She wonders if he hates it as much as she does.

His shadow has gone still again. There’s a pregnant pause.

“Draco...” she says again, unable to prevent some of the fear from leeching out.

But then the ice makes a strange noise. A crackling. Something’s shifting.

And she hears his cold, muted voice float through. He sounds like a ghost.

“You can come in.”

Something dark and heavy settles in her chest. It’s a simple enough phrase, but it bears a massive weight.

With a shaking breath, she tests the wall. Watches as her finger glides through, instantly enveloped in crippling cold.

She glances back to Nort and the others, uncertain. It’s the first time she thinks she’s seen Pansy look at her with anything other than annoyance.

Because they all know, and she knows — he isn't in his right mind. Isn't safe right now. Isn't sane right now.

And if she walks through that wall, he might not let her back out.

She knows.

And trusting him is like trusting a starving dog not to eat a plate of meat set in front of him. Trusting him got her into this mess. Trusting him ruined her life in a lot of ways.

She looks back at his shadow. Sees him turn away. Hears the crackle of the ice starting to reseal.

She steps through.



*January 29th, 1999*

IT MUST BE TWENTY DEGREES BELOW FREEZING. At least.

When she steps through the wall, it feels like shards of ice are being driven through her skin. Every muscle tenses, every joint locks into place. Her eyes fly shut instinctively, as though to guard against it, and she shoves her hands into the already cold pockets of her bathrobe.

But somehow she forces her lids to open. Watches the stream cloud of her breath rise in front of her as her gaze settles on him.

He's sitting on the sofa the way one would as they read the morning paper. Casually. Loosely. One knee propped up, his elbow resting on it. As though his fingers aren't dark blue. As though he isn't frozen against the leather. She can see where it's fused to his clothes. His skin.

He glances sideways at her, and his eyes are vacant.

"Granger," he nods. Sounds bored.

And she wants to slap him again. Cruel, unfeeling *bastard*.

"What are you doing?" she asks instead, voice trembling with the cold. She's already lost feeling in her toes.

"Enjoying an evening to myself," is his answer, and just like that, all of her caution flies out the window, sucked out of her just like the warmth.

"No, you aren't," she spits. "You're being selfish. Disgustingly selfish."

His gaze doesn't change, but his posture adjusts. He sits back a little. Looks her up and down. Says nothing.

"Your friends are out there." She points behind her angrily, breath coming in steamy bursts. "Worried sick. You've dragged them all out of bed to stand around this ridiculous bloody *igloo* of yours, and they're casting useless spell after