Summary

The war is over and a new school year is beginning. Everyone has to learn how to live again.

Notes

Hey everyone, this is my first ever go at an eighth year fic. Each chapter will be very short and I'll update daily as that is the easiest format for me to write in considering how busy I am right now. I haven’t written a full fanfic in a good three years and I'm a bit out of practice as a writer so this is partially an experiment for me- so It's probably not going to be my best just yet. All being said, I hope you enjoy it. Thank you very much for reading :)

Carpe Diem

by themafloys
She landed with a thud upon a bed of leaves, taking a deep breath that puffed out in to the early morning air and crooking her neck back she eyed the castle ahead of her, grey and old, yet rebuilt and new, crumbling once more with age and not war. She stuffed her wand in her robes and took one step forwards. This was the beginning of the rest of her life.

It seemed strange. The fact that she was returning again but this time on no train, with no Ron or Harry, no parents to see her off, no belongings to pack beyond a wand and her books. It had been a long hard war and where Ron and Harry were tired of school Hermione was tired of the silence, the letter from Hogwarts came as a relief. The days at The Burrow seemed to be dragging and it was beginning to wear on her. Especially when most nights - the nights she could sleep through at least - she was woken by muffled crying or screams from half empty bedrooms. It was no longer a safe haven to her but a living hell.

So Ron and Harry went off to London to live in Grimmauld Place and start their Auror training. Ginny and Hermione, on the other hand, were going back to school. Eighth year, they were calling it now, the collection of war shattered 18 year olds returning to complete their education, exhausted and haunted, more damaged than they could ever have anticipated being. It was bitter sweet. The joy of learning mixed in to a cocktail of long gone memories and too soon deaths. The people she had loved had fallen between these walls. She had fought between them. It was scarred stone now, visible only to those who suffered.

It knocked the breath out of her when she saw it, the Great Hall all spic and span like it had never been compromised by darkness. McGonagall smiled at her warmly, beckoned her to move beyond the wide doors and sit down with whoever else had arrived. It was a mismatched selection of eighth years, all earlier than the rest of the school as requested by the Headmistress, ‘so settling in could be done more efficiently’ she had said. There was Pansy Parkinson, running a thumb over her gleaming nails, black bob swallowing her face, Theodore Nott staring hard at the wall across from him, trying to pretend he wasn't there, Blaise Zabini, head high and proud, Neville Longbottom, a nervous smile on his lips at Hermione’s appearance, Ernie Macmillan pressed knee to knee with Hannah Abbot. And Draco Malfoy. Farthest from them all and sinking in to his skin. Pale and thin and small.
Settling In

Their common room was in North Tower. An until recently vacated expanse of relatively dusty furniture spruced up with strong cleaning charms and dotted around a cackling fire emanating a reassuring warmth. There was no gaudy red or jarring green, just grey sofas and armchairs, ebony chairs and tables and plum curtains that had a quality of oldness that was endearing enough that Hermione felt she could become quite comfortable here.

The password was Carpe Diem and Gryffindor’s was Lily Flower, they each had permission to return to their house common rooms whenever they wished, McGonagall had told them as she outlined the general rules with the same stoic authority they'd known her for all these years.

And that was all fine. When they had someone to pay attention to about the various circumstances of their return, the corridor patrol duties and the free reign to leave the castle and the stern order to respect each other and ‘for gods sake the war is finally over, do not cause any unneeded conflict’. But once McGonagall had vacated the room all eight of them were left on their own, to make eye contact, to possibly communicate. Hermione had realised the problem with this over the summer. The merging of certain houses with others and how it would be taken by certain students. So she looked across at Neville who was standing besides her, “Nice isn't it?”

He seemed mildly distracted, “Oh? Oh yeah, yeah very nice.”

“Come and help me un-pack my books?” She suggested, marching assertively up the stairs, taking him by the hand as the rest of them began to break in to separate paths. Some sat down, some migrated towards dormitories, others walked right out of the entrance again.

Hermione chose the bed nearest to the door and unlocked her case with her wand, scooping out stacks of books, “You can sort this years in to subject order on the shelf over there,” She told Neville, handing him Standard Book of Spells Grade 7 amongst various other titles and tackling the rest on her own, she scrunched her nose at the sight of them, “I think I might have over done it.”

“Just a little.” Neville grinned.

There were at least thirty five.

“So how was summer?” Hermione asked. She understood the question she was asking; how were the funerals? Do you have nightmares too? Why are you here? But all Neville did was smile sheepishly and proclaim,
“Grans finally proud of me now. Its weird - but nice.”

Hermione’s heart ached slightly in her chest, “It shouldn't have taken a giant snake and a magic sword for that to happen, you know. You’ve always been someone worth being proud of, Neville.”

His cheeks flushed and he turned and hid behind a defence textbook she’d bought at Diagon Alley three days ago, “What about you? Summer, I mean.”

“Oh I’ve just been at The Burrow, really.” She murmured.

“Seen your parents?”

“No actually - I’ve decided its best just to let them be.”

“I’m sorry Hermione.” She saw it in his face when she finally looked up at him, the expression of a man who's parents did not know him either, so she distracted herself with Dumbledore’s copy of Beedle The Bard as to not think about the empty greying couple in St Mungo’s who would never remember their son.

“It’s safer for them that way,

Neville looked confused.

“Memory charms and all. Tricky things.”

They fell in to a silent work for a few more minutes before the door opened again and Pansy Parkinson entered the room.

“Hey Granger,” She smiled, the tip of her lips at the same cruel edge Hermione recognised all too well, “You don’t snore do you? Just so I know if I have to set up any silencing charms. Living with Millicent Bullstrode for seven years taught me well.”
“Not that I’m aware of.” Hermione replied stiffly, eyebrows raised as she slot three novels next to each other, sending Neville a knowing look which made him grin secretively. It might have been entirely mad to know she would be sleeping in the same room as Pansy Parkinson for eight months and she knew full well she might end up clutching her wand under her pillow, but it alleviated the pain of living, to talk about something as mundane as silencing charms for once.

“I suppose we’ll soon find out,” She sighed, lounging back on her silk sheets, “If you keep me awake all night though we will have a problem Granger.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

And it could have been a trick of the eye but she was sure she saw Pansy Parkinson’s shaking hands reaching for a vial of purple potion that had disappeared from view by the time she turned around again. Or maybe she had not seen that at all. But either way, she wanted to ask the same question again, it was a relentless tug of curiosity, why are you here? We all hate you.
The First Night

All was quiet. There was a violent wind whirling outside and a rush of leaves to be heard, echoing amongst the soft breaths of Pansy and Hannah sleeping deeply in their beds. Ginny and Luna had arrived with the rest of the school and along with Neville they all sat together, catching up and smiling and pretending that it wasn't strange not to have Harry and Ron next to them, or Parvati and Lavender laughing girlishly three seats down. They were ghostly memories now, Hermione realised. Everything that had passed was gone forever now and Hogwarts would never be the same.

She couldn’t stop herself from glancing over at Slytherin table. Wide eyed first years, teary and terrified, those three syllables, blared whilst they were tucked under the Sorting Hat, sounding like a death sentence. She hoped they would not suffer too much for the sins of their predecessors. Her eyes slid from student to student, resting on Pansy Parkinson who had been considerably less vile than she had expected, Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini who she had not yet had the misfortune of greeting and Draco Malfoy, cold eyed and hollow. She knew they were all just children, innocents. But the wounds were still fresh and every time she heard a cackle or saw a mess of black hair her blood chilled and her heart skipped a beat. She was looking at Malfoy’s expression now, vacant, spooning food back and forth but not eating and she remembered what it was like to be at the Manor, remembered his face twisted in what she hoped had been disgust, feeling the burning, the tainting of her skin, hot putrid breath against her ear.

So there she was tucked up in bed, sheets knotted in her hands as she stared up at the star dappled ceiling, following the specs of grey white moonlight with her eyes, listening to the sounds of calm as her heart thumped loudly in her chest. Reaching over for her wand she cast a silent lumos and fished for a book, not looking at the title she slipped her feet in to the battered slippers she’d taken to war with her and padded gently down the stairs.

The fire was dull, a meekly glowing ember in the pit of an ashy tray. The common room was empty and the clock on the wall ticked past the seconds slowly, finally declaring that it was two o clock. She grabbed a throw from the back of one of the sofas and sunk in to an armchair by the fire, tucking her feet beneath her and opening the paperback in her hands.

It was then she realised she was not alone.

“Malfoy.” She gasped. He’d given her quite the fright tucked in to a darkened corner just opposite from her, staring seemingly at nothing, a crystal glass sitting empty in his hand.

“Hello, Granger.” He said. She didn’t like it, it unnerved her, his tone of voice, there was no fight in it.
“I didn’t see you.” She breathed, awkwardly bowing her head to her book.

“No.” Was all he said. He said nothing else at all. But he didn’t move either. Neither of them did. They sat there in front of the cackling fire until it extinguished completely into weak smoking tongues and the sun began to rise gently from its slumber. Hermione was nearing the end of her book and Malfoy was sleeping, neck crooked at a peculiar angle and it startled her when she looked up, she’d forgotten he was even there.

As she finished the last sentence and tucked the book under her blanket between her chest and knees she stayed squished up in the armchair, achy with fatigue but nowhere nearing sleep, watching his face. He looked peaceful, there was no line to mark stress between his brows, no curl to his lips, no tension to his shoulders. He hadn’t called her Mudblood either. There was no foul comment to be heard. She’s not sure what she expected in a post Voldemort world but she didn’t expect him to be so resigned. After all he had once wished her dead. He had stared at the fire silently instead, drifting off into a deep sleep, glass rolling out of his hand and onto the cushioned floor, decked with thick carpet.

Then his eyes began to move and a door opened loudly, startling them both to alertness. They looked at each other warily as if they did not quite understand what had happened and she could see he was gripping his wand as tightly as Hermione was grasping her own. She backed away cautiously, up the stairs and to her cold weak sun shadowed bed with just five minutes to spare before Pansy’s charmed alarm blared and the first day of school began.
Marmalade

“Pass me the marmalade?”

Hermione slid the jar across the table to Ginny before jamming her spoon back in to her porridge bowl, “How’s it looking for you?”

“Divination first fucking thing,” She moaned, scanning the parchment with her eyes, “That’ll be Runes for you?”

Hermione checked, “No, Arithmancy. I’ll see you straight after in Charms though.”

“Good.” Ginny declared, “I’ll need someone to cheer me up after two hours of Trelawney.”

“I don’t know why you do it to yourself.” Hermione was remembering, quite vividly, the detailed predictions of her best friends death and stuffy perfumed classroom, it made her shiver, she was glad to be rid of it.

“I like an easy O, Hermione. Not all of us are complete masochists.”

“Arithmancy isn't bad,” She argued, Ginny was looking at her as if she knew Hermione was telling a very elaborate and obvious lie, “It’s fascinating. A challenge. I like challenges.”

“Whatever you say.”

Ginny stuffed the last of her toast in her mouth and poured a second cup of coffee.

“I’ll have one too please.”

Ginny hesitated, looking up beyond that thick sheet of red hair, “You’ve had like six.”
“Three.” Hermione deadpanned.

“No sleep?”

Hermione tried not to let her eyes shift towards Slytherin table so looked towards the charmed ceiling instead, watching the wispy clouds circulate the length of the hall, “A little.”

“You stayed up all night again didn't you?”

But Ginny wasn't judging. Many a time over the summer they’d sat together in the garden in the warm twilit August air, letting the hours go by in meditative silence, trying not to think too much about everything.

She finally sloshed more liquid in to her cup.

“Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

A few more minutes of silence passed in which Hermione thumbed through the Prophet and Ginny continued to complain about their similar timetables to anyone who would listen as Neville approached the table. He slot himself between Hermione and a tiny second year who was eyeing her every three seconds and failing miserably to be discreet about it. Hermione supposed today would be one of those days in which she was reminded what being a 'War Hero' meant for her life now.

“Morning!” She beamed, trying not to let her hand shake too much as she gulped down a scolding mouthful of black coffee.

“How was sleeping with the snakes?” Ginny smirked.

“Ernie’s here too,” Neville reminded her, spooning jam on top of his porridge, “He still has a fair amount of issues that's for sure.”
Ginny snorted, “Surprising.”

“He was going on all night about *decency* and *those who agreed with him* with a dirty look on his face.”

“You can’t really blame him though,” Hermione said, “His parents are dead.”

Ginny took in a sharp breath and looked down at her crumby plate, Neville gulped.

“It doesn’t mean you have to have a go at everyone though does it?” Neville said gravely.

“Perhaps not.” Hermione conceded, “I’ve been thinking about it all. Breaking the ice. House unity. Maybe doing like a group therapy thing, getting a Healer in too.”

“Group therapy thing.” Ginny echoed.

“Yes.”

“Its just- It’s a nice idea but *who would come*?” Ginny glanced behind her at Slytherin table, past the Ravenclaws and over the Hufflepuffs as if to demonstrate the challenge she would face, “I highly doubt most of us want to talk about it, I don’t know what it’s like in the muggle word but Mind Healers aren’t really welcomed with open arms by many. Besides, what if Slytherins show up? There’ll be a *brawl.*”

“Multiple brawls.” Neville added thoughtfully.

“Well its up to us to change that isn’t it?” Hermione told them, “The war is over and the criminals are in Azkaban and I for one, do not want to spend the rest of year avoiding peoples glances and having to take sides.”

“I think more House Elf liberation might be a safer route, Hermione.” Ginny smiled sadly.

“No. No, she’s right,” Neville nodded, it was still a new thing to hear Neville speak up and
Hermione’s heart swelled slightly every time he did something to prove he knew his own worth, “We’ve got to look out for each other, we've got to mend.”

Ginny sighed, “On your heads be it.”

“You’ll still come though wont you?” Hermione asked nervously.

“Of course, you idiot.” She smiled, stretching a little before rising from her seat, “We better get off, it’s ten to.”
Arithmancy

She was one of the first to enter the classroom and she chose a seat by the window, close to the cool flush of morning sun. She was thinking about McGonagall, suggesting the ‘Group Therapy Thing’ and everything that would come of it. Would she flat out decline? Would there be terms? Hermione couldn’t be sure. Movement obstructed her clear view of the blackboard as Malfoy entered the room, he hesitated briefly before going to sit next to Theodore Nott who greeted him with a knowing smile (an irritating Slytherin trait) and she pretended she wasn't looking.

“Mind if I sit?”

Hermione looked away and up at the girl before her, Pansy was dabbing her lips with a forefinger.

“Go for it.” She said impartially, dipping her new quill in an inkwell and titling her parchment ready for the lesson, “I didn’t know you took Arithmancy.”

“I didn’t,” Pansy brushed her hair back from her face and a diamond glint shone from her uncovered earlobe, “Not back then. Fancied a change this year though, things can get obscenely dull.”

“Why are you here then?” Hermione hadn’t meant for it to come out like that, harsh and short. But it was what had been irritating her for the best of twenty four hours, a question not even she could manage to find the answer to.

“Why are any of us fucking here, Granger?” Pansy asked, although it did not sound like a question, “We’re learning how to live again.”

Hermione stared at her and Pansy’s lips curled up in to a smirk.

“What, surprised? It’s a tragedy I’ll be the first to admit that, but we have hearts as well.”

She bent her head to copy up a definition from the chalk board unaffected by the quality of their conversation. Hermione thought about it for the rest of the lesson, in between note taking and question answering of course. Maybe that was why there were Slytherins brave enough to return. It was nothing to do with ulterior motive or craziness, they were not demons, not evil as their parents were, they just wanted a second chance at the life they should have always had. There was nothing strange about that, the desire to survive. Packing away her books she let herself watch him again,
Pansy walked by him and pressed a kiss to his crown saying she’d see him later and he nodded, looking brighter than he had done the last time she’d looked. It made her miss Ron and Harry.
She was staring at the ceiling again. She’d gone to McGonagall earlier on that day and suggested her idea in way that mirrored anxious trespassing over a minefield. She need not have worried. McGonagall had deemed it an excellent idea, suggested Hermione got on to contacts and arrangements immediately and offered an empty classroom. She left her Professor’s office in good spirits and went to dinner, sitting with Luna at Ravenclaw table amongst the rest of her friends. She spent the rest of the evening in Gryffindor tower writing a Charms essay with Ginny, feeling in considerably better spirits. But everyone was aslepp now and her heart was beginning to thin again, the emptiness opening up until it was a void so deep and wide she felt she had no place to breathe.

So she crept downstairs again, her lumos glinting dully against the stone walls. Peering in to the stillness of the common room, not expecting to see Draco Malfoy again, yet coming across him sitting in the same seat with the same glass, this time it was half full, liquid brown and interspersed with mirrored flecks of amber flames spouting from the fireplace.

She smiled at him awkwardly and sunk to the floor at the foot of the chair she had been sitting in the night before, leaning against its back as she dug out a length of parchment from her bag and a muggle pen (they made writing easier at this angle and felt inexplicably like home). Hermione wrote for what seemed like hours; to Ron and Harry. About Group Therapy and how they were all doing okay and how she was finding the lessons and was auror training going well? Were they enjoying themselves? The scratch of pen against paper was occasionally joined by the crackle of fire or clink of glass that set as a reminder of who she was sitting with, which, in all honesty, she was trying to forget.

Once she’d read it over three times and enveloped it, slipping it between the hard back of her book and the final page, ready to post in the earlier hours when it was viewed as socially acceptable and when she was actually allowed to be out of bed, she settled back against the chair leg and opened the front of her book, awaiting the sweet oblivion of other worldliness.

She hadn’t expected to finish as early as she did. Malfoy was still awake. She noticed this as she peered up at him and saw his glassy eyes wide and grey. It was a strange compulsion that made her do it, but she shut her book and retrieved the stray letter, noting the time of five thirty am and walked over to where he was sitting.

“Here.” She said, stretching an arm towards him, offering him the novel.

He looked up at her with confusion, “What?”
“Well that’s polite,” She complained, finding it easy to fall in to old ways again after dancing around him and everything he reminded her of for the last day or so, “I’m offering you my book, the least you could say is thank you.”

“Why would I want your book?” He asked, although it seemed less spiteful and more curious than she was used to.

“I don’t know, to read? It must be awfully dull just staring at that bloody fire all night.”

His lips crooked up slightly and she imagined he could be trying to prevent laughter.

“Thank you.” He replied, small. He took the book and flipped it over to read the synopsis and she turned her letter over in her palm before holding it up to him.

“See you later.” She gestured.

And walking out of the heavy door she wondered why she’d given him her book, her muggle book, and felt knotted up and satisfied about it all at the same time.
“What’s it say?”

He watched him frowning distastefully, reading the letter again and again and crumpling the edges until they were tearing in his fists.

Blaise looked up and puffed out a breath, “Funeral date.”

“Well when is it?”

“Saturday.”

“You’re going aren’t you?”

Blaise let out a cruel laugh, “Of course I’m not.”

“Blaise. It’s your fucking mother.” Draco looked at him exasperatedly.

Of all the types of pureblood families he’d known and grown up with, Blaise Zabini’s was by far the most demented. Each of his mothers’ husbands had died under mysterious circumstances leaving her richer each time- not that she needed the money, of course. But this summer whilst holidaying in Italy the newest husband, who’s name Draco could never recall as Blaise only spoke of them as numbers, had beat her to it. Emeline Zabini had curiously dropped dead in their greenhouse, the most peculiar place for a forty-five year old aristocrat to be. When Blaise had got the letter on August 28th - he’d been hiding out at Draco’s empty house the entire summer after the end of the war for reasons neither of them would ever articulate- he had an unrecognisable expression upon his face before sighing resignedly and passing it over to Draco to read. They had not spoken about it again. But this, this was important. Draco knew if his mother died he would never forgive himself for missing her funeral. Regardless of Emeline’s character it sat unkindly with Draco, what his friend was doing.

“I don’t care if she’s my mother, you know full well she’s never cared enough about me for any of it to matter.” Blaise argued, getting up from his seat in the yellow glowing library, filled with lamps and thick with chatter, to scan the bookshelf behind them.
“She raised you.”

Blaise scoffed, “Barely. Or did she also have a guest room at Theo’s, I never noticed?”

He pulled out a thick Astronomy textbook and blew off the dust, Draco dog eared his book page and leaned forwards, “That’s not the point-“

“Isn’t it?” Blaise hissed, thumping back down on to his chair, “What’s blood Draco? It never got us far before.”

He recoiled rigidly, breathing hard out of his nose, “Okay. Got it. I’ll shut up.”

“What the fuck are you reading anyway? You’ve been glued to it all day.” Blaise asked, dipping his head to get a look at the cover. The spine was cracking and the edges were matted and he knew it must look peculiar for him to be reading a book that was in a state like this. Apparently Granger read hers ten times.

“Mm? Pride and Prejudice.” He tried to sound careless, not make a big deal out of it, there wasn’t a big deal about it anyway.

“Strange.” Blaise said, shaking his head as if brushing off a thought and going back to dragging a dry quill across the page he was skim reading.

Draco stared in to the blank distance for a little while, head empty, before returning to his, as he had figured out rather quickly, muggle book, and trying to erase the last ten minutes from the front of his mind, push it back, preferably near the chains and rust of the chamber where his demons dwelled. It was easy to ignore them when he was reading or heartily drunk or talking to someone like Blaise who cared substantially less than he did, but when his mind was off it he noticed them. The students whispering and staring and giving him dirty looks, judging them for writing essays and reading well loved books in the corner of their school library. He absentmindedly scratched his forearm and tried to ignore the hiss of ‘Death Eater’ he heard, that continued to echo in his mind before it bounced back behind the bars squashed amongst the rest, as he left through the wide doors and towards North Tower for another expectantly restless night.
By the Light of the Moon

She’d noticed at dinner, his head stuck in her book, completely immersed, Pansy’s conversation running off him like water. It made her heart skip unnaturally. She wasn't sure what she had expected of it but she hadn't expected him to actually pick it up and open it and pay interest. How absurd. She realised even the most realistic of people could find themselves surprised.

Her Owl to St Mungo’s had been returned, Harry and Ron’s had not. They had considered her request but had to regretfully deny it due to lack of staff (which she gathered meant more Healers were killed in the war than she had realised) and that if anyone wished to they would have to add themselves to the thick dusty waiting list book sitting on an ancient wizard’s shelf in London. Marvellous. Ginny had told her not to worry, Neville said it would be fine, they’d just have to do it themselves. So she’d scoured the library at lunch time for psychology books to no avail, for a school, Hogwarts was woefully understocked. Hermione found herself flipping through a Flourish and Blott’s catalogue over dinner between cautious glances at the Slytherin table and small talk, attempting to track down some informative volumes that would help her. This wasn’t the deal. She organised, other’s taught. It was the same with Dumbledore's Army, she wasn't made for this. ‘I like challenges’ echoed in her head and she scoffed at herself regretfully.

“That’s more than enough for me,” Ginny exclaimed, pushing away from the books littered over Hermione’s bed. The dorm room was silent. Pansy was flipping through Witch Weekly in her silk pyjamas one bed over, Hannah was no doubt with Ernie, they were always attached at the hip it seemed, and Hermione and Ginny had been pummelling their Defence theory for four hours.

“It’s only midnight.” Hermione whined, quill held aloft in her hand with a disheartened expression on her face.

“Midnight, Hermione. I have to set up for quidditch trials in the morning.” Ginny got up, closing her books and swinging her bag over her shoulder, “Get some sleep” She added meaningfully to which Hermione glared back at.

“Bye, Parkinson.”

“Don’t take your time, Weasley.” Was the reply that sounded from behind her half drawn curtains and Hermione huffed an amused laugh.

Hannah had crept through the door within the hour and silently sunk in to her bed, Pansy had finished her magazine, Hermione had heard a final clink of glass before she had also turned in and it was dark again. She had been waiting for this. She hated to admit it but it had been at the back of her mind all day. When the coast sounded clear she reached for the book she had stashed under her pillow and crept from their room once more, the other girls completely unaware in their deep and
peaceful slumber.

He was sipping from that glass when she located him, her book sitting closed on the arm of his chair.

“You finished it.” You started it, she thought really.

“Yes.”

Hermione settled in to the chair opposite him and he offered her the hardback which she took silently, slotting it between the left arm and cushion of her chair, “Did you like it?”

“Alarmingly so.” he replied softly and she scanned his face, pale sunken cheeks and rose tinted lips and wondered if he smelled of whisky too.

“Good,” She risked a coy smile, “I wondered, with it being muggle and all.”

“What, that the big bad Death Eater would throw a fit?”

“Something of the sort.” She admitted, trying not to notice how he was subconsciously clutching his forearm.

He lifted the glass to his lips, “I’m too tired for that, Granger.”

Hermione nodded, watching as he tipped back his head and gulped it down before stretching an arm out to her, offering her the half full bottle in question.

“Oh, no, I shouldn’t.” She shook her head, I’ll fall asleep and I’ll have a nightmare and no one is here to comfort me and I don’t want to be comforted.

He got the message and sat it back on the floor at his feet, watching the swirls of the fire, she opened her new book. Feeling Malfoy’s gaze on her she looked towards him, holding it up, “Gatsby.” She said.
There was a long drawn out silence and like the night before she found herself doing something she never thought she would have again, “Would you like to read it with me?”

Malfroy didn't reply for quite a time and she suspected there was an internal battle going on somewhere.

Then he breathed, “Alright.”

She held his gaze, moving over to the sofa so they could sit together, tucking her legs beneath herself and patting a hand against the empty space, indicating she wanted him to join her. Which he did, leaving the bottle of Ogden’s to heat up in the glare of the fire and sinking next to her, so close she could have moved her arm half an inch and be pressed up against him. They said nothing else. For the sake of awkwardness or thankfulness for the peace she couldn’t decide. But they sat there, reading page by page as the hours tumbled on. Hermione found she read approximately three seconds faster than Malfoy, so by page ten they had formed an effective routine in which she held the book and he flipped the sheets over each time. They did not stop until they reached the end, perhaps because if they took a break for one second they would realise how awkward it was, how out of place, for them of all people to be sharing a book by the light of the moon. And once they did she closed it carefully and leaned back against the headrest, watching clock hand near Seven.

“We’d better go.” Malfoy said. He was right. Eighth year would rise soon and the idea of Neville Longbottom bounding down from his bed and to the sight of Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger looking cosy on the sofa seemed equally unexplainable and unwanted.

“Wait,” She started as he collected his bottle and stretched his arms back before the fire, “I’m doing this group therapy thing on Friday night for Eighth Years. Come?”

What did she think she was doing? Inviting Draco Malfoy to talk about his feelings in the same room as the unendingly vicious Ernie Macmillan and a bunch of do gooders whom he offended greatly in his younger years? She was insane. Did she even want him there? Making everyone all anxious and reminding them of their dead parents and fallen friends and the tallest tower? But she didn’t have time to retract the statement for he just looked at her with a single stony, unreadable expression on his face and said,

“Maybe. It sounds like something Pansy will drag me to anyway. Not that it’s my thing.”

She heard him aged fourteen in those last five words, honestly, what a fucking ridiculous idea,
pathetic really, Granger. But she quashed the thought, smiling hopefully as she left, on a quest to search out a hot strong cup of coffee.
It was Friday. The week had passed in a breath and Hermione had spent it working through her subjects, pinning up Group Therapy notices to their common room boards and reading. With Draco Malfoy. For the last two nights. There was little need for words, they met at one in the morning and turned pages until sunrise, going about their days with their own friends and their own lives as if they’d never known one another. No one had any idea. Hermione suspected one of the house elves who had stumbled in accidentally one night and disapparated immediately probably did, but no one of consequence. And that wasn’t a bad thing. Not when she’d asked Ernie in Herbology if he’d come to group therapy and he’d asked very specifically and irritatingly who would be attending. She named all her friends and conveniently left out Pansy, Malfoy and anyone else who might arrive. It was better that way. Maybe once she could get them all in a room the tension would lift - or become worse than ever. She ignored the possibility of that outcome.

Turning over a page in her newest book *Healing The Mind* she risked another glance at Slytherin table, a habit she had not yet been able to shirk. Malfoy and Pansy were speaking heatedly to Blaise Zabini. Theodore Nott was reading the Prophet decidedly uninterested and she wondered what could be going on, what secrets were woven amongst their words?

“Are you looking for them too?”

“Sorry?” Hermione was startled out of her daze, feeling her cheeks colour at the thought of having been caught eyeing the Slytherins to find Luna was looking at her with wide eyes and a rapt expression.

“The Wrackspurts, I think they’re all over Hufflepuff table. Thomas Jenkins keeps brushing his ear.”

“Y-yeah,” Hermione began nervously, she couldn’t exactly say *No Luna, I was staring at Draco Malfoy, we’ve become quite civil did you know?* Instead she coughed and bowed her head back to her book, “Sure.”

“It’ll be fine,” Luna said, completely misinterpreting her discomfort, “Tonight.”

Hermione smiled back at her, “Fingers crossed.”

She was sure not to look up from her book again.
Death Eaters and Crisps

They were on the third floor next to the charms classroom. It was eight o clock so there were no younger students to interfere and all was quiet and foreboding like the silence before running in to battle. In the yellow lamp lit room, desks pushed back to walls, Neville was twiddling his thumbs, Luna was reading an old edition of the Quibbler. Ginny was trying to open a bag of crisps and making such a mess of it Hermione had to snatch it from her and break it open before its contents spilled all over the floor in bright and pungent orange. Hermione was biting down hard on her lip until she imagined she could taste iron, tapping a foot incessantly and trying to remember why she’d decided to put herself through this in the first place.

Slowly, students filtered in, Hannah poked her head around the door nervously, smiling when Hermione gushed, “You came!” She did not think anyone would’ve done.

“Yeah. Ernie’s on his way.” She explained, perching on a rugged armchair and scratching a freckled eyelid mindfully.

“Hello, losers,” Pansy announced herself lazily, swanning in to the room, “We’ve come for the reckoning.”

“Sit down, Pansy.”

As she placed herself next to Neville on the sofa, who attempted to discreetly shuffle westwards, Malfoy followed suit, tie knotted tight and shirt crisp and white and Hermione smiled at him brightly, “Hey.”

“Told you she’d drag me.” He leaned backwards, hands in his pockets, looking livelier than ever.

Hermione glanced over at Pansy who was tossing over a crisp with her manicured nail in search for a decent one and then back at Malfoy, “I’m glad you’re here.”

Ginny’s loud inquiry punctured the air, “What are you two talking about?”

Hermione jumped slightly, “It’s called manners, Ginny.” Before recovering herself and taking her seat again, making eye contact with Malfoy as he positioned himself next to Pansy, wondering why the hell anyone had actually taken her this seriously.
A tall figure entered in to the doorway, fair and unamused.

“Sorry I’m late Hermione- ah, I see you’ve let the riff raff in.” Ernie’s expression turned unpleasant and he looked as though he felt quite betrayed by Hermione’s reassuring declaration that only certain people would be attending.

“Take a seat.” She told him, *and shut up,* “Is this everyone?”

“Blaise and Theo would rather die than come.” Pansy confirmed, blissfully unaware of the way Ernie was clenching and unclenching his fists in his seat next to Hannah, a red rising to dash his pale cheeks.

He breathed hard, “Well you’ve got to give it to them, at least *some* people know their place.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Pansy spat. Hermione noticed Malfoy’s hand slide to her wrist but she brushed him off furiously and Hermione heard the tell tale clink she was always curious about as Pansy dug her hand in to her robes for her wand.

“I’m just surprised McGonagall let you in that’s all, your place is Azkaban.”

Hermione was panicking now. She looked at Luna who was still cluelessly reading her magazine, then to Neville who was mouthing something that looked like the word *brawls* and then to Malfoy who had has hand over his forearm again and was refusing to make eye contact. A rush of fear shot down her spine, shaking her blood.

Pansy sucked in a breath and pronounced in a low and dangerous tone, “*You carry on like that and it will be my fucking place, Macmillan.*”

“Going to kill me too are you? Just like your pathetic Death Eater friend did?” Ernie’s fiery eyes shot to Malfoy, who unless for the words he uttered Hermione would’ve thought he had been quite unaffected by the series of events,

“Just shut the fuck up, you’re not doing yourself any favours.”

But Ernie was unstoppable now, he threw his wand arm up, lashing it between Pansy and Malfoy deliriously, “*You killed my family.*”
It could’ve been a whip of wind but it sounded like the beginnings of a curse and felt like a stab to the heart, shocking Hermione in to action.

“That’s enough!” She snapped, fearing a full on duel breaking out over the coffee table, “The whole point of these meetings is acceptance and mending and support, not to have quarrels and start threatening students you don’t particularly like.”

“Ernie, if you can’t accept the Slytherins then maybe you shouldn’t be here at all, I suggest you come back when you’re prepared to be mature.” Hermione told him shortly.

He stood up, stuffing his wand back underneath his robes and turned to Hannah, speaking in ragged breaths, the heat on his cheeks glistening like ugly rubies, “Fine. Are you coming or what?”

Hannah looked bewildered and glanced from Hermione to Ernie as if hoping for her to interject and whisk her away from him to safety. There was a tugging at the back of Hermione’s mind that told her Hannah was anything but safe. He huffed as if shrugging off anger and stretched out an arm to her and she swallowed, taking his hand and allowing herself to be marched back up to the common room. Hermione sighed, sinking down in to an armchair and covering her face with her hands once the door had slammed like a bullet behind them.

“That went well.” She said through muffled palms, feeling them growing damp with her heavy breaths.

“I did say brawls.” Ginny added.

“I’m an idiot.” She declared, flinging her arms to her sides and lying back.

Pansy looked briefly strained as if she was finding it difficult to form a sentence before she finally said, a mildly pained expression on her face, “No you’re not. You just wanted to do something nice thats all.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows in disbelief, “What happened to you?”

“Fuck Hermione, I’m trying to be nice,” Pansy drawled exasperatedly, “Take the compliment.”
It was the first time she’d addressed her by her first name and she felt a rush of amusement at Pansy fucking Parkinson complimenting her with no ulterior motive, she could almost laugh.

“It will,” Hermione’s lip quirked upwards, “Thanks.”

“So, what was on the agenda for today anyway?” Ginny asked encouragingly.

Hermione shuffled upwards and pulled the stack of paper from the coffee table on to her lap, “Well I was going to start with trust exercises.”

Pansy snorted. Hermione threw her a glare.

“Maybe you’re just trying too hard,” Ginny suggested, “What if we just came here to spill our guts. No trust exercises or-

She crooked her neck to look at a book title,

“CBT. Let’s just talk.”

“I think that’s a good idea.” Malfoy interjected evenly.

Ginny smirked slightly looking over at him, “See? Even Malfoy agrees with me.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Weasley.” He murmured and Hermione broke out in to a grin.

“Okay. Talking. Good.” She breathed, trying to pull herself out of a gloomy reverie.

They decided that for one day an almost fight between Pansy Parkinson, Draco Malfoy and Ernie Macmillan that could’ve resulted in an emergency trip to St Mungo’s was enough for anyone, so Ginny and Neville left to work on a Herbology essay together, Luna asked politely if she could take the barely touched bowl of crisps to feed the mermen, to which Hermione granted her permission
albeit uneasily, and Pansy was out of the door before much of this had taken place, murmuring about *more important things to do*. It was only when she’d finished organising her stack of books and paper she realised Malfoy was still there, sitting across from her and watching her work.

“Want to go somewhere?” He asked, grey eyes glittering slightly in the artificial light of the evening, she was reminded then that he had a beating heart, he was no glass case.

“It’s not one o clock.” She teased, looking down to her lap of books, “I don’t even have a new book on me.”

He smiled warmly and stood, tilting his neck with the kind of smooth confidence pureblood breeding emanated, “I was thinking of something else.”
They walked quietly down the halls, listening to the echoes of their footsteps against the cold stone in
the silence of the night. They flew past the Headmistresses’ office and trailed up a staircase that
would lead them towards the tallest tower. She let the crescents of her nails push in to her palms
uneasily as she realised this was where they were going, she knew it was stupid, but it was already
reminding her of Dumbledore’s body, frail and still at the foot of the brick stretch, all the tears that
were shed and Harry’s shaking body woven tightly around Ginny’s black form. But they’d reached
the doorway anyway and Malfoy gingerly performed an unlocking charm before letting the door
creek open for them to flood in to the wide open space. Hermione felt an immediate gush of cool air
and wrapped her arms around herself, watching her breath dissipate in chilled puffs like smoke in to
the surroundings, smelling the freshness of grass, remnants from summer in the thick night air.

“Right up to the barriers.” Malfoy beckoned her, walking towards them himself and holding the
railings, tipping himself over them slightly so his torso was floating above open air, feet firmly on the
ground.

“You didn’t bring me here to watch you jump did you?” Hermione joked weakly, watching him,
head tilted up in to the moonlight. She slowly inched towards him until they were standing side by
side almost touching, looking out in to the open expanse of grounds and air and shimmering stars.

“I know it’s not special,” He began, “It’s not like we don’t come up here all the time for Astronomy
and stuff but there’s something about being here alone that I love.”

“Come up here often?”

She couldn’t take her eyes of him, how relaxed he look, how free, she thought it could be a beautiful
portrait.

“Sometimes, before I see you. I used to come up here all the time in sixth year though. Couldn’t
after, not with the Carrows’ and everything.”

She smiled at him softly, grasping the barriers and mimicking his pose, letting her thick hair tousle in
the wind, “It’s nice.”

He turned and looked right at her, “You think?”
She realised how close they were. Letting her head tip back she let herself look properly at his eyes, dim in the darkness of course, yet unexplainably captivating. Hermione let her gaze dash to his lips and shot her eyes back up to his as soon as she’d realised what she’d done with something of a gasp. He did not pull back. So she jerked her head forwards gently, feeling a thrill of uncertainty, the adrenaline of unknowing gushing through her veins, heart matching pace with the wind. Then he did the same, letting a thumb rest lightly on her cheek, his cold fingertips softly sitting against her neck. She closed her eyes briefly at the chill.

“I do.” She whispered like it was permission. He noticed, pushing himself slightly close enough for her chest to meet his, seconds dragging out like hours, slow and soft and then he pressed his lips to hers. It wasn't exactly a kiss. It was an unsure press of lips, a smooth and firm question to which she answered by cupping his cheeks with her hands, moving hers against his like a nervous ebb and flow of tide.

They broke apart. Hermione did not move, she felt oddly glued to the spot, forehead against his, hands against his icy cheeks, his single hand still resting softly against the side of her face, over the pulse point on her neck that was thrumming loudly now.

It was Malfoy who stepped away, a look on his face that Hermione had not expected, a sad, broken look. As if the world had crashed to the ground before him and left him nothing. She risked a small smile, reassuring him that somehow this was completely okay to her. But he was bolting the locks faster than she’d anticipated, his face sliding in to a shield of expressionlessness.

“We should go.” He said
Toothache

He’d returned to his dormitory once they’d made it to the common room the night before and left her standing alone in the open space wondering what the hell just happened. It was fuzzy in her brain, thick and confused like soup watered down and she had to sit for a little while and just get her thoughts in order. She wanted to seek someone out but instead she went to bed, sleeping restlessly, in an hour, out an hour, for 12 of them, demanding answers from thin air.

Breakfast time. Hermione was groggy, hands wrapped around an almost over flowing cup of coffee, wondering why the hell she’d tried to sleep, it always made her feel worse when it was forced. The morning post swooped in through the high windows and a dusty brown barn owl dropped a slip of parchment on to her empty plate.

She looked over at Ginny, “It’s from Harry.”

“Finally. You sent it ages ago.”

Hermione unraveled it and spread it out between them. It was nothing if but a bit dull, about being tired and having work and how Ron was starting to regret the decision to become an Auror because he was sitting down and revising for an exam- exactly the reason he’d declined to come back to school. She smiled at the thought endearingly. There was a note under the Love, Harry and Ron, p.s, it said, let us know when Hogsmeade weekend is, we want to see you. Hermione was already scrawling the October date on to the back, next to a heart and a small well wish and setting it back off to London with the same owl that was hovering uneasily over the plates of food and filled jugs.

“I’m glad they’re good.” Ginny said, tying her hair back with a band, she was about to go to practice.

“Yeah.” Hermione murmured. She wasn’t really listening anymore but looking over at Slytherin table where Pansy was shaking her head at Blaise and Draco and Theo had their backs to her in deep and lively chit chat. She wondered what she’d done that was so wrong. It was scary, it was ridiculous, it was possibly idiotic but it wasn’t hateful and she wondered why he hadn’t just said that it wasn’t what he wanted. Why did he have to ignore her? Thats what words were for weren’t they? Setting records straight?

“You alright?”
Neville was snapping his fingers in front of her eyes. She startled.

Regained herself, Hermione hid behind her coffee cup as she drained it, “Of course I am.”

“No, there’s something wrong.” Ginny realised, watching her closely as if she could see clues in the depths of her eyes.

“There’s not!”

“She’ll tell us if she wants,” Neville decided, slopping pumpkin juice in to a goblet, he was later than usual and she wondered why, “Won’t you Hermione?”

“Y- I mean, I would, if there actually was something.”

“I’ll be on the pitch until 12, maybe you and Neville could find Luna and come watch for a little while? We can do that talking later.” Ginny told her with an absolute determination in her tone which Hermione loathed in that moment.

“Maybe.” Hermione replied sarcastically.

But Ginny quirked up her lip and she realised she’d just revealed to them something was wrong. Occupying herself with pouring another coffee as Neville buttered his toast and Ginny bounced away she tried to push it out of her mind. There were more important things to life than being rejected by Draco Malfoy. *Rejected by Draco Malfoy.* She shivered. The phrase echoed around her head all day, pestering her like a toothache.
“So what is it then?” Ginny demanded, walking alongside Hermione with her broom slung over her shoulder, they were watching Neville and Luna in the distance. He was trying to snatch her Gryffindor lion hat from her head and they were laughing gleefully and it was the most delightful thing Hermione had ever seen.

“Oh, nothing.” She shrugged, digging her hands in to her deep pockets and steering her gaze to the softened damp grass that was wetting their shoe soles, thickening them with mud.

Ginny gave her a harsh look.

“Promise you wont make a big deal about it?” Hermione asked, nervous at the prospect of what Ginny could and would do with her wand if she felt it was her duty.

Ginny nodded, readjusting her broomstick with a muddy hand, “Course.”

“Malfoy and I have been hanging out a lot recently-

Ginny looked confused.

“At night. Not like that. We’ve been reading together in the common room, don’t be crass.”

Ginny was stuck somewhere between subtle amazement and amused laughter.

“And then after Group Therapy we went up to the Astronomy tower and he kissed me or I kissed him I don’t entirely remember. And then he got all uptight and left. Vanished. He’s been avoiding me all day.”

“Merlin,” Ginny blew out a breath, “I thought it would be something more simple like being offered Minister for Magic.”

Hermione tucked her chin in to the warm bundle of her scarf, “Nope, not that simple, sadly.”
They’d reached the prefect bathroom and Hermione waved Ginny off and headed towards North Tower to dive in to a book. Or perhaps she could persuade Hannah to play a game of chess. Saturday things, mundane and completely drama free- she’d had enough of that in her life.

The common room was unnaturally empty. She frowned, making her way up to the dorm where Pansy was sitting bent at the knee on her bed, painting her nails a glossy black.

“Where is everyone?” Hermione shrugged off her scarf, tying it around a bed post.

“Hannah and Ernie went to Diagon Alley for some reason. The boys are engaged elsewhere. I’m leaving in half an hour too. And I thought Longbottom was with you?”

“He went off with Luna after quidditch.” Hermione replied, lying flat on her back on her bed and breathing up in to the high ceiling, let her muscles relax and loosen.

“Seeing as you’re doing absolutely fuck all, pass me a cotton pad would you?”

“From where?”

“My trunk.”

“And you can’t do that yourself?” Hermione asked, eyeing the trunk which was only half a metre or so from Pansy’s bed.

“I’ll smudge.”

“You owe me,” Hermione emitted an incredulous sigh, dragging herself over to the case.

“As a Slytherin I’d expect nothing less; you’re learning.” She grinned, finishing off her left foot with unnatural precision.
Hermione smiled at her with sugary, overdone falseness before dipping a hand into the trunk and opening up a cosmetics bag.

Pansy seemed to notice what Hermione was about to do,

“No, not that one!”

But she was too late, Hermione had already ripped it open and almost 50 of those curious tiny purple bottles were sitting tightly side by side.

Hermione froze, taking a moment to ponder before looking up at Pansy whose face was trying very hard not to show the surprise and fear she was almost definitely feeling in that moment, “Those are calming draughts. Some of them dreamless sleep too?”

Pansy gulped rigidly and nodded as if it meant nothing to her.

She took in a sharp breath, still motionless, “Pansy, you do realise you can become highly addicted to anxiety potions and their qualities of—”

“Thanks very much for your consideration but I’m perfectly fucking fine,” She countered a little too hastily to seem careless, screwing the top back on to her nail polish and snatching the bag from Hermione’s hands, “you can go now.”

Hermione nodded wordlessly, unsure of what to say and stepped back, deciding to leave for a little while to allow the cracks in the glass to mend before she ventured an attempt in civility with Pansy again. Pansy wasn’t looking at her and Hermione suspected she had breached a boundary, a deep set secret as serious as the war had been. But then Ginny burst through the door loudly, gushing quickly as she did,

“Okay, so about how you snogged Malfoy—”

Hermione crumpled her face in to her hands. It had never been more not the time. She’d just accidentally uncovered her roommates secret stash of addictive anxiety potions and now her best friend was bursting in to a dorm that was not her own, talking about how she’d snogged said roommates best friend in a very rude and invasive manner unfitting of the current situation. Fucking fantastic, Hermione thought.
“You kissed Draco?” Pansy had her brows knit together disbelievingly.

She sounded contemplative and Hermione wondered why she hadn't whipped her wand out an started cursing Hermione for being the Mudblood who tainted the Malfoy heir.

“Possibly.” Hermione replied warily.

“Well that explains pretty much everything,” She groaned, revelatory, “Honest to fucking god I’m going to kill him.”

She tugged her heels on aggressively and smoothed out her tight black dress with heavy hands, shaking her dark hair back and tugging on her cloak. Hermione did not miss the clink that sounded from her clutch bag and she winced at the knowledge.

“Hermione, talk to him,” She told her, “Draco does this clever thing you’ve probably noticed where he closes off about things that are bothering him and drinks a bars worth of whisky every other night. Just corner him and tell him to fucking communicate with you.”

She took one last glance around the room to make sure she had not forgotten anything and with clenched fists, breathed in and out so heavily Hermione could see her chest rise and fall, “He’ll be back tomorrow morning.”

Pansy stormed from the room, slamming the door behind her and leaving Hermione and Ginny alone and staring at each other, absolutely speechless.
Dangerously, she tottered out of the Floo on her heels and into the dark drawing room. It was ghostly, all black polish and dark wood and she brushed off her shoulders and tried to shrug off the feeling of melancholy as she moved towards the mumbling of chatter two rooms away.

“IT’S me.” Pansy announced herself. Their heads turned immediately. Theo looked tired as hell and Blaise, like a volcano about to erupt, hot and bubbling beneath the surface. She lunged for a bottle of wine from the glass cabinet on her way over to them on the stiff leather sofas, cracking it open and slipping her heels off, lying flat out, legs stretched over Draco’s lap.

It was a sombre event. Each of them were black tied and no one was particularly happy to come back to this from Hogwarts. Theo’s house was never the brightest.

She took a long swallow and passed the bottle neck to Theo, “When are we leaving?”

“Ten minutes.” He replied.

“Delightful.”

“It wasn’t me who wanted to come, you do realise you brought this on yourselves right?” Blaise snapped, tapping his soles loudly against the hard floorboards, “For being so goddamned pushy.”

Pansy breathed heavily, glancing over at Draco as if she could mentally convey to him that she knew exactly why he’d pushed it. She’d wondered at first. If Blaise was serious about not wanting to do something family oriented, even if it was his own mothers funeral, they knew not to force it to this extent. They had all grown up, observers of Blaise’s turbulent childhood, it was selfish of Draco to push for this for an excuse to avoid Hermione fucking Granger. Futile, too.

“Well we’re here now.” She sighed, “Are we having a Wake?”

Blaise snorted, “We’re far too late for that. We’re going to watch her burn.”

Draco winced and Theo drank a little more to stave off the calamity of it all.
“I’m sure she’d be happy to know you were there for the most important part.” Pansy smiled humourlessly.

It was the most depressing thing she had ever witnessed in her life. The four of them, Number-, well, she couldn’t remember which one this was, and their house elf who was making an awful fuss during the ceremony by sobbing irritatingly loudly and almost drowning in the pool of tears that washed around him. It was an Italian Ministry official performing the service, and he’d brought along a handful of non english speaking friends who congregated at the back and pretended they’d known Emmeline for long enough to be here. She took Draco by the hand as the ceremony closed to an end and walked him to the back of the church whilst Blaise’s stepfather made to talk to him, she saw he was gripping Theo by the back of his neck, a jovial threat forcing him to stay put.

“What’s your problem Draco?” She hissed when they were well hidden by a frayed net curtain, slapping him across the chest with the back of her hand, a sharp angry fire in her black eyes.

“Sorry?” He seemed genuinely perplexed.

“Forcing Blaise to see his horrible mother off just because you’re hiding from your girlfriend!”

“She’s not my girlfriend–“

“Your tongue was in her mouth, does it matter?”

He scrunched his eyes up for a moment as if collecting himself so he didn’t slap her and begin a shouting match before looking back at her, shaking his head in disbelief, “How the fuck do you know?”

“Ginny Weasley, she’s not subtle.”

“Fantastic.” He spat out, looking manically around and she could smell the whisky on his breath.

“What’s the big deal? Because she’s no idea why you’ve run out on her and to be quite honest I think she thinks you find her repulsive.”
“What? No, it’s just-” He exhaled, loosening his muscles with unnatural mastery and falseness. “It doesn’t matter anyway.”

“Don’t you dare shut yourself off again-

She glanced over to see Blaise and Theo storming towards them. Blaise had a grievous look of disgust on his face, hands clenched and jaw tight, she could see the lava oozing from him in her minds eye. Even Theo looked slightly ill.

“What is it, what happened?” She asked.

They reached her and Blaise gripped her hand too hard, “We’re going home.”

And they turned on the spot, it was so unexpected she didn’t even have a chance to draw in a steady breath. Tumbling out on to the hallway floor in Theo’s once more, she spluttered in surprise, coughing her breaths back and listening to the resounding smash that echoed through the entire house. Blaise had smashed the glass cabinet.
“Merlin, Blaise!” She heard Draco shout.

Pansy grunted unsteadily, ripping her heels off her feet and standing straight. She wiped her mouth on the back of her hand and limped towards the doorway.

“You’re fucking lucky you didn't splinch me,” She glowered at Blaise’s turned back which was shaking with heaving breaths, “Now what the hell happened?”

She looked over the room, earlier so stiff and symmetrical, now smashed to the ground, glass flecks glittering across the floor like chunks of diamond.

“They never look right again after reparo.” Theo complained resignedly, eyeing the complete abolishment of his living room with sorry regret.

Blaise turned around, thrashing out his arms, “Well buy another one then!” he roared, “You know you can afford it, you have a family vault that stretches across half of fucking Gringotts!”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Theo demanded, anger crawling in to his features like a bus arriving that was just slightly late.

The bottles that were sitting in the cabinet five minutes ago were now smashed along with the glass doors, contents pooling and dribbling down the floor in veins of crimson blood.

“That fucking twisted bastard.” Blaise seethed. Punching his fists in to the headrest of one of the tightly leathered sofas to stop himself destroying even more of Nott manor.

Draco edged towards Blaise, not wanting to provoke him, and sat down on the black cushion, looking up at him incredulously, “Who?”

“Eleven. He came up to me and Theo whilst you and Pansy were having an unsubtle domestic at the back of the church. To kindly inform me that he now owns my families entire fortune.”
“What?” Pansy choked, swiftly moving from the doorway and sitting next to Draco, resting a hand over Blaise’s fist which was still pressing in to the softness of the sofa, it would dent slightly later.

“Yeah, bastard was prepared. He knew exactly what was going on when Emmeline proposed a joint account, switched it last minute, merlin knows how. So now I’m not only homeless, but broke.”

“He can’t fucking do that! We can’t let him!” She gushed, feeling her heart speed up dangerously with every breath she took. She was reminded then that she hadn’t had the time to take a potion after her unfortunate morning and feared it would drag her under like an ice cold current.

“Who’s going to help, Pans? Murderous mother involved in the dark arts, family connections to Voldemort, use your fucking head.”

She felt her nails push in to his skin and ripped her hand from his like she’d just been administered an electric shock. Standing up she walked back in to the hall under the clumsy, shakily pronounced guise of I’m just getting my shoes and pressed herself to the wall outside the room, digging through her bag and downing her potion. She shuddered for a moment longer, then like a breath of fresh air whilst breaking the water, she inhaled deeply, feeling her heart rate abate to calmness. She grabbed her shoes and returned to the living room just in time to hear Theo say, his voice thick and gravelly,

“You’ve never been homeless Blaise. You’ve always belonged here.”
The tension had dissipated only slightly when Blaise had slammed the door to his bedroom. The rest of them remained in place, looking at each other unsure of what to say.

“Let’s go to bed.” Pansy suggested.

It was even darker in the room now, no lamps were lit and the sky outside was waning in to an ink black. Flicking her wand she drew the curtains before they all traipsed tiredly up one of the huge staircases.

“My room.” Theo said as they turned the corner down a wide hall decked with ancient gold bordered portraits of Pureblood Aristocracy. Whether they were really asleep or not, Pansy couldn’t decide.

Draco pushed open the door, his tall strides leading him there first. It was an airy room. The interior hadn’t changed since they were children and there was something distinctly comforting about the sky blue walls and fluttering white curtains. There was no darkness here.

Pansy slid herself under the thick sheets and settled in the middle of the stretch of mattress. Draco was next, slipping off his shoes and huffing out a sigh. Pansy rested her head on his shoulder and she felt Theo lace his fingers through hers. She squeezed his hand gently.

“What are we going to do?” She asked.

Draco let out a bitter laugh, “Fuck knows.”

“We don’t need to do anything,” Theo replied firmly, “He’s got us.”

Pansy’s heart tightened again, not from anxiety or pain but love, the one feeling that scared her most in this world, that she could only ever bring herself to share in friendship. She flipped herself over on to her chest, sliding her hands under a soft pillow and nuzzling further in to the mattress.

“Love you idiots.” She murmured, half muffled from the fabric which was pressed against the side of her lips, the red she’d painted them in so many hours ago fading in to a weak pink flush.
“Oh we know.” Theo smirked, his wit always selective but never absent. She heard a clatter of a wand and the lids of her eyes were no longer shining blood orange but as dark as the night outside.

“G’night.” He whispered, tucking himself next to them. It had been a habit when they were children, all climbing in to a single bed and using the comfort of one another’s hearts to see them through the night. They’d started doing it again during the war, clutching each other as their friends died and were coerced to kill, not knowing where the carnage would lead them.

Pansy listened to their slowing breaths, herself growing heavy as she thought of Blaise all alone in a dark bedroom he’d called his own since he was ten, wondering how on earth he could maintain his pride now. Her eyes burned threateningly. She scrunched them tight.

The next morning she woke to dry lips and a weak sun. There was a cool empty space to her left, she suspected Theo was consoling Blaise wordlessly over coffee that scalded their tongues. She turned over to see Draco staring at the ceiling, stolen by thought. Pansy squeezed his shoulder, still clad in a dress shirt (why hadn't they thought to bring pyjamas?) and he looked over at her, startled at being ripped out of a slow daydream.

“You have to talk to her.” She told him.
The Problem with the Universe

Hermione turned the page of her book, trying to focus on Gamp’s Law in the uneasy silence of the common room. She tried not to think about how she’d stayed behind because she was hoping to see him, get to the bottom of one of the only problems she’d ever been unable to answer. Equally, she was dreading Pansy’s return, wholly unsure of how to go about such a fragile almost-friendship as it had been bashed to the ground the day before, feeling as if she was trying to avoid misstepping on an explosive which would rip her to shreds. It was with a quill between her teeth that she looked up, tapping her fingers against the arm of her chair and watching the door as if begging it to open, to get something resolved.

Her breath hitched in her throat when the door actually began to open, something she wasn’t expecting at all. It was him, clad in dark dress robes that were creased, he had not changed since the day before. Her heart clenched. She tried to ignore it.

“Hi,” Hermione said loudly and he looked up as if she could've been talking to anyone but him, but the room was empty and full of air, “Can we go somewhere?”

She was going to suggest the Astronomy tower, somewhere he liked, but he scraped a hand through his tousled hair and shook his head, “Why do we need to do that?”

Great, he was being closed off again. Hermione remembered Pansy’s advice now, cornering him. She closed her book and rose from the armchair, mustering up a little bold confidence, “I just thought you might not appreciate talking about snogging me in a mutually shared room, you know, people can walk in.”

He nodded, speaking like she was talking about group work for a Charms project, “Yeah, um, let’s leave it a day then.”

Malfoy bowed his head and moved towards the staircase of his dormitory, looking as if he had never shared more than a word with Hermione, like he hadn’t pressed his lips against hers amongst a thousand stars.

Her hands scrunched in to fists and before he could leave she called urgently to him, “Why did you do it?”

He froze. The words seemed to echo in the silence, gentle birdsong sounded from the window.
seeming unreachably far away.

“What kind of question is that?” He demanded.

“Why did you run away?”

“I didn't run away-“

She was talking quickly now, frustration getting the best of her, “Yes you did, you’ve been ignoring me, you’ve been flooing off to god knows where-

“We can’t do this, Granger!” He yelled, and she saw the angry conceited teenager she’d grown up with before her eyes, filled with rage and haunted by unsaid words, “Don’t you understand?”

“Why not?” She exclaimed, bracing herself for whatever was to come next, *Mudblood, war hero, do gooder.*

He moved towards her, finally leaving the close proximity of the door and pulling himself to a rocky halt all but centimetres from where she was standing, shaky on his feet.

“Because it’s dangerous!” He retorted, “*I’m* dangerous!”

She laughed incredulously, “Malfoy, I’m pretty sure if you were going to hurt me you’d have done it by now, stop making excuses for being such a damn coward!”

“Do you ever notice it?” He asked, pacing and fuelled with energy, before resting an arm on the shelf above the roaring fireplace, precarious and jittery, “The whispers, the stares? The death threats?”

It was all coming in to place for her now, it wasn’t about her, it was about the universe, those particles that made up people, the brutality of human consciousness once faced with two wars, the aftermath, the fall out, the blood of aching hearts.
She sunk back in to her chair, whispering, “No, I-

He laughed bitterly, “Of course you don’t. Because that’s what it would be like.” He seemed preoccupied still, ready to burst and he did, “You don’t even know me! Three fucking books and we’re best friends are we?”

“Of course not,” She retorted, shaking her head angrily, “Is it so much of a crime that I’d like that? *To know you?”*

“I’m not Potter.” He said suddenly. Her eyes shot up at him and they met and underneath the anger she could see an anxiety in him, a softness she’d never paid attention to before. “I’ve done fucking awful things, I’m not nice.”

“Neither am I, Malfoy. We’ve all done things we regret.” *Like jamming a reporter in a jar, she thought, although that was not something she regret just yet.*

“They’ll talk.” He said it like a threat. She stood up again, moved towards him.

“Let them.”

“They’ll hate you.”

“I’ve had worse.”

She took his hand, the one jittering over the fireplace and tried to bring it to calmness.

“Perhaps,” She suggested, gaze focused on his papery skin, fearful of what the sight of his eyes may tell her, “We should just be friends. In the day time, too.”

It was a peace offering of sorts. A compromise. An offer to run in to battle but only fight for half.

“Don’t be stupid, Granger it wouldn-
“Let me know you, Malfoy. As a friend. That’s all I want if you do.” She was anxious she’d overstepped, “Do you?”

She could tell he was biting the inside of his cheek but that bubbling rage was more of a simmer now.

“Friends.” He replied, gruffly. Gently taking her hand in his and shaking it somewhat awkwardly, “Don’t say I didn’t warn you, though.”

“Shut up.” She countered, palm lingering against his, watching the slightness of a smirk inch up his lips.

But he removed his hand from hers and she remembered; friends, nodding with relief and with something that felt like victory she watched him walk off to his dormitory, stopping at the corner just before the shadow could swallow him.

“I’ll see you after dinner?” He asked, slipping his hands back in to his pockets, prouder than he’d been earlier.

She smiled at him, “Maybe.”

And the door closed behind him and she let out a huff of air, sinking back in to her chair and letting her mind race, the churning in her stomach solidifying the one fact she had been toying with the idea of ever since the war, Draco Malfoy was human. Solidly, wholeheartedly human. And another one which had been haunting her all day, that she might just be beginning to like him a little. Friends, she reminded herself. Thinking on it. Delighted at the prospect of it. Possibly a little scared. What would come would come, she decided. Perhaps how it started was not how it was supposed to end.
Pansy returned far later when the sun had melted against the surface of the earth and Hermione was sitting in bed doing a crossword puzzle from the Prophet, too tired to work but too scared to sleep. She walked quickly past Hermione, not even acknowledging that she was there, kneeling before her trunk and pouring something in to it, Hermione had a fair idea of its contents. Then she slammed the lid and turned around, dropping her bag and wand on her bed and shrugging off her cloak.

“Hi.” Hermione greeted her, a nervous smile on her lips.

Pansy reached to the necklace clasp at the back of her neck, “Did you talk?”

Hermione paused, frowning, she wasn’t entirely sure what Pansy was talking about.

“You and Draco.” She clarified as if talking to someone incredibly dim.

“Oh! Uh, yeah we did.”

Pansy tugged the slim dress up over her arms, revealing delicate black lace lingerie against her pale skin. She turned around and a harsh pink gash revealed itself, taking Hermione’s breath away. It crawled plastically from her left hip to right shoulder, looking sorer than a scar would feel and Hermione diverted her gaze back to her crossword, pulling her knees up to her chest as not to stare. It cinched her insides and she thought of Harry’s red chest, Ron’s mottled and brain scarred arms.

“So are you one of us now?” She smirked, slipping a short silk nightdress over her head, this was soft pink, she had not realised Hermione had seen what seemed to be the outline of an attempt to slice Pansy open, let her insides ooze on to stone and drain her of darkness as if it were as easy to elicit as blood.

Hermione took in a measured breath, “We’re friends.”

“Friends.” Pansy echoed as if trying to take it all in, slipping beneath her covers and throwing a small pile of owl mail on to her lap, ready to open, “Well, you got him to talk to you. There’s always time in the future for more snogging.”
She laughed accordingly, letting her mind wander to the dangerous precipice of speculation, “You aren’t mad?”

Pansy laughed, “Why would I be mad?”

“He’s your best friend. Didn’t you go out at one point?”

Pansy seemed to stare at her for a little longer than a good few seconds, weighing up her reply, before leaning forwards and placing her hands on her knees, Hermione noted the glitter of a ring that probably cost more than her parents’ house,

“I’m not interested in Draco. Men at all to be honest. Besides you’ll be good for him, you’ll force him to talk and merlin knows the boy has issues.”

Hermione didn’t know what to say. She felt it was only through sheer luck that Draco Malfoy had not began to bully her yet, tear her down with indoctrinated hatred and names in bad taste. She wondered why Pansy was still talking to her, the entire potion problem, their history, it all fused in to one in her head, a river flow of second guesses, clever tactics and killing strikes.

“I know you’re thinking about it.” Pansy guessed, Hermione stiffened up, unsure of what to say but then Pansy was talking again, “Don’t. Big fucking deal I have issues, PTSD actually. That goddamn war let no one out unscathed and I’m not going to get all murderous because you know I’ve been chugging potions all summer.”

Then she smiled,

“But for future reference, the cotton is in the white bag, Bright Spark.”

Hermione threw a cushion at her.
As she left the staircase that morning she saw him moving towards the doorway alone. It had been an unusually restful night and she hadn’t seen him since their talk between the fire and the silence of the previous day, so she jogged to catch up to him, tugging the loose sleeve of his cloak.

He turned quickly, raising his arm instinctively and then freezing in realisation when he saw her, “Fucking hell, Granger.”

“Sorry,” She apologised, taking the door handle and stepping outside, “Are you going to breakfast? Thought I might join you.”

“What, at breakfast?” He looked at her as if she’d just willingly signed her own death warrant and was the most idiotic human being he knew.

“No. To breakfast.”

“Good,” He followed her out of the door, “I thought you were being a bit ambitious.”

“I didn’t know you cared.” She teased, they were racing down stone steps now, soles of shoes clattering as they emerged and melted amongst the chaos of Monday morning, vibrant chatter under dull grey sky.

“I try not to.” He smirked a little and she looked up at him with something of warm disbelief. The single fact that Malfoy was revealing something of a beating bloody heart and admitting it to her seemed too unrealistic to fathom in that moment. He was constantly surprising her these days.

But there was a silence to the air now, something she had never recognised before, the walls were closing in and students were gaping at them and suddenly everything became ten times louder. The mutter of gossip that reminded her of fourth and fifth year, the astounded faces, the soulless glares. Hermione knew he had warned her but for some reason she couldn't accept that hatred could exist in a world that had only just been rebuilt from ashes. She felt him press in to her back, lips close to her ear and it reminded her of twilight and dazzling landscapes,
“Now do you see what I mean?” He deadpanned.

She inhaled, tilting up her chin and smiling at him determinedly, “It’s absolutely fine. Abhorrent. Truly ridiculous. But completely manageable.”

He snorted, “We killed people, Granger, people get mad at mass genocide.”

“They can spit on the ground over Voldemort’s corpse then, I’d rather not live to see Wizarding War Three.”

He smiled slightly as they turned in to the Great Hall. She murmured a goodbye and watched his tall frame turn left before heading towards her own table. Ginny was already pouring coffee for her, she pushed the cup towards Hermione as she slipped in to her seat, ignoring the curious stares, the unpleasantness of Ernie’s gaze two tables away.

“Thanks.”

Ginny just looked at her wordlessly as she gulped down the burning liquid, every second longer making Hermione more confused.

“What is it?” She frowned.

“You and Malfoy!” Ginny slapped Hermione’s arm with the back of her hand causing her to yelp in surprise, “You’re gone all of Sunday and next minute you march in to breakfast practically glued to his hip!”

“I’m not glued to him,” Hermione refuted, “We talked. We’re friends.”

Ginny froze, “I’m sorry, what?”

“Were fr-

“Yeah I understood, I just don’t get why.” She shrugged, dumping another tea spoon of sugar on to
her cereal as Hermione tried to think of what to say.

“There’s a lot of complications.” Hermione started, feeling wary of Ginny’s clipped tone as if she’d wronged her somehow, “We barely know each other and at least ninety percent of the school are in some sort of Ex Death Eater Hate Club against kids who didn’t even do the bad stuff willingly. It’s like they want another war.”

“Let me get this straight.” Ginny began slowly, “You, Hermione Granger, are refraining from doing what you want because of what other people think.”

Hermione cringed, Ginny flourished her hands exasperatedly.

“It’s not something I can decide on my own, there are two people involved and Malfoy’s a Class A coward, we all know that.”

Ginny laughed, “Yeah we do. You speak so highly of him, Hermione.”

“What? Just because I kissed him doesn’t mean he’s not an idiot,” She countered, “But he also read Pride and Prejudice in one day and that intrigues me. He’s not half as bad when he’s not insulting you.”

Ginny had a look on her face Hermione had never seen before, “I see.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Ginny rolled her eyes, “*That I see.* Now, how do you feel about meeting me and Luna in the library at lunch to do those potion essays?”

Hermione nodded, taking another sip of coffee and letting the wash of chatter smooth over her, watching as a weak sun forced its way beyond heavy clouds and flecked the windowsills in light, thinking about her upcoming Arithmancy lesson.

Chapter End Notes
V busy but reading your lovely comments when I can, tysm! X
Hermione watched Hannah’s reflection in the mirror that evening, her hands were twisting around a long ashly blonde braid, lamp lights shimmering in her wide eyes, feeling utterly deflated. In Defence that morning she had taken matters in to her own hands and sat next to Hannah on a rickety chair, arms against the chipped wooden desk top, hoping to get something more out of her than a polite smile or a few choice words. She didn’t know Hannah too well before the war but she had never been this quiet and there was a weight in her stomach that told her this was no more normal than Harry’s relationship with the Dursley’s. So she’d entered the classroom that morning with a strong wave of determination.

“How did you find the homework?” Hermione slot in to the space next to the girl and Hannah seemed thoroughly surprised at her intrusion, she was small and fragile up close, with soft full cheeks that seemed untouched by age, preserving her youth and deflecting the harshness of the last year as if nothing had ever happened.

“Alright. You?” She replied mildly. Hermione realised it was her voice that told of her pain, the cupping of her hands, reddened fingertips, the timid whisper of a voice, she had been stolen of her true identity just like the rest of them.

Hermione pushed to keep the conversation flowing, to get it to go somewhere, “I could’ve extended the part about counter curses a little more. That’s going to frustrate me all day.”

Hannah laughed and Hermione thought it was a beautiful and rare thing to hear, “I’m sure it’s O material, I wouldn't worry.”

Hermione was encouraged now. The sound of laughter seemed to have eased them both like steam covering a mirror after a hot bath. So she leaned forwards slightly and ventured in to a foreign realm.

“Are you going to come to group therapy this week? I’m still running it.” Hermione asked, trying for all the world to seem innocent and not as if she was searching for details about Hannah’s private life. She wanted her to come, she truly did, just alone.

“I- I don’t know about that.”

“Please do,” Hermione hesitated, “Ernie’s welcome too- if he can be civil.” Merlin, please do not take that offer seriously.
Hannah took in a breath and Hermione consciously kept an open expression, “I’m sorry about that by the way, it was really out of order spoiling things like that.”

Hermione shook her head, resting a hand on Hannah’s arm in what she meant to be reassurance, “Don’t worry, you didn’t get up and try to duel anyone. It wasn’t your fault.”

Hannah had opened her mouth nervously, looking as if she was about to speak, but then a stack of books banged sharply on to the desk in front of Hermione and she jumped violently. Hermione looked up and met Ernie’s hard gaze.

“You’re in my seat.” He said shortly.

Hermione went cold, “I was only talking,” Then turned back to Hannah whilst she still could, “please come on Friday?”

Hannah twisted herself in to what could either be a nod or a shake of head and Ernie barged his way in to his seat, Hermione could hear him muttering about heroes turned traitors and how much of a sick idea group therapy for Slytherins was as she walked away, leaving Hannah to grow smaller and smaller in the face of unnecessary prejudice. Hermione shivered, thudding her bag down violently to the floor next to her desk. Pansy was sitting to her side, up high on the desktop, legs dangling mid air, Blaise Zabini in her seat beneath her.

“Morning,” Pansy greeted her warily, brows dancing, clearly perceptive of Hermione’s steely eyed frustration, “You know Blaise, don’t you?”

“By name,” She turned to smile at him weakly, “Hey.”

“Hello, Granger.”

He went to stand and she realised he was taller up close, like a perfectly carved statue, more portrait than human, nothing swirled in his eyes, there was no passion beneath his stony gaze. She could hear the money in his voice.

“I’m going to go talk to Theo, see you at lunch.” He added, eyes fixed on Pansy. Her face screwed
up a little and unexpectedly, she lunged forwards to hug him. He buried his face in her hair for a moment and Hermione turned her head to the window, feeling like an intruder on an explicitly private moment. Then he was walking away and Pansy huffed out a breath and something that sounded like a venomous bastard and Hermione realised she was not the only one navigating her friends problems as if they were her own.

“I don’t like that at all.” Hermione announced, jumping up next to Pansy on the desk. They were facing the back of the classroom where Ernie was speaking hotly and Hannah seemed to be listening, looking as if she could vanish amongst the stone walls in to small nothingness.

“He’s an insufferable cock.” Pansy mused in distaste, no doubt recalling the almost duel of five days ago, wand twitching in her pocket.

“I just wish she’d stand up to him.” Hermione complained with a thumbnail lodged between her teeth, she tasted the tang of blood that seeped out from under her nail bed, joining her in frustration with an unkind jolt of pain.

“There’s clearly something pinning her there,” Pansy deduced, slipping down in to her seat and opening up a notebook full of surprisingly neat blue notes, “It’s either love or a fucking imperius curse.”

Hermione laughed humourlessly, effortfully dragging her gaze from the sickening scene, “Either way its twisted.”

“You’re not wrong there.”

With those four well worn words Hermione was given the unexpected impression that in that moment Pansy Parkinson was not thinking of Hannah Abbot, but someone entirely different.
Ghosts and Silencing Charms

The halls were cold, autumn was reigning in and the nights were chilling. Wind whistled through the emptiness of the corridors and Hermione wrapped her robes tighter around herself as she latched open the door to the classroom. Once she’d made it inside she stopped, readjusting the books in her arms and listening to the silence before she turned.

“Merlin, Luna!” She leapt back, crushing her side on the door handle and hissing an undignified shit.

Luna had been sitting on one of the sofas in the darkened corner of the classroom like a fucking ghost under a silencing charm. Hermione caught her breath, flicking on more lamp light with her wand, trying to recover from the shock, looking anywhere but at Luna as not to glare at her too harshly.

“Did I scare you?” Luna smiled, her face a wash of paleness and light, looking as if she had no inkling of what she’d just done. She shifted over to a more lightened chair and picked up one of Hermione’s books, reading the title aloud, “Sherlock Holmes.”

Hermione smiled at her confused expression, “It’s muggle.”

“Why do you need a muggle book for group therapy?”

“It’s not for now its for later,” Hermione took it from Luna’s loose grasp and tucked it between two thick wads of parchment, she’d brought her load directly from the library and was regretting cutting it so short for now she had a huge stack of books and notes to lug around with her before she could go to bed.

“Is it for Draco?”

Hermione froze, lips parting slightly as if she was about to speak but then she drew her brows tightly together, utterly astounded, “Sorry?”

“Aren’t you going somewhere with him later?”

Hermione was genuinely considering whether Luna was a secret Legilimens or not now, she was
sure no one knew about what she and Malfoy got up to after dark.

“How the hell do you know?” There was an amused tint to her tone.

“Well you left together last week,” She shrugged, “It’s your thing.”

“Our thing.” Hermione echoed, her lips unconsciously curling upwards.

Luna tucked a thick lock of hair behind her ear, new sunflower earrings swinging in the lamp light, “Isn’t that what couples have, ‘things’?”

Hermione began to laugh, shaking her head resolutely, “Luna, no, no were not a-

Then the door crashed open and Ginny collapsed on to the nearest arm chair in a streak of hasty red, spreading her arms and legs out, letting out a tragically resigned sigh, “I swear to god if MacDonald takes that long to catch the snitch on Saturday we’re going to lose.”

“Rough day?”

Ginny turned to Hermione with a tired roll of her head, dullness in her eyes, “Rough week. Our team is bad.”

“It’s a shame Harry left, he was a good Seeker.” Luna interjected thoughtfully, but it only made Ginny squirm, Hermione supposed several years of talent were flashing past her eyes and that she was grasping at the memories, trying hopelessly to resurrect them.

She glared at Luna, “Don’t remind me.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

Pansy had entered, grey skirt hitched high and scarlet across her lips, she was eyeing up Ginny distastefully.
Ginny instantly shot up, adjusting herself in to a more civilised position in the chair, legs crossed and hands together, an unfeeling expression across her face and Hermione didn’t think she’d ever seen her look so stiff, “Me? Nothing.”

There was silence. Hermione continued shuffling papers in to subject order. Ginny was looking at Pansy as if it was a dare. Then Luna leaned forwards like she was letting Pansy in on a very exciting secret.

“She’s worried because the Gryffindor quidditch team are performing so badly.”

Ginny exploded, “You’re not supposed to admit it to the opposition, Luna!”

“I’m barely the opposition, I couldn’t care less.” Pansy drawled, perching on the arm of her chair and dusting off her knees, she looked at Ginny for a second too long and Hermione averted her gaze to Luna, who was now reading the copy of the Prophet Hermione had been shuffling amongst her other work.

The door banged open again and Hermione thoughts were averted from Pansy’s gaze at the dash of freckles across Ginny’s cheeks. Neville swooped in, head down and perched next to Luna on the sofa, only looking up at Hermione’s greeting,

“Hey, Neville. You okay?”

“Mm, yeah. Of course.” He murmured, flipping his hair with his hands and shuffling uncomfortably. Hermione felt something dig in to her chest, not good. She made a mental note to talk to him in private later, even if Ginny and Luna got there first.

“Who are we waiting for?” Ginny was unstably contorting herself in to a more comfortable position again and Pansy seemed to realise she couldn’t stay there amongst flailing limbs so pulled up a chair from the back of the classroom instead.

“Hannah and Malfoy.”

“Hannah’s not coming.” Neville told her.
“How do you know?”

“She’s been in our dormitory with Ernie all evening, she was still there when I left.”

Hermione dropped her books to the table in exasperation, “Fuck.”

“You can’t solve everyone’s problems.” Ginny said loudly and a silence drowned the room as everyone was forced to notice the reality of their lives, the brokenness, the issues that could not be solved like an arithmancy sum, how each part of their souls seemed like a fractured shard of glass.

Hermione said nothing, just gave her a withering look and then Malfoy was in the room and she was delighted to have something else to divert her attention to, “Finally!”

“Hey.” He looked around the room, there was no space on the sofa unless he felt like getting up close and personal with Luna and Neville, Pansy was in a rickety wooden chair and Ginny was sprawled out over that arm chair again, Hermione mentally berated herself for choosing a smaller classroom this week when she knew three of them would not be attending.

“There’s a space here.” She offered, and there was, she had been sitting on a smaller sofa, books and paper on the seat next to her which she moved quickly, back on to the coffee table with the rest of them, trying to look as if she had thought of the suggestion completely unconsciously, that she had not just been faced with the assumption that they were a couple, that they had not touched and kissed and-

He sat down next to her and she felt his thigh hot against hers.

“So,” She breathed, leaning forwards, elbows on knees in an attempt to look as if she hadn’t noticed that they were sitting so close and that no one else had either, “Who wants to start?”

Ginny immediately initiated lively debate about the frustration incited by her obscene workload to which a snide but agreeable comment was made by Pansy and a disinterested hum was elicited from Neville. When Hermione chanced a nervous glance in her direction, from the opposite side of the classroom with an open newspaper on her knees and lights in her eyes, Luna was looking back at Hermione and Malfoy, grinning.
“So, do we like the classics?” Hermione grinned. They were sailing through the vacant halls, the sun merely a memory as the moon shone white. They’d gone to the Astronomy tower to read and sit cross legged before the stars, listening to the echoes of the earth, allowing it to calm them as they worked their way through a few short stories.

Malfoy nodded, “We like the classics.”

She looked at him and he looked back, face open like a book and she couldn't help the giggle that escaped her.

“What?”

“I don’t know its just-” She shook her head again and again as if trying to shake off a silly thought, “Draco Malfoy likes muggle classics.”

“Didn’t see that one coming” He admitted.

They’d turned in to the stairs for North Tower now and were rising through them quickly. Hermione knew that when they got to the top they’d say goodnight and part ways and she didn’t want to leave just yet. Her thoughts were darkness and Malfoy was giving her some light. There was a softness to her heart when they spent time together now, something was profoundly comforting about it.

“Me neither”

They were silent for a few more minutes and Hermione counted the steps. One two three four five.

“What about the contemporaries? Are they any good?”

Her smile waned and she looked to her feet for an answer they would never be able to give her, “I wouldn't know.” She breathed, “I’ve been out of the muggle world for a long time.”
And she had been. The last few years had been spent at the Burrow and Hogwarts and then Horcrux hunting when there was no time to stop by a bookshop apart from to glance longingly at the window of bestsellers, stacked and advertised and guarded by glass, so normal and mundane, with prices and barcodes and the magic they spoke of was all just fiction.

“Ah.” He said nothing more.

She leaned in to him slightly, a nervous nudge that she regret once she realised she was not talking to Ron or Harry. So she pulled away quickly, putting space between them and climbing up a few stairs faster than his pace.

“Maybe I’ll go soon, explore Waterstones for something exciting.”

“Waterstones?” The word was foreign on his lips.

“You’ve never been have you? Muggle London?”

“No.”

Her smile grew as he confessed something she was not surprised of. Maybe a year ago he’d had said it proudly. Now it was with resignation, it slid off his shoulders like rain.

Hermione didn’t think before it was too late to stop, “I’m sure we can change that.”

It tumbled out of her mouth and it sounded so forward and she blurted out Carpe Diem as not to see his reaction, letting the door swing forwards and welcome her home. She heard it close behind them and as the common room came in to view a darkened figure was sitting alone by the fire. She risked a look at Malfoy, he didn’t seem to have cared about her proposition. But then again she was beginning to learn that he was a master at shutting off his feelings.

“Good night.”

He turned in to the far staircase.
“Yeah, night.”

She watched him sway on his feet slightly as if waiting for something more but then he was gone and she went to sit on the sofa next to the figure. She sunk in to the cushions and kept her gaze at the fire, not willing to speak, she knew he must come to her.

“Hey Hermione.”

“You finishing that?” She pointed to the mug on the coffee table before them, It was still steaming. Neville shrugged carelessly so she took it in her hands and gulped down some of the tea. It was too sugary and she sucked in a surprised breath, wiping her lip with the back of her hand.

“Thanks,” She placed it back on the coffee table and looked over at Neville, “Want to talk about it?”

He looked bad. How had she only just noticed? There was blue under his eyes, dark sagging tiredness, red veins mottling their whites, crimson at the corner of his lip in a dash like a slash of a knife and she was sure he’d been biting it all day.

“I was at St Mungos' today.” He ventured nervously. His voice was shaking and it reminded her of who he used to be and she wanted to wrap him in her arms and protect him from the harshness of the world.

“Is everything alright?”

More silence. An owl hooted and a flutter of wings spun past the window nearby, Neville lifted his head to watch and she saw the wetness swimming in his eyes like deep pools about to overspill and drown his skin and Hermione couldn't breathe. He had never looked like this before.

“No,” His voice cracked, “My um, mum. She’s-

Hermione was frozen, he turned to her and her heart was thudding in her chest, the tears that were collecting so largely in his eyes tipped over and slipped down his face in fat thick stretches and he scrunched up his features tragically as if simply talking hurt.
“She’s d-ying.”

He crumpled like paper. Just like that. His face falling in to his hands as shaking sobs wracked his body. He curled in on himself and broke out in to a howl and she gripped his back in what was supposed to be a hug, helplessly rocking him back and forth before the warmth of the fire, the cold of the night, feeling her own eyes spike, threaten to break her in two.

They sat there for what felt like hours. Hermione covering his form, trying not to cry and Neville’s sobs of anguish turning in to silent floods, his face was buried in her neck now and she could feel the wetness, the sombre flutter of eyelashes. She didn’t say sorry, it was the wrong thing to say, too many people said sorry about death and she knew that now. Instead she held him tightly until he mellowed out in to a sodden tiredness and began to slip in to a half sleep, as she thought about how he would never get to say goodbye, how he never did the first time. Wondering, dangerously, what it would feel like when her parents eventually met the same fate, knowledge-less of her existence, unknowing that they had another beating heart loving them, rooting for them, wishing things could have gone differently. They would talk in the morning. For now all she could do was help him brave the night.
It was the farthest corner of the library, dark with shadows and muffled with quiet, away from the buzz and hum of student life and only the slide of books and rain thudding against the windows could be heard.

“I’m done.” Theo declared, dropping his quill to the table. Ink dashed the wood as it rolled away and he began packing his things in his bag, growing tiresome of their work.

“Had enough?” Draco asked. It was getting late, the air was blanketed in velvet and now he realised the quiet was perhaps due to the flow of students who had been filtering out of the library and to bed over the last few hours, all that remained now was a sea of vacant desks, some dotted with variant Ravenclaws and lonesome figures with nothing better to do than study or hide.

“More than enough.” Theo huffed, readjusting his glasses on his nose and sliding the strap of his bag over his shoulder, “Going to get an early night.”

Then he leaned over to Blaise and pressed a kiss to his temple and it happened so quickly and so calmly that Draco was left speechless.

“Ah!” Pansy screamed, her eyes were wide and her hands covered her mouth, then she removed them and pointed a violent finger in Blaise and Theo’s direction, lips quivering disbelievingly before she finally spoke, “You sneaky fucking bastards! How long has this been going on for?”

Theo shrugged, a subtle smile was threatening to overtake his lips, “A week-ish.”

Draco saw that she was grinning now, looking from Theo to Blaise and back to Theo again like they were apparitions.

“What?” Blaise jibed, “did you expect us to jump out of a fucking cake?”

Pansy shook her head as if irritated at his sardonic quip but the grin that was tattooed on her lips told of a deep affection, then she turned to Draco in a demanding threat, “Did you know about this?”
“Not at all.”

And it was true. They should have seen it coming, joined the dots together with ink and quill, the solitary coffee, the softness of words, hell, *the living together* for 8 years. But they hadn’t. Where they were now, around a Hogwarts library table in their corner of the universe, Draco felt something rush through him, satisfaction, gratefulness, the knowledge that his friends would get the soft epilogue they deserved even if one was penniless and both were glued to the reputation of Death Eaters. Maybe there *was* hope in this world beyond lasting one more day. But he would never tell them this, of course.

Pansy deflated immediately, “Well that’s alright then, you’re off the hook.”

“Thank merlin we wont have to face the wrath of *Pansy Parkinson*, Blaise.” Theo drawled, a glitter in the blue of his eyes.

“Oh shut up.”

Blaise looked up at Theo, letting their words do little but amuse him, “See you later.”

Draco met Pansy’s gaze and she raised her brows at him, beaming in to her hand. He nodded back, a wordless reply.

“What are you two doing?” Blaise demanded, a veiled coldness back in place now, his well worn mask.

Pansy just smirked, leaning back down to finish off her essay but Draco cleared his throat and said with talented complacency,

“Absolutely nothing.”
The sun was bright and it shone in to her coffee cup, unfitting to Hermione’s mood. She’d tossed and turned so much after talking to Neville for the last few hours of the night before the dawn broke through that she’d even shrugged back in to her dressing gown in hopes that Malfoy was still in the Common Room. He wasn’t. And it had been too late now to go traipsing the corridors and up to the Astronomy Tower, she was sure teachers would be rising now, owls returning with post.

With heaviness in her heart she’d descended upon an early breakfast so desolate almost no one was there. Ernie and Hannah were talking quietly at the Hufflepuff table though and when Hermione raised a hand, purposefully grinning widely at Hannah all she got was a scared little smile and a look of death from Ernie so savage her stomach turned a little and she felt as if she could slap him.

So she drank in silence for ten minutes before Ginny materialised besides her, wearing scarlet against her skin, ready for practice.

“Has Neville told you?” Hermione asked, her head dense with sleeplessness.

“Yeah, before you got back. Me and Luna sat with him and played Chess for a little while, didn’t do him much good though.” Ginny admitted, elbows against the table as she sipped at her coffee sorrowfully.

“It’s horrible.”

“I know.”

“I wish we could do something. But if magic can’t solve it muggle medicine wont manage.”

Hermione was too terrified to ask what was actually wrong with Alice Longbottom, she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

“We can be there for him.” Ginny proclaimed, “I mean the match is next week, win or loose we’re having a fucking party. We’re going to get him to smile if its the last thing we do.”
Hermione smiled, “Of course. Let’s christen the eighth year common room properly.”

“And Hermione?”

She looked up at Ginny from the swirls of her teaspoon making entrancing waves in her cup, drawing her in like a feeble storm.

“Are you sure you don’t want any dreamless sleep?”

“Have a good practice.”

“I mean it! I know you think its dangerous but you look ill and-

“See you later, Ginny.”

She got up from her seat, leaving the hall and her toast untouched, making her way up to the library, an uncomfortable feeling in her stomach, the thought of Pansy and her addiction, of Neville and his dying mother, of Malfoy and how he still seemed like half a man, even Ginny and her practising like if she stopped for one moment she’d drop dead. September was closing and what a dark month it had been.
Gryffindor had won and Hermione felt herself joyous with relief, the cold had seeped beneath her jumper and she’d been praying for the game to end. They’d screamed and clapped and then screamed some more when Ginny looked as if she wasn’t going to brake and fly in to the stands instead but ten minutes later found them grouped at the exit, throats raw, feeding their highs from the ecstasy surrounding them. It felt like meaningless happiness and Hermione had missed that, she inhaled it like oxygen.

“There she is.” Luna beamed as Ginny made her way towards them a little worse for wear, hair snapped out of her hair tie and flooding her face thanks to the strong wind.

When she met Luna, Hermione and Neville she flung her arms around the three of them and let out a groan of victory and relief.

“By ten,” She cried, knocking them over slightly with the weight of her lunge, “We almost fucking lost by ten.”

“But you didn’t.” Luna smiled warmly at her.

Ginny scoffed, “Yeah, only because I flew by MacDonald and threatened to kick him off the team straight after if he didn’t start paying attention.”

Hermione bit her lip because she was sure there had been a few choice words thrown in to that threat and Ginny’s grin was not telling her otherwise.

Before she knew what was happening Neville had slipped away from them and was walking towards the black of the lake, Hermione jogged after him, linking her arm through his before he could escape her.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

He wouldn’t look at her, just to the grass, hands stuffed in pockets and eyes dark and red, “I thought I’d just go for a walk-
“You can walk tomorrow, you’re coming with us. Party in our common room.”

He hesitated, the wind flipped his hair over a little and then the sky split in two and rain began to surge down upon them. Hermione flipped her hood up.

“I don't know-

“I don’t care.” She interrupted, steering them around back towards the castle. Floods of students were running now, hoods and umbrellas shielding them from the downpour in a sea of colour against the darkening sky, screaming and laughing and Hermione wished she could stand there for just a moment, upturn her palms and face to the clouds above and let them cleanse her of everything, remove the problems that plagued her like cancer, leave her pure and unharmed, “You deserve this, Neville. I’m always going to be here, so is Luna, so is Ginny. We’ll always be here to help you. Just have a night off worrying, please.”

“Alright.”

He was smiling a little, raindrops clinging to his pale lashes. He hadn’t taken that much convincing. Hermione could sense it, his guilt entangled with a lust for temporary relief. But it was her job to love him, to be his friend and help him through, so she just tugged his hood up for him, pulling him in to a soggy run up to the castle. They’d put their clothes over the heaters and warmed themselves with coffee for there was a long night to come.
The eighth year common room had never been so busy. Life hummed and buzzed around them, the pounding of music and the murmur of chatter that had nothing to do with pain. It was all encompassing, a drug of sorts that dragged you in, willed you to make a home amongst all the happiness, settle in to its beating heart.

Hermione felt a tap on her shoulder, spinning around she came face to face with Malfoy and Zabini, the former was tilting a bottle towards her with a crooked smirk across his lips.

“Going to turn me down again?” He teased, and amongst all the laughter and heat and aversion he seemed more like himself again. Hermione liked that.

“Not at all.” She took the bottle from his hands and gulped down some of the whisky, it burned her throat and she shook her head, cringing at the strength she was not used to.

“Who are you and what did you do with Hermione Granger?” Blaise asked, she cocked her head his way and he grinned a little.

“It’s a party, we’re all of age, I don’t see the problem.”

“The girl who threatened to give me lines for putting my feet up on a desk drinking on school premises.” He marvelled.

Hermione laughed, “I’d forgotten about that.”

“Don’t worry about it, you dished out so many punishments theres no way you’d remember them all.”

“They were all for good reason!” Hermione argued, “Unlike you, docking Harry points because you didn’t like him, Malfoy.”

“I had a reputation to uphold, Granger.” Malfoy shot back. She pushed the bottle back in to his chest.
“What? As an infuriating dick?”

Blaise snorted. Malfoy was grinning now but there was a slight hesitation in his reply, as if everything in their past was flying through his mind and it made her heart sink a little.

“Something like that.”

There was another silence and their eyes met and neither of them said anything, their gaze a hazy transmission of unsaid words that were refusing to make sense.

“I’m going to go and find Theo, I’ll leave you two to it.” Blaise said loudly.

“Bye.”

And before he submerged in to the sea of faces, he turned to her and said,

“You’re alright Granger, you’re fucking alright.”

And she laughed, “You too, Zabini. Maybe I’ll see you around.”

She wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting and she certainly did not need his approval, but the words had been appreciated and she turned back to Malfoy, “Do you think he’d like to come to therapy?”


Hermione hit him in the arm, “You never know.”

“I do fucking know.” He offered her the bottle again and she downed enough to make her rock on her heels a little.
“Well I tried, come and sit with me whilst I try to figure out how to get Hannah to leave Ernie for two seconds and join us for a drink.”

They collapsed together on the sofa and laughed a little as their shoulders clashed, but they did not move apart, the bitter whisky was clearing paths in Hermione’s mind and it didn’t seem so awkward anymore.

“‘You’re relentless you know that?’”

“It’s my best quality.”
She stared at herself in the glow of the mirror, hard gaze, smudging mascara streaking her cheeks, dappled with the water drops she’d soaked herself in. It was a quick swipe of a towel and a good dose of calming drought that relieved her. Then she coated her lashes thickly again and stared at the emptiness of the dorms behind her. It was one of those days when everything was irritatingly difficult and Pansy just wanted to forget it all was real, but someone had found a turn table and the music was loud, alcohol was flowing and she couldn't seep inside herself for an evening and play it off as if it were tiredness. So she felt the anxiety thrashing inside her abate in to powerless waves, snapped her back straight and went to find her boys.

“Where’s Draco?”

“He was with Granger when I left him.”

Blaise tilted his head to the side and Pansy watched them, lolling around on the sofa, giggling in vapid drunken argument and she scrunched her nose at the sight. But then behind them the door creaked open and Weasley bounded in, she watched her, followed her movements as she went to Longbottom and Lovegood and dragged them over to the sofa where Hermione and Draco were. They talked for a while, Longbottom was grinning and she realised he hadn’t looked like that since the start of the year when everything was stranger than it seemed now. Time passed slowly before Weasley was walking towards the drinks table and Pansy had no idea what forced her to do it, perhaps it was the calmness the potions caused, but her hands were moving, sloshing whisky in to flimsy cups and meeting her halfway.

Weasley frowned. She stared at the cup in Pansy’s outstretched hand, “What’s this?”

Pansy rolled her eyes, “A drink.”

“Why?”

_Fucking good question._

“Because you don't have one? Keep up Weasley.”

She took it carefully, swirling it around a little and sniffing it warily, “Ah. Thanks. It’s not poisoned
“Only with Amortentia.”

Then her face contorted into a feigned bitter smile, “Hilarious.”

“I know.” Pansy replied, and she couldn’t help the tilt of her lips.

Weasley took a gulp and Pansy looked back over at Draco and Hermione, still talking as if they’d always been so close, as if there was no destruction in their pasts. But it was the happiest Draco had looked in two years and she couldn’t wait to tease him for it later, she would press a kiss to his head and poke fun at his grin and he would know it was approval.

“Is that what they look like when they flirt?” She remarked, inwardly enjoying the spectacle.

“It’s astounding isn’t it?” Weasley smirked, leaning against the table behind which they stood, “I give them another week of pretence tops.”

“It’s like watching children.”

Weasley nodded. Then Pansy caught her eye and they looked at each other again like they had many times before and it was like a hurricane inside her head. She thought of her wit and irritating charm, dark eyes and boldness, how she had never edged around Pansy at first meeting like Hermione and Hannah had, how their civility felt like a leak, each fleeting jibe or word or hello and goodbye puncturing the incision more and more until it was almost at rupture. Now was the rupture. It was scolding her insides like an alcohol bathed wound. She wanted to run from it. But this was a party and what could one night mean?

“I just think if they want each other so much they should just go for it.”

Weasley was silent for a moment, contemplating Pansy’s words, the dregs of her cup draining before she spoke.

“Yeah I mean, people are always going to be bastards, what do they have to lose?”
“Absolutely nothing.” Pansy shifted the hand that was against the table closer to Weasley’s as if trying to navigate where to go next. The music seemed louder now, deafening voices drowning out their hesitation.

Weasley bit her lip, “Tell you what-

“What?”

“Kiss me.”

Pansy cocked her head as if her insides weren’t on fire and smirked indulgently, “Why not?”

Then she had her hands pressed against Weasley’s freckled jaw, and her lips were pushing against her own, hard at first with nervousness that would never be admitted and then soft and slow. Pansy sunk her teeth in to her bottom lip desperately and felt her honeyed gasp, hands tightening around Pansy’s waist as their kisses lengthened, quickened, urgently and all at once.

They broke apart quickly, gasping for breath and Pansy’s scarlet lipstick was stained over Weasley’s bottom lip and there was a rewarding satisfaction to it.

“You weren’t lying about the Amortentia then.” Weasley teased and Pansy smiled hatefully and scoffed.

“What? Can’t admit to yourself that you find me incredibly attractive, Weasley?”

“Shut up,” She interrupted her with another searing kiss, dragging her back from the table and in to an alcove far enough away from the centre of the party that each sugary breath sounded like a heartbeat. Then she seized Pansy’s wrists, pressing her back in to the wall, the curve of her breasts were against Pansy’s own and she wanted nothing more than to slip her hands down against them, feel the weightlessness of unattached lust. Biting down on Pansy’s bottom lip with her teeth, Weasley smiled and then said in a soft but scathing tone, “And its Ginny.”
Kiss with a Fist

It came over her suddenly, the weight of her tongue, dry like sandpaper, the ceaseless thud in her head that sounded like the clink of a whisky bottle, the taste of bitterness, and she groaned, unwilling to open her eyes to face the sunlight burning her lids.

The night before had been strange, she could recall now the closeness in which she had been sitting with Malfoy the entire night, their lightheaded arguments about various scholars and principles, Neville’s eyes shining like gems and Ginny’s early exit. Then she’d somehow managed to drag Malfoy in to her Hannah Abbot Rescue Mission, to which he’d said he was not involved and was just sitting there, you’re the one being nice, Granger. How they’d conversed with her for all of two minutes to fruitless avail because Ernie seemed to latch on to her like a fucking magnet and she was helpless to his pull.

And now she lay there quite still with an ache in her jaw, she seemed to be laying on something hard and she cracked open an eye unenthusiastically before they both shot open in surprise. She wasn’t in bed, not even napping in that god forsaken armchair, but Merlin, she was draped over Draco Malfoy, head cushioned quite stiffly now against his shoulder, his deep breaths and thudding heart against her ear. She realised they must have passed out on the sofa together and a part of her wanted to jump away, to wake him up, apologise, do something safely within the criteria of friends, but the other part of her that was hazy with drunkenness from the night before felt like staying just a moment longer. The discomfort seemed worth it to see his face so open like he had been those weeks ago when he’d fallen asleep in front of the fire, like nothing plagued him but NEWTs, like the last two years hadn’t come to pass. There was a lurching in her heart that was less anxiety and more something Hermione would rather ignore.

But then he was breathing with more shallowness and Hermione became aware of the hand she had pressed against his chest and how one of his was squeezing her shoulder as he breached consciousness.

“Fuck.” Was the first thing he said.

She lay there frozen as he came around, eyeing the mess that was their common room, all empty bottles and crisps trodden in to the carpets and precariously scattered items of clothing. Then he looked at her and his expression was heavy with tiredness and she wondered if it was the first time he’d slept so fully too and was thinking about the utter irony of that being on a springy sofa, smushed against another person amongst all that clutter.

He was otherwise unreadable and someone had to say something so she said, her voice thick with dryness, “We didn’t even make it to bed.”
He didn’t reply but smirked at her almost mockingly and her heart dived straight for her stomach when she realised what she’d said.

“Not yours or mine I mean our…respective….beds.”

She gave up helplessly as he began to laugh.

“Stop laughing at me or I’ll hit you.”

“Sorry Granger, heard that one way too many times to be afraid.”

She tilted her chin up proudly, “Not from me you haven’t.”

And she was smiling, a warmth manifesting in her chest as Malfoy calmed down in to a seriousness and she realised she was still flat against him and that he hadn’t moved backwards and everything began to slow around them, birdsong behind windows became mute and the sun stopped filtering in and out and made its mind to stay shining on them, heating Hermione’s back.

They leaned in at the same time and just as they were close enough to smell the staleness of whisky on each others lips a great thud sounded from behind them. Hermione shot up on to her forearms quickly, leaning over the sofa to see what had happened and crushed her palms in to Malfoy’s chest in the process.

“Merlin, Granger!”

“Oh God, are you alright?” She jumped off him, anchoring herself dizzily on her feet as from the other side of the room Ginny stood up, hopping on one foot in pain, jacket in her arms.

“What are you doing here?” Hermione asked.

“Tripping over someones fucking shoes, that’s what,” She spat, kicking the heel with her good foot so it thudded in to the wall and shrugging on her jacket, then she looked over at the back of the sofa
“Hey, Malfoy. Alright?”

“I would’ve been if you hadn’t made so much fucking noise I got punched in the chest.”

Hermione looked down at him, he was scowling and rubbing a hand across his front, “Well I did warn you.” She risked a smile.

“That’s my girl,” Ginny grinned, “Anyways, must go, see you later.”

Hermione watched her until Ginny slammed the door behind her, making her way back to Gryffindor tower, leaving Hermione standing motionlessly in the middle of the room.

“I’m going to go shower,” She said, not really looking at Malfoy anymore, still staring at the door trying to put two and two together, “See you later, Malfoy.”

Once she’d got back through the door to her dormitory everything was silent. Hannah was still asleep in her bed, it was early after all. But Pansy had her curtains drawn and Hermione felt a pang of clear curiosity, an urge for confirmation.

She swiped back a curtain to find Pansy in a silk dressing gown, reading a few letters that had no doubt gone unanswered the day before. The robe had slipped off her shoulder a bit and it glinted white against the dark ends of her hair.

“Morning, Hermione.” Pansy said, not looking up and Hermione took that as her invitation to sit on the edge of the bed.

“So,” She began, “Ginny.”

“What about her?” Her green eyes were blank.

“Are you like, a thing now?”

“It’s absolutely none of your business.” She said lightly, ordering the letters and placing them in her
top drawer. Then she slipped a purple vial from her trunk and downed it and Hermione tried her best not to say anything or look too disapproving.

“You don’t have anything for a hangover in there do you?” She joked, attempting to inject a bit of warmth in to what had become so cold.

“I’m not your fucking drug dealer.” She said coldly. And Hermione was reminded of the Pansy Parkinson who wasn’t Hermione’s roommate or almost-friend, the Pansy Parkinson who tolerated her.

“I wasn’t-

“Just leave it, Hermione, okay? You’ll wake Hannah.”

She glared at her for a moment longer before tightening the pink tie around her waist and leaving for the opposite end of the dormitory towards the bathroom. Hermione stayed there for a minute longer, all too aware of the thudding in her head, then decided a long bath in the prefects bathroom was in order. It was an obscenely early Sunday after all and Ginny had been kind enough to tell her the password. Perhaps it would clear the discomfort in her mind. There had to be something in the world that would make it all stop.
It was raining again and the common room was unnaturally full. Hermione was sitting across from Luna in front of the fire revising notes and drinking hot tea whilst Neville practiced a spell behind them. It had been a slow couple of days. But one evening when the wind was cold and rattling their windows she and Ginny were writing Charms essays on her bed. Hannah had joined them and Hermione was delighted to discover that when she was far enough from Ernie’s watchful eye she began to light up and shine like the sun, they’d laughed that night and at three am when Ginny was passed out at the end of Hermione’s bed Hannah had turned to her and squeezed her hand. *Thank you.* It only fuelled her determination to help her more. There was something satisfying about watching the wounds of war heal in to mere memories and Hermione wished she could be the healer of them all, especially her own.

“Name one of Jupiters moons.” Luna flipped a card over in the stack she was holding.

Hermione did not even take a breath, “Leda.”

“How the fuck do you do that?”

Blaise Zabini was draped over the sofa in a sort of way that exuded money and Hermione did not believe for one second that this was not deliberate.

“Sorry?” She asked.

“We had that class an hour ago, when did you even have time to revise?”

“I apologise for being better than you.” She smiled with a tilt of her chin.

He narrowed his eyes at her, “Really?”

“Nope.”

His glass face cracked in to a satisfied smirk and she revelled in it for a moment.
Then Ginny walked through the entrance as if she had a pressing mission, red hair swinging in her hair tie. Her eyes met Hermione’s and then scanned over the rest of the room and she stilled in slow motion.

“Hey, Ginny. We’re going through some Astronomy if you wanted to-

She smiled a little painfully at Hermione’s words, bouncing on her feet restlessly.

“Yeah, definitely, I’m just going to-” She pointed towards the girls dormitory as if it was entirely normal she’d go to the eighth year girls room on her own, “see you in a bit.”

The three of them watched her jump up the stairs and Neville sunk down besides Hermione and Luna, toying with his wand in his palm.

“Who does she think she’s kidding?”

“Not me.” Neville interjected.

Hermione turned to him, “What do you make of it?”

“I don’t know. I mean it’s fine isn't it? Maybe if she was less sketchy about it I’d feel better.”

Hermione nodded and the fire crackled at their backs.

“I think It’s nice.” Luna added.

Neville and Hermione turned to look at her incredulously.

“Well, if you like your best friend keeping secrets from you…”
Hermione trailed off, she had no intention of continuing that line of thought.

Then Malfoy was walking down from the boys dorms and the hole that was trying to stretch itself wide in her heart began to ache a little.

She jumped up, “Malfoy! Can I have a word?”

He scanned his cold grey eyes across the room, Luna and Neville spread across the rug before the fire like it was a picnic blanket and to Zabini who now had his legs up across the sofa and crossed at the ankle, paging through an old book that had been left on the coffee table earlier.

“Why the hell is everyone being so sociable?”

“I know,” Zabini tossed the book back, letting it slam on to the table and rested his head in his arms, “it’s like someone spiked the pumpkin juice.”

“Well I like it.” Hermione moved over to them, “You should come to therapy, Zabini.”

Draco gave her a hard, tragic look.

Zabini grinned though, as if he knew something she didn’t, “This is where I draw the line. Nice try though.”

“Told you.” Malfoy remarked.

She threw a fake smile at him before taking his arm and steering him slightly away from the centre of the room.

“Our tower, I am?”

She didn’t even realise she’d called it theirs until Malfoy seemed to stare at her for more than a few second and suddenly she felt like jumping from the window.
“Yeah.” He breathed, gathering himself again with a telling cough and shake of a hand through his white hair, “Yeah okay. I’ll bring the poison you bring the book.”

“I had something else in mind actually.”

He raised a brow at her then said dead pan, “I’m still bringing alcohol though.”

She rolled her eyes, “Of course you are.”

“What are you two talking about?” Neville called, snapping them out of their trance and back in to reality. The rain had stopped now. Zabini had turned the radio on.

“Nothing.” She smiled, catching Malfoy’s eye and watching him nod as she walked back to Neville and Luna, “Go on then Luna, next question.”

“Fancy a trip to the library?” She heard Malfoy say, standing over Blaise.

“Not particularly.”

“Get up. Theo’s been on his own all afternoon because you’re too fucking lazy to move.” Malfoy drawled, stretching out an arm for Zabini.

He huffed and pulled himself up, “And what were you so busy doing that you couldn’t go?”

“Maybe I’ll tell you if you get up off your ass and socialise for once.”

She didn’t know this but his eyes were on her back as he left.
“I think we’re going to have to stop coming up here, it’s getting colder.”

She wrapped her robe tighter around herself and looked over at him moving towards the moonlight like a spectre. He turned his head to her lazily and raised his brows.

“Really, Granger? Forgot about magic did we?”

He pulled his wand from his pocket and set about doing a heat charm, close to the edge of the tower, right on the brink of the stars, so that they could watch them swimming above in a dark and diamond flecked sea.

“We’re definitely moving if it starts raining again though.”

Hermione dropped to the floor, bringing her knees up to her chest and breathing in the damp air. A green glass bottle was dropped besides her, spinning slightly on its base.

“Red wine?” She asked.

“Got to have some variety.” Malfoy said, “Even if it is a bit weaker.”

“That’s why you drink whisky? Because its strong?”

“What’s the point if it’s not?” He said simply. But his words were weighty and she felt them in her chest.

“What did you have in mind anyway?” He settled besides her, leaning against one of the cold pillars and Hermione marvelled in the easiness of the moment. How everything seemed to flow like honey, as if that night against his chest had shifted the remaining awkwardness between them- it probably had.

“I want to know about you.” She said bluntly.
He did not reply, watching her as he wrapped his lips around the mouth of the bottle, tipping it back and shutting his eyes as he drank it down.

“Why?”

“We had that whole argument about not knowing each other and since then all we’ve done is read and argue about Gamp’s Law.”

“If this is about the kissing thing I don’t think-

“Shut up, Malfoy. Just shut up,” Hermione snapped, “I’m not trying to get in your pants you fucking narcissist. Just…let’s talk.”

The wind smoothed past her skin and Hermione had a feeling she’d royally messed up because all he did was tip his head back and finish off more of the wine. Then he offered her the bottle and she shook her head.

“Not on school days.”

He rolled his eyes at her, “Alright.”

He said it with mockery in his tone and although there was no fight behind it, it dug under her skin a little.

She huffed at him, incredulous and partly amused, “Just because I have moral standards.”

“So do I, Granger, only mine don’t revolve around alcohol consumption and arithmancy notes.”

“What do they revolve around then?” She smiled. Perhaps he would let her in.

“Genocide,” He stated, “Don’t do it.”
She shook her head at him with a heartened laugh, “Obviously.”

Malfoy raised his brows at her in a way she could only describe as flirtatious and her stomach turned over and spun in to her chest.

They grew silent again and her mind began to race and she wasn’t sure if it would spoil a good thing but she had to bring it up, she had to know.

“You don’t believe it anymore do you, the blood supremacy thing?”

His face seemed to close a little and she wished she could catch the doors with her arm before they shut. But then he looked away from her and over the expanse of countryside before them, the rippling lake water pearlescent under the moon.

“It was all bullshit.” He said frankly, his face remaining indestructible.

But his tone seemed envious of something she could not see so she took a chance.

“Do you…wish it wasn’t?”

“That’s the thing. You grow up being told one thing and everything in your life relies on it. Then it starts to ruin your life and you see the ruin around you and you have to turn your back on it but you can’t. It’s like life betrayed you or something.”

He still wouldn't look at her but she kept looking at him, the curve of his nose, shadowed hollows of his cheeks, a pale smoothness she could almost feel under her fingertips if she thought about it hard enough.

“Must’ve been hard.”

“Yeah well I didn’t fucking die.”
“Neither did I.”

His head jerked a little in hesitance but then he brought it to hers, he looked at her with a cold intensity in which she felt as if he was staring into her soul.

“I’m sorry about being a bastard.”

She was thinking now about what she always tried so hard to ignore, the chandelier at his Manor, how the glittering glass melted into daggers in her dreams, how when the hot steam of a shower dissipated she could stare at her bare body and see the marks left over, pink and irritated as if angry about their origins, burning furiously in despair.

Hermione blinked, her eyes were spiking with heat, “Thank you.” She whispered.

Because he did not have to divulge into a monologue for her to understand the weight of his words. She saw it in his face, in the bottles that were now empty, in the way he shut himself down so often and how she could barely read his face. She saw his bones and his withered heart and perhaps she was beginning to understand him.

“My mother was alright though. You could tell, especially near the end, she was only carrying on to keep me alive. She wasn’t evil.”

None of their conversation about the war tonight had come out of him with any emotion, he spoke like he was empty and Hermione was jealous.

“She saved Harry.”

“Yeah, she did.” Then he inhaled and it looked as though he was making a vital decision, “She died a few weeks after the trial. My dad going to prison again, her sister not wanting to see her, it took it out of her.”

Hermione swallowed. She’d read about his mother’s sudden death in the paper that summer, but hearing it from Malfoy made it personal. She had asked to know and he was telling her. About his fathers’ life sentence and his Aunt’s refusal to reunite. She had met Andromeda a few times with Harry and Ron when they had gone to see Teddy. She’d seen the hollowness in her, how two wars and decades of condemnation had scooped everything out of her. Teddy seemed to be bringing her
back to life, slowly and steadily, when Hermione had seen her in August her eyes were shining and
she seemed better. And now all she could feel was the thickness of Malfoy’s pain, it lingered
between them silent and hard as steel but she could touch it nonetheless. Life was greyer than she’d
ever imagined it could be.

He was still staring on in to the darkness and she placed a feeble hand on his shoulder. He lifted his
own and squeezed hers and she did not get the impression he’d done that knowingly because he
jolted slightly afterwards as if surprised by himself. It was almost as if the great Draco Malfoy was
too nervous to look at her. The sad silence was torturous now.

Hermione broke it, “My parents were dentists.”

Just like that, he looked at her.

“What?”

“They tended to peoples teeth. It’s a muggle thing.”

“Sounds thrilling.”

“Once a girl was so scared to get a filling done she jolted as my dad was about to jab her and the
needle went right through the wrong cheek.”

She was grinning, years of memories flooding to the forefront of her mind, flitting before her eyes
like snapshots of another life.

“You look disturbingly happy about that. Should I be worried?”

“The night he told me I was horrified but since then its become kind of a funny story to tell.” She
admitted, eyes glittering at him. She would tell him about their memory later, when the need for
happiness was not so severe.

“Looks like you’ve got a dark side after all,” He marvelled.
And she laughed a real laugh she didn’t expect to hear, pressing her hand against her lips afterwards as if she’d told a terrible secret. But he didn’t mock her or laugh at her expense. Instead he looked at her as if he was bursting with some unidentifiable emotion. Some great feeling she knew she could feel too.

“What else don’t I know about you?”

“Oh, loads.”
Lunchtime

“Fucking hell.” Ginny panted, sinking herself in to Pansy’s shoulder, pressed hotly up against her, the sheets sticky at her back.

“I know.”

Pansy stared at the ceiling, levelling her heaving chest as Ginny pressed kisses in to the crook of her neck and behind her ear. Pansy had to bite her lip to stop from moaning. Then laughter vibrated from Ginny’s chest and Pansy felt it flat against her breasts.

“What?” She asked.

“Its lunchtime.”

“Well we can't exactly get it on with two other girls in the room can we?”

Ginny finally turned over and settled on her side, pressed up against Pansy’s hip in the narrowness of the bed. She traced a delicate finger along her collarbone and Pansy shivered, lifting a hand to allow herself the indulgence of sifting through Ginny’s hair. It shifted behind her ear, soft and smooth, and staring at her in the bright greyness of noon, at the ghost of laughter on her lips and contentedness in her eyes, she felt the regretful swoop of her stomach, dangerous and thrilling, almost like ecstasy in the midst of her orgasm, rushing out to her fingertips in tingles.

“What time is it?” Please say we have to go.

Ginny leaned back and groped for the alarm clock, sheets pooling at her waist, breasts bare and Pansy had to suppress the urge to squeeze one. There was something gorgeous about the way she looked, full chest and narrow waist, spattered with the warmness of freckles, almost entirely smooth except for the scars clinging to her forearms not unlike the one that slid up her own back. The weight of the curse still made it ache sometimes.

“Shit.” She hissed, “One twenty five.”
Then she stumbled up out of bed and began tugging her underwear up her thighs, grey cotton covering the satisfying curve of her ass. Pansy could see the light redness from the scratch of her nails against Ginny’s shoulder blades and couldn't help an indulgent smirk.

“What have you got next?”

“Potions.”

Pansy walked closer to her. She was standing in the doorway now, bag over her arm with only two minutes to spare. There was no doubt they’d be late.

Ginny cupped her face in her hands, pressing a final open mouthed kiss to her lips and Pansy pulled her in at the waist. Then she grinned at her mischievously, backing away in to the darkness of the staircase, leaving Pansy's arms empty. Pansy listened to her feet tap against the steps and then for the slam of a door.

Once the coast was clear she stepped down herself, seeing a streak of red at the bottom of the staircase she’d just reached the top of. She watched her whip around the corner and fumbled in her robe, chugging down a violet potion and biting hard on her tongue as if hoping it would bleed. 

*Please don’t fall for me. I couldn't fucking handle that.*
“When did they say they were coming?”

Hermione looked up at the clock over the bar, its ticking drowned out by the thick sea of bodies in the pub that were talking, laughing and drinking from shining glass along stretches of oak tables.

“Any minute now.”

Ginny huffed an impatient sigh, tapping her fingernails against the bar and occasionally looking behind them to the door. It had been a grim walk up from the castle. The wind was howling and the rain pounded the lanes, grass dim and sodden, a scent of damp in the air. Not to mention the bitter cold that had Hermione tugging her maroon scarf up to her nose every two seconds. But The Three Broomsticks was warm and yellow and delightfully dry and she was seeing her boys in a few minutes. It was strange not having seen them for so long after spending a war practically attached to them. It was the sort of experience that brought people closer together than they ever could’ve imagined being, sandwiching their souls side by side and she was full of the excitable kind of anxiety that anticipation aroused.

Then suddenly, as she was beginning to tire with waiting herself, arms were wrapped around her shoulders and a grinning voice sounded in her ear, “Hello.”

She whipped around, coming face to face with freckled cheeks and red, wind beaten hair and smiled manically, “Ron!”

They hugged each other tightly and she muffled an I’ve missed you in to the dampness of his coat and breathed him in along with everything else she’d left behind to go back to school without.

“You’ve not forgotten about me have you?”
She pulled herself away from Ron and straightened his collar with a satisfied smile, turning to Harry as he broke away from Ginny and slid straight in to her arms.

“Course not.”

“Hogwarts’ shit without me?”

She laughed, “No, it’s better.”

Then they were sitting around a small round table right at the back of the pub away from the eyes that seemed to follow them everywhere they went. Hermione sipped her butterbeer and let the warmth immerse her, taking in Harry’s startling green eyes and head of hair almost as messy as hers as if trying to pretend she’d never left either them behind.

“So how’s auror training?” Ginny asked.

“Hell,” Ron said, taking a gulp from his mug witheringly, “The amount of reading we have to do, you’d love it Hermione.”

“I’m sure,” Hermione said, “but I think I’m going to stick to House Elf rights. And of course every other marginalised creature in wizarding society. Someone has to do it.”

Harry was grinning a little as if delighted to be listening to Hermione’s political views again, although he would never admit he’d missed waking up on a Saturday morning to rants about Elfish Welfare over far too little coffee.

He leaned forwards, forearms on the table, “No it’s good. We’re enjoying it. How’s school?”

“Gryffindor won the first match of the year and Hermione’s set up Group Therapy.” Ginny said.

“What’s that about?”

“Just some seventh and eighth years talking every Friday night about various topics. A venting
thing.” Hermione explained.

“It’s really good, actually. I thought it would be a train wreck but things have settled down.” Ginny added.

“Why, what happened?”

“We had an incident. An almost duel. Pansy Parkinson vs Ernie Macmillan, who is incredibly fucked up now by the way. Like to epic proportions.”

“Yeah I know,” Harry said dully, “I saw him in Diagon the other week looking pissed off. Picked a fight with someone outside Flourish and Blotts. He was always a twat but I’ve never seen him like that.”

“Merlin,” Ginny said, “Can we not be depressing today? I’m sick of depressing. Tell me something good.”

“Umm…” Ron was wracking his brains and Hermione’s heart fell a little, “No one died?”

“I suppose that’s good.” She sighed. The secret yearning inside of her for everything to be okay again stung with disappointment and she wished something better could have come out of five months of rebuilding. But okay was good, she realised, okay was brilliant.

“Definitely good.” Ginny beamed.
They were walking around Honey Dukes like old times and the sun had begun to break through the mist and splash on to their backs, streaming through the windows and intermingling with the prominent scent of sugar that could make you a little dizzy if you stayed for too long.

‘How’s George?’ Hermione asked.

She and Ron were standing towards the back of the shop surrounded by a display of sugar quills, watching Ginny and Harry laugh to themselves at the counter, purchasing an obscene amount of chocolate.

“I don’t know. One minute you think he’s getting better and the next you don’t see him for five days.”

“Has he opened the shop up since-

Hermione couldn’t say it but Ron knew what she was talking about, she could see it in the dullness of his eyes.

“No.” He said, toying with the plastic stick of a lollipop for something to do, “I’ve been talking to Harry about quitting Auror training, taking over for George. The more I think about it the less and less I want to spend the next five years chasing down even more fucking Death Eaters.”

Hermione chuckled knowingly, “Yeah. Looks like Harry’s over his ‘enough trouble for a lifetime’ mantra though.”

“He loves it, I think he always will.”

They stood there in comfortable silence for a few more minutes and Ron seemed to slide closer in to her side, pressed up against her so that if she moved a little she could be tucked under the crook of his arm. She took her hand in his instead and squeezed.

“You should do what’s right for you. If you want to open the shop, do it. It doesn’t mean you’re
abandoning Harry, if anyone did that it was me.”

“Sod off,” Ron retorted, “You went back to school, Hermione, you didn’t run off in the middle of the night during a war.”

She cringed inwardly, feeling the sheer force of the regret he’d never forgiven himself for heavy in his conscience.

“The past is the past. Stop living in it and go and enjoy your future, Aurors or not.”

She said it with a sort of finality and looked up at him. He was smiling at her, at her no nonsense approach to life that was more difficult to live than to advise.

“Let’s go,” Harry grinned, walking back over to them as Ginny went straight for the door, “We can go and find somewhere to hide for a while.”

Once they were back outside and the cold air was against their faces Ron spoke up.

“Actually Harry, I think me and Hermione are going to-

Hermione frowned. Ron was raising his eyebrows theatrically in all sorts of unspoken messages and Harry was looking at him as if he was trying to figure out a puzzle.

“You know, the…you know.” He continued.

“Something wrong with your face, Ron?”

Ginny was laughing at him now but then something seemed to click in Harry’s mind and he gasped a breath, raising his brows understandingly.

“Oh, that. Yeah, yeah that’s great. We’ll just go and find somewhere to sit. See you later.” Harry babbled, grabbing Ginny’s hand and dragging her off in the opposite direction, she squealed at the unexpected gesture and flipped her head back at Hermione as if to ask the very pressing question of
what the fuck? and Hermione shrugged at her dramatically, mouthing an *I don’t know* before the corner was turned and they were lost to the influx of third to sixth years who seemed to be gaping at them with the subtlety of a toddler.

“What the hell was that about?” Hermione asked.

But then she looked up at Ron and he was shuffling, a redness tingeing his ears and he scratched the back of his neck sketchily, “Can we go somewhere?”

“So. I think there’s a bench down there.”

They made it to the bench and sat down. Hermione tucked a leg under her other and turned to look at Ron, who was evidently incredibly nervous by this point and placed a hand on his shoulder, “You alright?”

“Yeah, yeah, course,” He paused and then took in a readying breath, “Here’s the thing. After the battle everything was a bit mental, I get that. The Burrow was stressful and we all left and moved on and did our own thing and we’re all still feeling a bit rubbish about everything. But I haven’t been able to stop thinking about how much I’ve fucked things up with you, kissing you and then going back to being awkward. You’re not my friend with benefits, Hermione, that’s not how it was meant to go-

Hermione’s breath caught in her chest and she couldn’t seem to get any words out. Ron looked like he could faint so she put her hands in his and squeezed again as if spurring him on. It was true. They’d kissed during the battle and then spent the summer pretending as if nothing had changed apart from a few sleepless nights laden with panic and nightmares that had been soothed by warm bodied sex. When Ginny couldn’t stay up with Hermione she’d found herself in Ron’s room and with the whirlwind of starting school and therapy and learning how to live again the fact had got pushed to the back of her mind. She knew exactly why. But she wasn’t sure if she could say out loud without hurting him.

“What I’m trying to say is, I’m sorry. And..and that I love you. A lot. And I really hope you do too.”

Hermione could feel the sting of tears beginning to stab at the back of her eyes. Why wasn’t she relieved? Why didn’t this feel like life righting itself? Hadn’t she always been sure this was how it would turn out? Hadn’t this always been how it was meant to be? As the seconds progressed and she continued to say nothing, looking in to his eyes with a twisted expression on her face she could feel him beginning to tense again.
“Ron,” She began shakily, “I do love you, deeply, like I love Harry. And I’m so sorry things got lost in communication between us. Like always-

She risked a watery grin and he smiled back.

“But I don’t think that’s what I want anymore,” She whispered. A tear rolled down her cheek, hot in the cold of the day and Ron raised a thumb to gently wipe it away, staring in to the dark milkiness of her eyes, “I’m sorry.”

“No, no, I get it,” He breathed, “I’m too late.”

She couldn’t stand him looking so forlorn and helpless so lunged to hug him, rocking back and forth with the weight of his heart in her hands, wishing there was a way to have made this easier. Because Ron didn’t deserve this. Ron was pure and good and he loved with everything in him. He was gripping her tightly, head resting against her shoulder and although she knew he wasn't at all crying he was processing everything with shaky breaths, becoming familiar with the pain of rejection.

When everything had settled down a little and the tears had dried they remained on the bench, holding hands and watching the passersby in quiet contemplation. It seemed lighter now. As if it was in need of addressing but now that it had been done everything would be better, less confusing, easier. That was what Hermione and Ron always needed- easier.

“There isn’t someone else is there?” He asked.

And Hermione all of a sudden was thinking of Malfoy, of the first time she’d sat with him besides the fire and watched him sleep, to the book reading, watching him devouring Pride and Prejudice from the other side of the Great Hall with a thrill in her heart. The first night at the tower, the softness of his lips against hers and the way he tore in to himself afterwards. The arguments about Gamp’s Law, silly little things, the offer to take him to muggle London. The night he’d talked to her about his family and she’d told him about her parents. How he always seemed to look a little in awe of her and a little worried at the same time when he finally let that indifferent mask slip once in a while. It hit her like a pendulum in the chest and she didn’t know why all of this made her heart ache but she supposed it had something to do with the comfort she found in his smirk, how he leaned about with his hands in his pockets when he was comfortable as if he owned the school again, how he was entirely and unapologetically himself and yet so ready to want to protect her from the prejudices of a post war world.
“I- I don’t know.” She said it slowly, though her mind was racing.

Ron seemed to be having thoughts of his own and all of a sudden he scrunched his nose in defeat, “Oh God it’s not Neville is it?”

Hermione couldn’t help it, she laughed, “What? What, No, Neville’s gay!”

His entire expression dropped to complete disbelief and she relished in his swinging jaw, how he was looking at her so vacantly.

“You’re kidding!” He burst out and she could see the cogs in his mind trying to work out how he’d ever missed it.

“He went to the Yule Ball with Dean Thomas remember?”

“I- I thought they just went as friends.” He spluttered.

“No, Dean and Seamus were arguing so he took Neville to make him mad, it worked.”

“You what? Seamus too?”

“Ron, Dean and Seamus have been together since third year.” Hermione told him seriously, watching as he tried to let the information sink in, clearly startled by how much he didn’t know about the boys he’d spent so many intimate years with.

“Merlin.” He breathed.

“You do know your sister’s bisexual right?” She smirked amusedly, entirely enjoying the turn of events.

“Of course I do, you prat.”
Hermione giggled at him, “Thank god, I was starting to worry.”

“Seriously, though,” He said as her laughter died down in to softness, “If you’ve found someone you can be happy with I’m happy for you. You deserve it, Hermione.”

“Thanks, Ron,”

He was smiling at her with an endearing look on his face and she pressed a kiss to his cheek, savouring the moment to rub her thumb against the soft pink of his skin and she hoped he knew it meant goodbye. Not from their friendship, but from whatever it was they had been trying to find all these years.

“We should probably find the others,” He said, shaking off what had surely been the most heavy hearted five minutes of his life since the war and standing, offering her a hand.

She stared at it for a moment and a strong wave overcame her, it crashed in to her defences, toppling them down and she took a quick breath, steadying herself before taking his hand and letting him pull her up.

“Look,” She said hastily, dropping it and digging hers in to her coat pockets, feeling hotness at her feet, “I have to go and do something. Tell Harry to owl me and I’ll meet you both in London next weekend to make up for it but I really have to go alright?”

“Did…did I freak you out?” Ron asked, a bewildered look on his face.

“No, not at all,” She gushed, backing away step by step, “You helped me. Thank you.”

Then she rushed forwards and hugged him quickly one last time before setting off in the opposite direction almost at a run, turning back for one second just to shout,

“I’ll owl you!”
No Brakes

Hermione stumbled through the door of the common room and scanned it quickly, trying to catch her breath, the airiness of it welcoming, open wide and mostly vacant, brimming full of oxygen. Theodore Nott looked up from his book and she could see the curiosity unhidden across his face, intertwined with his tousled fringe which sat messy across his forehead, almost covering his brows.

“Is everything alright?” He asked- which Hermione had to give him credit for considering they’d barely said a word to each other since they’d first met.

“Yeah,” She huffed, her heart finally simmering to a slow beat. Then as she moved further in to the room she saw Zabini sitting across from Nott writing a lengthy essay against the coffee table, “oh Zabini, hi, do you know where Malfoy is?”

Please don’t have me running all the way up to the fucking Astronomy Tower.

“No reason, just…stuff.”

Hermione let out a sigh of relief but the hardness of Zabini’s face was beginning to make her feel uneasy. The entire thing had happened so quickly that she hadn’t exactly stopped to think about how any of it would be received. Too late for that, she thought, she couldn’t back out now. She was driving a brakeless car without knowing what was around the corner, wind racing by as strongly as her nerves were hitting her.

“No reason, just…stuff.”

She saw Zabini’s frown as she followed the path to the staircase of the boys dormitory, climbing the steps with weakening knees and feeling the buzz of adrenaline begin to incapacitate her, swallow her up until she was shaking with what could be.

But the door was already opening when she met it and Malfoy was standing there in pyjamas and grey socks, hair softened and sleep heavy. There was something angelic about the way the brightness was shining from the room behind him, pouring out and around him like a white halo. And as Hermione looked at his confused expression she knew she couldn’t leave it to him for fear of premature rejection.
“What’s going mph-

So she dived for him, slamming the door shut with her foot so that it resounded with an ear shattering slam and kissed him deeply, hands against the back of his neck and eyes shut tight, scared of what may happen when she opened them. He froze against her at first, it had happened so quickly that his mind hadn’t got passed the twisted, desperate look on her face before she’d slammed in to him. Then she felt him soften, lips parting, moving against hers, rough with not expecting, fingers smoothing thick curls of hair behind her ears as he did so and she sighed in to him as if relieved.

Her chest was heaving against his and they stayed there silently for a moment. Foreheads together, catching breath as if it were a rarity to be feeling so real and so alive like this- it kind of was. She couldn’t help herself. She scattered kisses against the corner of his closed mouth and ran her hands over the slopes of his shoulders. If this wasn’t to last more than a few minutes she wanted to remember it. The feel of him against her, his height and his frame, fragile like paper in the light yet so solid to the touch.

“Fuck.” He said.

Her breath hitched nervously and she raised her head and slowly stepped backwards until her back was against the cold hard wood of the door and she staring in to his cool eyes, lip between her teeth.

“Sorry, I know you said,” Hermione began, voice like sandpaper.

He cut her off, “No, it’s…whatever, Granger.”

But he sounded nothing at all like it was meaningless, the thickness in his words were threaded with the emotion he was always trying to hide from the surface.

“I’m tired of this game we’re playing.” She said bluntly.

Malfoy looked as if he were about to protest.

“No it is a game. I’m tired of us dancing around each other because of what other people think, because of my feminine fragility or whatever bullshit excuse you had before. What are you so afraid of? Don’t we all have nothing left to lose?”
He stared at her rigidly and she feared he might just walk out, or start screaming at her, but then he nodded so slightly she barely even realised it had happened.

“You’re right.”

“No, I’m- sorry, what now?”

He grit his teeth, “You’re right. Nothing left to lose.”

“I don’t understand-

“That’s a first.” He snorted.

She stared at him silently as if trying to read his mind, imagining the words inked across his skin in swirls and smudges, rubbings out and spidery capital letters.

“No one can know. Not at first anyway.”

Silence. A scoff.

“Merlin, you really haven’t changed have you?”

Perhaps this was the price she had to pay to be close to him. To be a secret. Because he was Pureblood and she was Muggleborn and god, why hadn’t she seen this coming? She’d spent the last month and a half waiting for him to slip up, say something hateful, do something awful, and he hadn’t. Now, at the most important moment she’d completely forgotten what streamed through his veins, who he was, and she felt ridiculous for it.

“Oh, shut up, Granger. Stop pretending you know everything like it’s about you.” He spat out tiredly, sinking to sit at the edge of his bed, elbows against his thighs, hands clasped.
“Then explain! How the hell am I supposed to understand you if all you do is talk in riddles?”

“I thought you’d be quite good at them considering you’re a Know It All,” He retorted sharply, “Looks like even a fucking War Hero has flaws, would you believe it?”

“That’s rich coming from you!” She laughed bitterly, “And you know what Malfoy? I like you. I like you, alright? I really honest to God like you. I think you’re funny sometimes and I like how you get so immersed in books and how clever you are and how you’ve come out of this mess a reasonable human being. So thanks for making me believe you’re better than you were only to decide you want me as your dirty little secret. Fuck that!”

“Well surprise, surprise genius, I like you too.” Her heart stopped a little and she couldn’t say anything, just watch as he rose from his bed, growing angry, fists clenched at his sides, “That’s why I don’t want anyone to know. Because everything I touch turns to flames and no one is taking anything away from me anymore!”

“Don’t you think that’s my decision? Don’t you think I can handle it? I’ve been through years of idiots calling my best friend a liar for trying to save the world! I erased my parents entire memories to the point of no return just so that they wouldn’t die and yeah, maybe you’re a coward but I’m bloody well not!” She exploded.

The hair he’d tucked behind her ears so gently was loose now, flying over her eyes and camouflaging how they were glistening with wetness. This was not how she’d planned on telling him about her parents. This was not how any of it was supposed to have gone. But on some level she knew it would be like this, when had Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy not argued? It seemed futile to imagine a lifetime of peace between them whether they were kissing each other or not.

He let the words sink in to him before speaking in a low and dangerous voice, “I think you should leave.”

She scoffed at him, confused, “So we’re not even going to talk-

“Granger.”

Where there was a fire blazing behind his eyes there was now a rising of smoke from ashes, a colour to his cheeks, depth under his skin. She knew she had to give him time. So she left, leaving the door swinging behind her and refusing to look at the blank but surprised expressions of Zabini and Nott.
as she marched across the common room and up to her room, slamming the door behind her and stamping a foot in frustration.
“Shit!”

The portrait was completely empty. A gold lined frame surrounded a hole of blackness that flashed white with the shock of lightening glowing through the windows against the beat of the rain.

Hermione didn’t know what to do. She stood there in silence for a minute more, considering just waiting for the stupid Fat Lady to show up, or perhaps trying to find her in the portraits nearby. But the thought of returning back to the dormitory at one o clock made her uneasy, she saw him in her mind, sitting in his chair, breath like liquor, waiting for her to come down the stairs with her book. Of course he wouldn't be there now, not after today, but part of her worried he was there anyway and she had not just walked all the way across the castle in semi pitch black darkness just to turn back again without having seen Ginny at all.

There was only one thing for it. Casting a hopeful *muffliato* she screwed her eyes shut, hoping to God no one outside the Common Room would hear, and knocked loudly. Ten seconds and the door flung open and she tripped over the entrance, not expecting someone to come so quickly.

“Hermione?”

“Oh thank god its you.” She exhaled, taking in Ginny’s appearance, wrapped in a blue dressing down and with darkness beneath her eyes.

She glanced over to the sofa by the fire and saw a steaming mug on the coffee table and smiled gratefully.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah, no. Why are you here?”
“Me neither.”

Ginny made a noise that sounded like surprise as she climbed back on to the red sofa and poured Hermione a cup of tea.

“What was that?”

“I just thought you’d be with Malfoy. It’s your thing now isn’t it?”

“That’s sort of why I came.”

The fire was crackling so hotly that she felt she was inside it, dancing amongst the orange flames, burning in her anguish.

“What happened? Is this anything to do with why you left so early in Hogsmeade?” Ginny asked, taking a long sip of her drink, cup to lips.

“I kissed him again.”

Ginny almost spat her tea in choked surprise.

“I was honest. I told him I was sick of the whole ‘lets be friends and ignore our feelings’ game and that I really did like him and I even went as far as to prove I was strong enough to handle everything by telling him about mum and dad. And he just…went mad. Shouting about how we had to be a secret because of his own fucking ego and then just forcing me out of the room like he’d decided the conversation was over.”

Ginny gave her a withering look.

“I’m sorry, why do you like him again?”
“No, no, I get it. He’s been a twat, there’s no reason why you should understand what I see in him.”

“But you do like him.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah,” It all seemed to be sinking in to her now, like thoughts making their homes as memories, “for some reason.”

“You know you have to wait for him right? Don’t go making this right and forcing it to be fixed like you do with Hannah. He has to apologise for being a monumental bastard without you spoon feeding him like he’s a child.”

“No, I know,” Hermione spun her finger around the damp rim of her mug, looking up at the mantelpiece over the fire and feeling an ache in her chest as she noticed a badly knitted hat strewn over a clock that she remembered from a very long time ago, “I don’t think I even want to forgive him. How can I be with someone like that? Someone so fucked up they want to hide for the rest of their life? Someone who turns on you in seconds and just straight up tells you to leave?”

“If you’re looking for someone who isn’t damaged you’re going to have a tough time finding them,” Ginny said softly, “But yeah. Fuck Malfoy. There are damaged people who won’t be assholes to you, Hermione. I promise.”

“Like Pansy is to you?”

Hermione knew it was a long shot and where Ginny had had a hand resting against her shoulder she recoiled slightly, looking down to pick at her nails instead, revealing the kind of fragility that one rarely saw in Ginny unless you knew her like a best friend.

“That’s just sex.”

“But you like her? You know Pansy might be nice to you but she’s godawful to me nowadays.” Hermione smiled.

She figured she didn’t mind it so much, Pansy had always been difficult but at least this time she wasn’t cruel with it.
“What do you mean?”

“She’s snappier than usual. I don’t know. It’s like everyone but you pisses her off.”

“Like I said,” Ginny sighed, “It’s hard to find someone not damaged.”

“We’re going to be alright you know, you and me.”

Ginny dropped her head to Hermione’s shoulder and they sunk further in to the soft cushions, watching the fire die down and crackle, listening as the torrents of rain eased off in to a delicate patter.

“Course. We have each other.”
“Draco, come on-

When she reached the bottom of the staircase she was faced with the three of them all sitting around the fire. She noticed the bottles cluttering the table and the sour look on Draco’s face and she didn’t know what could’ve happened to make him look even more tragic. Was Lucius dead? Had he spilled coffee on his favourite jumper? He’d been in a terrible mood all week, spiteful and short with everyone, going off alone at all hours and now she was looking at him and seeing complete defeat and she wished he’d just tell her why he was acting like this. Pansy wasn’t stupid though, she saw the way Hermione didn't look over at Slytherin table anymore and how she rarely lingered in the common room, Draco had done something awful again and this time he was determined to block out the memory of Hermione Granger because of it.

“Ah, Pans, just the bitch I was looking for.” Draco said, “Care to join us?”

“As much as I appreciate the compliment honey, we’re going to be late.”

“I’m not going.”


“Change of heart. I miss the-

“Segregation?” She interrupted bitterly.

“Sit with us.” Draco ignored her, shifting over on the sofa so she could sit between him and Theo, “We can have our own group therapy if you’re that bothered about it.”

“Sounds delightful.” She sat down anyway, “You’re bankrupt, you’ve evidently fucked something up and- wait, Theo, what’s actually wrong with you?”

“Nothing at the moment. Apart from the crippling depression of day to day life.” Theo smiled brightly.
Pansy’s lips curled upwards a little, “The usual then.”

He hummed in agreement.

“I say a shot for every sob story.” Draco suggested, splashing vodka in to tall thin glasses with a sloppiness that told Pansy he was already mortally smashed as it was. She noticed how his words were slurring a little and wondered just how far he was willing to go.

“Don’t you think you’ve had enough?”

“Shut the fuck up, Pansy, my mother’s dead.” He said bluntly.

Then, as if in grand realisation, smiled widely and tipped a shot down his throat, barely cringing at the bitterness he had grown so used to now.

“I went digging the other day and Eleven has already invested most of my money in property.” Blaise contributed, leaning forwards to take a glass which was shining over the edges with spillage.

“I hate him,” Pansy said, “You know it’s never too late to appeal to the Ministry, you didn’t murder any of your stepfathers-

“Give it a rest Pans, the Ministry’s still as prejudiced as it was yesterday, nothing’s changed.”

Then Theo leaned forwards and raised his glass, the transparence of it glinting amber in the light of the fire.

“Yesterday someone tried to shoot me with a stinging hex.”

“Who?” Draco asked.

“I don’t fucking know, some stupid seventh year.”
“Maybe it was Macmillan.” Pansy suggested, “He loves duelling kids of Death Eaters.”

Theo laughed, wiping his damp lip with the sleeve of his school jumper and leaning back on the sofa.

“How do you know?”

Pansy cocked her head to the side, “How do you know?”

“There’s taken Hannah Abbot to London again. Fuck knows what they do there.” Blaise explained.

Now Pansy was thinking about Hermione and all the little things she’d tried to do and all the ways she’d talked about Hannah.

“How do you know?”

“Stupid stuff. Talking to you and Granger or not wanting to do things with him.”

“That’s messed up, Blaise, haven’t you said anything?”

“And risk getting hexed in to oblivion. We’re Death Eaters to him, he wouldn’t hesitate.”

“Maybe that would be a good thing for him, Azkaban, stop him from harassing everyone in the fucking year.”

“Don’t. Say that.” Draco winced.
And Pansy saw the trial woven in to his grimace, the summer in which he spent hours at Azkaban, talking meaninglessly to his father until he realised he couldn’t bare to go anymore. The tears and the blackmail threats as he stormed out of there with Pansy by his side for the last time, beyond those cold stone walls and back to the solace of the quiet muggle streets they apparated on to to walk the last metres home, feeling the intensity of loneliness that came along with surviving on the wrong side of the war.

“Well I’m moving to Paris- or being disowned.” Pansy blurted, not allowing herself any time to watch their jaws gape as she leaned over and downed her shot.

“When were you going to tell us that?” Theo burst out.

“Shall I pour us another set?” Pansy asked, leaning over for the vodka, feeling her heart thumping in her chest.

Blaise snatched the bottle from her, “No, you’re going to tell us what the fuck is going on.”

She sighed, leaning back and crossing her arms over here eyes as if wishing to disappear, inhaling regretfully, “Mother’s been owlng me non stop this year. She said England’s too dangerous for people like us. That we’re moving to Paris just before the new year and if I don’t go that she wants nothing to do with me.”

“That’s in like just over two months.” Theo said.

“Are you going?” Draco whispered, seeming to have sobered slightly with the shock of it all.

“Hell no, we did not just get through a whole war together by the skin of our teeth for me to abandon you idiots when you all clearly need me the most.”

“But Catherine-

“Fuck Catherine. All she ever did was try to give me to the Dark Lord once Draco got his mark, I wouldn’t necessarily say I’d be sad to see her go.”
Theo leaned towards her, “You’ll miss her.”

Pansy’s breath hitched and she stared at the fire as if to will away their sympathetic expressions.

“Catherine isn’t an Emmeline, Pansy,” Draco said gruffly, “She’s a Narcissa.”

Pansy could see the twist of pain behind his cold glassy eyes, hands shaking with the influx of alcohol as his fingers weaved between hers.

“Yeah well she’s not making a very Narcissa decision right now is she?”

“Her husband’s dead and her daughter is at constant risk of getting killed in a hate crime, give her a break,” Blaise said, “If it makes you feel any better I don’t think it’s an ultimatum she’ll go through with. Let her leave and I bet you a hundred Galleons she’ll keep owling you.”

“Blaise is right.” Theo added.

“You’re biased.”

“Maybe. But I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

“Thanks guys.” She said softly, looking around at them all, taking in this moment and hoping to freeze it in her mind.

“Fuck.” Draco blurted, “That was dangerously closer to group therapy than actual group therapy.”

“Merlin you’re right, who let us get so fucking sentimental?” Blaise shivered, leaning back in to his chair as if realising he’d just done a terrible thing.

“I think it was nice.”
Pansy laughed, “You would Theo, you give your boyfriend forehead kisses.”

“Shut the hell up, Parkinson, I won’t hesitate to curse you if you tarnish my image.”

‘And what image is that?” Draco smirked.

“Oh you know, a carbon copy of a Death Eater, void of emotion, that sort of thing.”

Pansy titled her head innocently, “You mean…Blaise?”

“Very funny.” Blaise drawled, refilling the glasses that lay empty on the table, “I think that’s one each for participating in the obscene travesty that has just occurred.”

They each lifted their glasses in to the air, waiting to toast.

“To living,” Draco announced, “And all of the fuckery that comes with it.”

One by one they downed their shots and as Pansy’s slipped down her throat with a bitterness that could never stop making her wince, she leaned back against Draco’s arm and smiled over at them all, and despite all of their problems, battles and fears, feeling utterly at peace with the world for a moment.
“Well this is quiet. Ginny, you don’t know where they are do you?”

“We’re having sex, Hermione, I didn’t put a tracking device on her.”

“Of course not.”

It was just the two of them. Neville had been at St Mungo’s all day and Luna had gone with him, they were all taking turns now. Hermione had been dreading sitting there next to Malfoy and pretending that everything was fine and she was glad she didn’t have to, but the lack of Pansy’s presence made the whole thing pathetic.

“Hermione,” Ginny started warily.

Hermione turned to her, giving her a scathing look, “Yes.”

“But I didn’t even-

“Go and get in some practice. I’ll just go to bed. What’s the point in sitting here for an hour anyway if no ones going to come?”

“I love you.” Ginny beamed, gathering her things and exiting through the door so quickly Hermione might have missed it if she blinked.

Now she was alone. She stayed there in the centre of the battered sofa for a minute more, taking in the orange flickering lamps and still empty furniture to the darkness swirling around the window outside. Ginny would levitate lamps and play for as long as she needed to clear her mind and Hermione would go to bed alone and unsatisfied. She considered following Ginny out and sitting in the stands but her exhaustion was winning.

For a moment she even considered taking one of Pansy’s purple vials to settle her mind so she could drift off free from everything that haunted her past twelve, but no, the stupid headstrong part of her brain was determined that she had to see this out herself, that she had to fight the darkness out of her
with nothing more than *brain power*.

The halls were silent. Now and again a ghost would flutter past or an owl could be heard through the windows, the wispiness of wind seeping in through the walls. She decided to take the long route, past the room of requirement and the girls bathroom, partially because she had to steel herself for who ever was in the common room and partially because she didn't want her solace to end.

But then she heard it. A yelp. A shaking sob echoing from the walls of the bathroom, the steady drip of a tap and shift of fabric and Hermione’s heart dropped. With a hand stuffed in her pocket wrapped tightly around her wand, Hermione edged towards the entrance of the girls bathroom, she saw the basins that decorated the far end of the room in an oval of pearl white and, shifting her gaze upwards, a figure in a black robe hanging over one, convulsing with the force of their sadness.

“Hello?” Hermione whispered, but she hadn’t needed to say it loudly because it echoed off the high ceiling all the same.

The figure froze. Hermione edged a little closer.

“Are you alright?”

Then it turned around and Hermione was met with the torn and twisted face of Hannah, cheeks glistening with tears, eyes stinging red. She wrapped her arms around herself as if to shield herself from the world but collapsed under the weakness of her knees, sobbing freely now on the floor.

Hermione rushed over to her and didn’t hesitate in putting her arms around her. She flinched at first. Recoiling as if she was scared of what Hermione would do. But then she seemed to realise who it was and she fell in to Hermione, arms wrapped around her neck, cheek pressed to her shoulder, *crying and crying and crying* and sounding so goddamn helpless it made Hermione feel a little ill.

“Shhh,” She tried shakily, rubbing her hands up and down her cold shoulders, “Its alright, Hannah. You’re alright.”

“I’m sorry,” Hannah gasped wetly, still shaking against Hermione’s robes. She raised her head and Hermione saw the strands of hair that had escaped from her braid, messy and wild and entirely broken, “I’ll just leave, I never meant to- I’m sorry- I-”
“Don’t you dare,” said Hermione, wrapping her arms tighter around her and squeezing but Hannah hadn’t needed much convincing to stay anyway, “What did he do to you?”

Then she froze. Breaking off from Hermione and trying her best to school her expression, but she still looked hysterical and as she got to her feet, pacing haphazardly up and down the stretch of the bathroom, reflection dancing across the many silver mirrors, she began to panic.

“What are you talking about?”

“What, Hannah, don’t run away from this. Please. I want to help you, I have always wanted to help you. To be your friend, to protect you, please.”

“I’m fine.” She snapped breathlessly.

“No, you’re not. And that’s okay. Just tell me what happened, help me to understand, let me help you.”

She started shaking her head erratically, a startling fire burning in her eyes, “Nothing’s wrong. Thank you, Hermione, really. But this was my fault… no ones hurting me.”

Hermione considered arguing, screaming the evidence at her, shaking her until she saw sense, but as she observed the look of terror in her face everything in her that wanted to fight Hannah subsided, melted like long ago lit candlewax pooling at her feet, simmering in to a warm shell of restraint.

“Alright.” Hermione said sadly, and although she hadn’t planned this, it seemed the best possible solution, reaching in to her pocket she retrieved a rusty galleon, “I’ve carried this around with me since Dumbledore’s Army. Even after the war I couldn’t seem to let it go. Do you still have yours?”

Hannah was watching the coin with evident confusion as Hermione flipped it over in her hand. She gulped thickly, shaking her head, “I lost mine in the last battle.”

Hermione stepped towards Hannah and reached for her hand which she jolted away at first but Hermione still managed to press the coin in to her palm, “Take mine, I’ll make a new one. If something else if your fault and you need my help let me know.”
Hannah looked at it sitting in her palm, then up at Hermione, then back again at the rusty coin, tinted red at the edges from the blood that had soaked it from Hermione’s slashed jeans all those months ago, worn with the cruelty of time.

“Thank you.” Hannah sniffed.

“Please use it.”

She nodded in return, slipping it in to her pocket and then disappearing through the door to the hall. Hermione stood there, listening to her footsteps retreat further and further, back to the common room, back to her haven or her hell depending on which dormitory she chose to step in to, with a stabbing of pain in heart. This was progress. She wished she could have made it all better in one night but for now, this might just be enough.
“Is it supposed to smell this bad?”

“I don’t think so,” Harry grimaced, running a finger through a blanket of pale dust covering an ebony shelf.

“No one’s been in here since May, if we leave the doors and windows open it’ll get better,” Ron’s shouted, his voice muffled amongst the sound of tumbling boxes as he was made his way through to the back of the shop.

Hermione poked her head around the door, frowning at the mess; cardboard boxes piled to the ceiling, jars of sweets turning sticky and soft with the lids hanging off and cobwebs dwindling in the corners of the ceiling.

Ron tore open a pair of orange curtains at the opposite end of the stock room and dust jumped from them, spinning in to the atmosphere and making Hermione cough, she could see the particles dancing in the break of sunlight stemming from the window, hazy in the brightness.

“Miss the aurors yet?” Harry grinned, entirely enjoying the fact that this was only his problem on weekends.

Ron looked back at him a little uneasily, “Maybe.”

“Oh cheer up, a few weeks and it’ll be brand new again!” Hermione beamed, looking around as if trying to find something positive in the whole sorry sight, “Just make sure you don’t start selling out of date potions or you’ll have a lawsuit on your hands.”

“Thanks, Hermione.”

She sighed humorously, “Start sorting the out of date potions. Harry can help me clean the windows.”

Harry and Hermione were standing in the doorway at the front of the shop now, taking in the early
morning and feeling the cold breeze sweep around them. They’d all decided over owl that it was best to start early because it meant there were less people to gawk and stare and harass them for autographs, so now they could indulge in the slow moving quietness of dawn as if they were the only three people who existed in the world.

“Have you been getting the Prophet?” Harry asked, summoning a cloth, throwing one at Hermione and beginning to wipe down the fronts of the windows which were stained with the thin sheet of grime that had built up over the time they’d spent locked up in the burrow trying to forget about their pain.

“I can’t bring myself to,” She explained, sliding her cloth up the blackness of the glass, “I still expect it to all about murders and Voldemort. Why do you ask?”

“Rita Skeeter.” Harry said simply, he continued to wipe the windows and Hermione stared at him for a moment, listening to the squeak of the cloth and watching as his glasses tipped precariously down the curve of his nose.

“You can’t be serious.”

“I’m surprised Kingsley even let her keep her job.”

“The Ministry can’t just fire journalists for doing their job, even if they are vicious deluded narcissists,” Hermione said bitterly, “What’s she been saying this time?”

“Oh you know, prying in to our personal lives, reporting fabricated news about the emotional state of Harry Potter, Hermione Granger and the Weasley family.”

Hermione let out a frustrated breath and pressed harder against the window, so tightly she could feel the crescents of her nails sink in to her palm and for a second she willed for them to slice her skin in two, letting the glass break from its frame due to force.

“And you didn’t say anything?” Hermione spluttered. What was it with secret keeping these days?

Harry paused, refusing to look her in the eye as he spoke, “We thought you knew and just wanted to ignore it but it was a bit weird when we came to Hogsmeade and you didn’t mention the front page spread of yourself about having tragically split up with Ron Weasley because he reminds you too
much of your traumatic memories of battle. Ginny doesn’t know either I don’t think, she never reads the paper anyway- or cares probably.”

“No, I get it.” She kicked a stone over with her foot resignedly, “Looks like I’m subscribing to the Prophet again.”

“Don’t. It’s all bullshit.”

“It’ll be nice to have a laugh.” She attempted a warm smile.

*Yes, a laugh whilst she read up on every possible loophole and clause she could manipulate to her advantage in a criminal trial.*

They worked on in silence, listening to Diagon Alley behind them slowly flourish in to life. Shop doors clanking open, early risers making bank withdrawals, owls soaring above them with today’s first Prophets and post.

Then she saw through the glass as Ron walked out of the stock room and to the dusty check out counter, stacking boxes and fishing through them with his head down, complete focus on his face.

“Has Ron really been alright? After last week I mean.”

She hadn’t talked to Harry about the entire unrequited feelings debacle but she knew he would know anyway, something told her if it wasn’t for him Ron would never have tried to come clean about his feelings for her again.

“Yeah. If anything you pushed him forwards. He quit the Aurors, we’re cleaning up the shop right now, he’s more focused than he’s been in ages, he’s getting on with his life now.”

“Good.” She let out a breath she didn’t even know she was holding, “That’s really good.”

Harry glanced at her sideways, almost worried of saying the wrong thing and having consequences to deal with, “Are you?”
Hermione couldn't lie, “I will be.”

And she would. When the nightmares got better. When Malfoy disintegrated in to thin air. When everyday didn’t feel like wading through mud and when Hannah Abbot was safe and Neville’s mother cured.

“It’s Malfoy isn’t it?”

Hermione froze. That was not the sort of reply she’d been expecting.

“You can’t say anything to Ron, you know he’ll go insane.” She whispered quickly, “Merlin, how the fuck do you know?”

“Not a lot of people went back to Hogwarts, Hermione, I put two and two together. It wasn’t that hard. That’s who you abandoned us in Hogsmeade for wasn’t it?”

She considered denying it for a second but what good would that do?

She knew it before it had left her lips, “Ginny told you didn't she.”

“Possibly.” Harry smirked, light behind his green eyes.

“Well it’s over- whatever it was.” She bit out, running her cloth along the insides of the frame and collecting cobwebs against her nails.

“Can’t say I’m sorry about that.”

“Thanks for not screaming.” She admitted, “Much appreciated.”

Because she couldn't expect Harry or Ron or anyone else to understand why she’d all of a sudden become mysteriously sympathetic towards someone infamous for hating her guts to the bitter end.
They couldn’t understand that she’d watched him read and laugh and felt the softness of his lips against her own, how she melted in to his strong hands in a way that made the ringing in her brain subside so sweetly she wished she could sink in to the feeling constantly, how she had begun to learn to run her fingers across the vacancies within his heart, reading between the lines of what he was so afraid to say aloud. But that was gone now. It had to be gone.

Suddenly there was a crash and a yelp and Ron came rushing out of the stock room, desperate for breath.

Ron leaned over, panting, ‘There’s…there’s a fucking family of spiders in there! It’s like Aragog relocated.’

Hermione grinned, she couldn’t help it. Ron shot her a sour glare, looking as if he was about to pass out.

“I’ll go.” Harry offered, trying his best to smother an obvious amused laugh.

Hermione swung an arm around Ron’s shoulder and strolled him back in to the shop but not so close to the stock room to trigger even more panic. Not that he would allow that anyway, getting him to walk a metre back in was proving difficult against his cemented stance and trembling shoulders. But it was mundane and ridiculous and so him.

“Never change, Ronald.” She smiled.

And in that moment she knew that they would all be okay. Because war came and went with tide of life but her love for those boys would be forever.
Cigarettes

“Hey.”

She felt arms twist around her waist and a warm mouth press in to the space between her shirt collar and the beginnings of the curve of her neck and everything in her melted.

“You took your time.”

Pansy spun around so she could face her, she was wearing her hair down today, tresses of fiery red smooth around her eyes, she saw the freckles spattered against her cheeks and imagined dotting them all together in a perfect constellation.

“Sorry,” Ginny cringed, “difficult essay. Hermione’s been locked up in the library all night, she’s doing something so serious she can’t even spare me five minutes.”

“I think room twelve is sufficiently vacant,” Pansy replied, cupping Ginny’s face in her hands and kissing her lips, once, twice, three times, letting her hands slip against her lower back, the curve of her gorgeous backside, wishing she could slip that grey skirt up past her hips then and there in the middle of the corridor with the moonlight dressing them in silver.

“Brilliant,” Ginny took her hand and they moved away from the alcove besides the front doors, “Although I think we should stick to lunchtimes because that wood is doing my back no fucking good.”

“What are you, eighty?” Pansy snorted.

She rolled her eyes, “I’m an overworked athlete, Pansy. Fifty percent of the time I’m fucking aching.”

They were walking past the Great Hall, which was usually locked shut at night, but not now, now there was a crack between its heavy doors, a thin line of night blue pouring in to the hallway and it made them stop in their tracks.
“Who the fuck is in there?”

Pansy shrugged, “I don't know.”

“Should we…check?”

“What about room twelve?”

“I’m not suggesting we stay for chat.”

“Fine,” Pansy huffed, letting go of Ginny and moving so she could look in through the slice of light and in to ghostly stillness of the hall; her eyes fell directly on him.

He had his back to her, sitting on Slytherin bench at the very head, his white hair like a moon amongst the darkness.

Pansy bit her lip, “Can we reschedule?”

“What, why? Who-

“It’s Draco, I should talk to him.”

Ginny’s face seemed to flash between the expected reaction of someone who was being turned down in place of a person she utterly despised for the sake of their sorry emotional wellbeing and then to resigned understanding, or perhaps just the tiredness that came along with the familiarity of being an almost intimate acquaintance of last minute decisions.

“No, of course, you should go to him, I get it.” She nodded.

“I’m sorry it’s just he’s been worse than normal lately and-
“See you at lunchtime.” Ginny said with finality, smirking a little and letting herself walk back in to the silent halls and disappear away from her up the adjacent staircase.

Pansy watched her go regretfully before slipping through the doors to the Great Hall. She didn’t announce herself, she wasn’t sure she had to, instead she just listened to her footsteps clatter against the wooden floors as she approached him.

She could smell it before she saw it, the ashiness of smoke, and as she went to sit next to him, legs dangling over the edge of the desk she saw him in his fullness. Head bowed, cigarette short and almost gone as he weakly smoked what was left of it, shirt sleeves rolled back and top three buttons undone carelessly; he looked how she always felt.

“Where’d you get that one?”

“Theo’s trunk.” He grasped, sounding very much like he hadn’t spoken for hours but let the ash build up in his throat instead, slotting what was left of it between his lips and attempting to drag it dry.

“I knew he was lying to me when he told me he’d stopped.”

“Yeah he just doesn’t smoke around us anymore, he’s not kidding anyone.”

It was over the summer that Theo had first ventured in to muggle London and came back with a habit for cigarettes and walking neon lit streets late at night. He said it soothed him, the chaos that was not born from war but excitement, how he could disappear in to a world that was not his own. Sometimes the wizarding side of London made things hard for him. He was always the quiet one, the outsider, now he was targeted, his silence mocked, it was understandable that he loved the true anonymity muggle cities could bring. How he could walk through them like a ghost.

“Who was with you?” Draco asked, realising the hopelessness of trying to smoke a smoked cigarette and twisting it in to the surface of the table between where the hands lay- she’d have to tell him to clean that up before they left.

“Ginny Weasley.”

“I thought so.”
“You wha-

“We’re all as bad as each other at secrets Pans. It’s like the Dark Lord dying made us lazy.”

“Probably true.” She conceded.

She wanted to tell him more. It felt like the morning after the battle all over again. They’d sat at this table in the golden hue of Victory with Narcissa and Lucius and she had told him that she was gay, that she couldn’t carry on pretending she wasn’t, that she was sorry for leading him on all those years. He gulped down something in him and she watched him nervously, his dirt streaked face seemed strained. Then he took her hand in his under the table and squeezed it hard.

“Good.” He’d said. But it had meant more than that. Good, you’re allowed to be yourself, good, I’m glad you told me, good, it’s alright, good, I’m proud of you.

“That happy to get rid of me?” She’d teased, although her insides were churning and her entire being was tired.

She had lolled her head against his arm and closed her heavy eyes, glad to find some relief because she had no idea what was coming next, she half expected the Auror’s to drag her off and throw her straight in to Azkaban any minute.

“I never plan on doing that.” He’d said.

And he didn’t. He went back to the Manor and Pansy went back to her mother and then time found them as orphans of war. So they moved on with their lives together, with Theo and Blaise, terror in their hearts and steel masks on their faces.

“It’s nothing serious,” She said, and he smirked over at her, shadowy against the darkness of the hall, if she tipped her head back she’d see the stars lining the charmed ceiling.

“Your first girlfriend.” He said almost proudly, and she wanted to wipe the smug look off his face.
“She’s not my girlfriend.”

She felt like they were twelve again.

‘I don’t care, you’re happy.’

He let go of her hand and leaned back now, flat against the table, staring up at the swirls and galaxies in the sky of the ceiling that mimicked the glow outside.

“That’s pushing it,” She admitted, thinking of the potion she’d downed only forty minutes ago in front of the bathroom mirror.

When she leaned down to look at him there was nothing behind him, he was just a shell of a human body, she imagined cracking him open like an egg and finding only air.

“You’re allowed to be.” She told him, because she didn’t think she was the one in this conversation who craved happiness as much as he did, regardless of how much he tried to pretend he did not care.

“And if I keep fucking things up?”

*Now, we’re getting there.*

“Apologise and try again. I know it’s not your thing saying sorry, fuck, it’s not mine either, but sometimes it’s necessary.”

“I’m never saying this again but-

‘Go on.” She grinned.

“You’re amazing Pans.”
“Merlin, he finally said something nice about someone other than himself!” She teased, laughing song like in to the silent night, “Next you’ll be giving out free butterbeer and singing to House Elves, you’ll have an Order of Merlin before the years out.”

“You’re being annoying.”

She stretched a hand out to him, “Get up, Malfoy.”

And she was six again, saying those exact words as he lolled on the grass in a hot summer against the vast stretches of lawn behind their houses. He crinkled his nose as he’d done then and let her drag him up until they were standing on the table. They jumped off and stumbled a little.

Together they made their way back to the common room and although it was not a pillow fort or a thrilling game of hide or seek, began a satisfyingly competitive game of wizard’s chess, volleying back and forth stories they’d forgotten all about, resurrecting the light in a cloudy sky.
“Morning, Hermione.”

“Nope. Go away. I’m busy.” She muttered, hurrying to scrawl down a note.

“So you’re going to ignore two compassionate women who just brought a cup of coffee all the way up from the fucking Great Hall?”

Hermione’s head shot up instantly and met the smirks of Ginny and Pansy although evidently still tired and loose with the heaviness of early morning.

“How the hell did you get that past Pince?” Hermione asked, taking the mug from Ginny’s hands and gulping it down so quickly it burned her throat, aware she could get spotted any moment.

“I distracted her by asking about a book that I know for certain is not in this library.”

Pansy slammed down her heavy bag on the table and took a seat across from Hermione and her towers of books, who was slowly beginning to realise that she perhaps may be slightly overworked, especially as the top of Pansy’s head was about all she could see past thick volumes on the Development of Wizarding Law. So she took a few from the pile and put them on the floor by their feet, squinting at the influx of morning sun she hadn't noticed before that was shining full force through the blocked library window.

“What book could you possibly know about that she doesn’t?”

Pansy smiled deviously, “The Love Witches.”

Ginny snorted from behind the sheets of a scruffy, quickly written essay she’d pulled out and shook her head.

“It’s porn isn't it?” Hermione declared bluntly.
“See,” Pansy marvelled, “That’s the beauty of it, you’ve read every book in the universe and you still don’t know about that God awful trilogy.”

“It’s a trilogy?”

“Oh yeah, I can’t wait to see what McGonagall says when she reads the Hogwarts Library request form.”

“She’ll faint that’s what.” Ginny laughed.

“It’ll be front page of the Prophet and they’ll really shut the school down this time. Murderous snakes and demented dark wizards doesn’t stop Hogwarts but a Librarian with a passion for erotica would.”

Pansy picked up one of the closed books and blew the dust from the top, reading the lengthy title with a confused expression on her face.

“We don’t study law, Hermione. Are you feeling quite okay?”

“Oh this is normal for her, she set up a House Elf association aged fourteen.” Ginny told her and when Hermione looked up many a time and saw mockery at the explanation, she saw in her best friend a glimmer of pride, “What’s the motive this time? Mermen?”

“The Daily Prophet,” Hermione said, “Or more specifically Rita Skeeter and her inability to keep her fucking mouth shut.”

“No way.” Ginny gasped.

Pansy laughed as if she wasn't surprised.

Reaching in to her heavy bag Hermione lifted out three newspapers and threw them over so they landed on top of Ginny’s crumpled essay, “Yes way.”

She passed one to Pansy and began reading immediately, her eyes growing more fiery with each
An anonymous source has confirmed that Ginny Weasley and Harry Potter have split due to Weasley’s alarmingly frequent cheating, it has consequently been suggested by a friend that she seek urgent help for her inability to form meaningful relationships.” Ginny quoted sourly, crumpling up the page in to a ball when she got to the end and throwing it out of the open window behind her with a rumpled frown.

Hermione could see the cogs turning over in her head, the anger beginning to gather in the clench of her fists, and she watched nervously as she jittered about as if desperate for something to occupy herself with.

“Who fancies a trip to the Ministry?”

“No!” Hermione replied, snatching the other newspapers out of Pansy’s hands and putting them back in her bag as if to fuel the fire no further, “Beating her up won’t help.”

“And reading books about legislation from 1645 will?”

“It’s a start,” Hermione nodded slowly, “Because once I know all the loopholes and all the blockades I can work on forming a strong campaign that’ll have her gone for good.”

“Skeeter’s been sneaking around for thirty years, what makes you think you’ll be the one to stop her?” Pansy argued complacently, stretched back in her chair, arms crossed below her breasts, wrist glittering with the diamond sparkle of a thin bracelet.

Hermione smirked, “I’ve done it before.”

“You what?”

“Hermione kidnapped her in 1995.”

“What the fuck?” Pansy breathed, a grin of surprise on her face. Hermione imagined she was wondering about all the other things she didn’t know about her and there was satisfaction in that.
“Why do you think she was so quiet?”

Pansy looked at her like she’d been looking at her wrong for the last eight years, like she was trying to figure out a difficult equation yet enjoying every hurdle it threw at her.

Within ten minutes Hermione had finished her chapter and Ginny had half heartedly word checked her essay- not that she needed to put much effort in as Hermione spotted Pansy correcting it herself when Ginny got up to look for a reference book anyway. Neither of them said anything although she was sure Ginny must know and Hermione thought it was sweet and that was reason enough entirely not to vocalise that opinion- to protect herself from rash hexing.

Then they were walking through the halls to Transfiguration and birdsong broke the air, dewdrops dotted the grass and the stone arches of the castle stood strong in the light.
Halloween: Part One

The common room was satisfyingly vacant for the first time in weeks. Hermione suspected it had something to do with it being Halloween. Everyone would either be in the Great Hall amongst the glow of the candles and carved pumpkins or searching for solace to hide from the crowds. She thought of Harry and what he’d be doing, how he’d be feeling and she wished she could be with him holding his hand.

She sunk in to the sofa and crossed her legs, opening a book on her lap, relishing in the calmness and absence of pain or drama to crush her heaving chest, just the wind billowing against the windows and her smooth heartbeat as the soundtrack to her evening.

It seemed to relax her, dull her senses so that she didn’t jump when the door cracked open and slammed shut, not when she heard footsteps thudding towards her, not even when they ceased and her page became shadowed by the faceless figure above her.

Instead she raised her head slowly and what she saw made her cringe with expectation, “What do you want?”

Malfoy was standing over her, blocking the glow of the fire so it blazed around his edges like an orange halo.

“What are you reading?”

“None of your business.” She snapped.

Malfoy barked out a laugh, “Are you planning on staying this difficult?”

“Are you planning on leaving?”

He balked for a moment and she thought he was about to give up and walk away. He looked fragile again, arms hung at his sides, not in his pockets today, there was no swing in his step or smirk in his tone.
Hermione stayed looking at him, straight in to those cold eyes, refusing to be steered by him. There was still a part of her that swirled like a hurricane whenever she saw the blue veins against his pale hand, the way his lips turned upwards just for her, but she couldn't let herself drown in his presence anymore. She knew there’d be no life saving, no safety ring thrown amongst the waves, she’d be left to tip back deeper amongst the blue of it all, sinking to rock bottom whilst he stayed motionless.

“I was actually thinking I might talk to you.”

Hermione frowned, that hadn't been what she was expecting and for a moment she didn't know how to reply.

“Get on with it then,” She said stiffly.

He dithered for a moment and it looked like nervousness, then he sat down next to her, looking straight at the fire so she could trace his strong jaw with her gaze.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about the other week-

*Have you? Me too.*

“And I had no right to treat you how I did.”

He didn't say anything more and part of her kicked herself for expecting Draco Malfoy to say *I am sorry*. Instead she closed her book and moved sideways so she was facing him, cushions on the sofa moving softly beneath them as he titled too, they were almost knee to knee now.

“What are you saying?”

His lip jerked as if he was about to make a snide remark but it faltered before it left his mouth, “I want you to know that I fuck up- *a lot-*

“That’s quite clear.” She rolled her eyes tiredly, letting out a long tortured sigh.
“And that I was...wrong.”

This was the moment she’d been waiting weeks for. Him coming to her, apologising, realising that he can’t be cold to those who put their hearts on the line for almost lovers who were barely still enemies. She thought of what Ginny said about her waiting for him to come to her and her reply of not wanting anything more to do with him for it and she knew it was the right thing to do regardless of the pull in her chest she was trying to masterfully ignore.

“Thank you.” She said rigidly, watching his stoic face with fascination, it was almost as if it were a prison, emotions fighting to get out, punching through the bars, their actions reflected in the movement of an eyebrow or clench of jaw, “You can go now, you know.”

But he stayed.

She picked up a gold lined velvet cushion and ran her fingers along the edges for something to do, squashing it in her lap, something to take her eyes off that gorgeous tainted face.

Minutes seemed to pass. She risked a look at him and he was already looking at her, for how long she did not know. It was like he was now mortal, his feelings splayed out before her in the desperation of his glare.

In that moment they were both simply young innocence, walking around the edges of one another and waiting for something that would never come.

He finally opened his mouth to speak. Her breath hitched. A hot circular glow burned against her thigh.
Halloween: Part Two

“I have to go.” She gasped, digging in her skirt pocket as she flew through the common room door, not waiting long enough to see Malfoy’s confused reaction.

Amongst the gold indentations of the coin, hot words rose to the surface as if melting through the serial number, beating with heat like a heart in her hand.

“Oh my god, Hannah.”

Hermione rounded the corner to the third floor and saw her, slumped against the wall to the entrance to the room of requirement, gasping and crying and clutching her ribs. She bit the inside of her cheek and steeled herself as she rushed closer to Hannah who was bloodstained and evidently distraught.

“I can’t- I tried to get in the room and I couldn’t,” Hannah cried painfully.

And Hermione could see her in full now, her stomach churned and she was overwhelmed by the urge to vomit as she saw the redness of her face, the soft dapples that would turn to gruesome bruises and the watery glow of tears as they poured endlessly down her cheeks.

“I think the fiendfyre destroyed it, I meant to test it myself but I guess we know now.” She explained, kneeling down next to her and offering a shaky hand.

Hannah was trembling as she took it, “Just- get me somewhere, I can’t walk on my own.”

“We’re going to the hospital wing.”

Two pulls and she had got her to her feet, she slumped heavily against her and Hermione was grateful she was so thin because she wasn’t sure she could’ve dragged her anywhere like that if she’d weighed anymore. It was closing in on her now, the reality of it all, it felt like she was saving a casualty from battle. In a way she was, a casualty of someones sick war on the rest of the world because he couldn't bare to move on from deaths he couldn't have prevented, desperate to battle through life by making others bleed with his oozing pain.
“No, please, Hermione, please, we can’t- just leave me, leave me, I’m fine, I-

“How about the dormitory? How does that sound?” Hermione compromised cajolingly, she knew now was no time to get mad, “We’ll get you to the dormitory and then I can go and get help.”

“You can’t say anything!” She begged desperately, her head rolling against Hermione’s shoulder as she tried her best to keep her legs moving.

“It’s too late for that, Hannah, they’re going to notice anyway.” She said softly, and it was true, he’d really messed his facade up this time because the girl against her was a rag doll with feelings that tore her entire being apart, “Where the fuck is he?”

“I- I don’t know, he just left, it was my fault, I said I wanted to break up I didn't mean for-

Hannah’s breath picked up again and she began to panic, gasping for air and crying so hard she might suffocate herself.

“Breathe for me, alright?” Hermione bit out desperately, they were almost at the north side of the castle now, “don’t talk. We’ll get you cleaned up and in bed and then we’ll take it from there okay?”

When they’d finally made it up the stairs to the common room and Hermione had pretty much carried her through the door, Malfoy shot up from the sofa.

“What the hell happened?”

“Where’s Ernie?”

“Dormitory. You mean-

Hermione couldn’t let him finish, “Just make sure he doesn’t leave. Whatever you do, don’t let him out of this room, Malfoy.”

She watched him as he gulped and nodded, stood stock still, frozen with shock.
Hannah was silent now but the dampness against the shoulder of Hermione’s robes told her she hadn’t settled at all.

“Just up these stairs, Hannah, that’s it, alright?”

She nodded, her blonde hair long escaped from her hair tie and drowning her bashed and bruised face.

Hermione kicked the door open and Pansy who had her back turned from it, digging in her trunk, jumped.

“Oh my fucking god.” She exclaimed, wide eyed, immediately taking hold of Hannah’s other arm and helping Hermione lead her to the bed.

“Can you get McGonagall for me? Just tell her it’s urgent don’t waste time explaining.” Hermione said, rushing to the sink and soaking a flannel under the tap until it became damp, listening to Pansy’s feet race quickly down the stairs.

“Do you want me to get your pyjamas?” Hermione called.

“No, I- I think I’ve got it.” She heard her say back, almost a broken whisper, but Hermione was sure she had at least one broken rib and she felt queasy knowing how much pain she must be in.

When she got back to the bed Hannah had her pyjama pants on but only one sleeve in her top, her breathing was hard and she looked so close to crying again that all Hermione wanted to do was hug her. Instead, she helped her arm through the sleeve, her heart cinching when she saw a line of bruises and scratches up the side of her arm. How had it taken her so long to save her from this? Why couldn't she have been faster? She didn't comment on it though, she couldn't afford putting Hannah through anymore stress. She wanted to steal one of Pansy’s dreamless sleep potions for her but she needed Pomfrey and a good helping of Skelegrow before that could be done.

Hermione was about to explain all of this when she heard a door slam from downstairs as argument began to erupt. She whipped out her wand and set up a hasty silencing charm before Hannah could become too alarmed and pressed the damp flannel in to her palm, “I’ll get someone to come and stay with you.”
“I’m fine on my own Hermione, I can wait.”

“Don’t be stupid, I’ll get Neville.” She argued, trying her hardest to smile brightly at her, but it melded in to something more sad.

“Thank you so much.” Hannah croaked, eyes filling with glistening tears again.

“Its okay, I’m so glad I could help you.” Hermione replied.

*I’m so sorry I couldn't get to you sooner.*

The common room was like walking in to a battlefield. Nott and Zabini were standing in front of the door, Neville and Malfoy at the other side, Ernie trapped between them. He was screaming at them, wand drawn threateningly, swiping it around without saying any spells. He looked insane.

Hermione felt nausea roll over her again. Then he saw her and his frustration grew, it was like she had just fuelled an angry fire adamant on destroying every last human being in its wake.

“This is your fault, you Death Eater bitch!” He screamed, charging towards her, wand in front of him, about to fire.

She drew hers quickly but before he could reach her Malfoy lunged for him, seizing his wrists and twisting them up against his shoulder blades, listening as he howled in pain, “Don’t you fucking touch her.”

Before Hermione had chance to process what he’d done for her Ernie began to thrash against him, hands and sparks flying around the room as he cracked his fist sickeningly in to Malfoy’s eye who stumbled back, tumbling to the floor and clutching his face.

*“Neville go to my dorm please.”* Hermione said urgently, and when she caught his glance he seemed to understand what she was asking and left immediately.
She was running to Malfoy before she even realised what she was doing, offering him her hands which he took, lifting himself from the floor and muttering out a bitter thanks.

Where the fuck were Mcgonagall and Pansy?

“You’re all fucking murderers!” Ernie spat out, shooting hexes towards Blaise and Theo who had their wands out and were shooting back shield charms just as erratically, desperately trying to stop him.

“Can someone please do us a bloody favour and restrain Mr Crazy?” Zabini shouted stormily, and it all happened so quickly none of them could do anything.

Ernie set off another hex and Zabini realised what was happening and grabbed Nott, dropping their wands in the panic and slamming them to the ground. The orange light hit the door behind them instead and shook it off its hinges. It slammed to the ground outside the common room, just missing the boys on the floor and shaking the entirety of the castle with its weight.

“Fucking hell!” Malfoy yelped, attempting to hit Ernie with a body bind and catching Nott, who was luckily already on the floor, instead.

“What the hell was that for you twat?” Zabini screamed at him, lugging Nott’s body to the alcove by the wall.

Malfoy shot him a desperate look that seemed to be an apology and lunged for the coffee table, tipping it up as a shield when he realised Ernie had started setting off an array of all three unforgivables.

Hermione quickly ducked behind the sofa, heart thudding so loudly she felt it might rip from her chest, letting herself calm and catch her breath, feeling the shake of her hands against her wand. The war was over, none of them felt like dying so soon after they’d just made it out alive.

“Can someone fucking do something!” Zabini shrieked again, he was using his entire body to keep Theo safely against the wall, searching for their wands with his eyes.

Ernie was chanting crazily now, setting off everything from tickling charms to avada kedavra at the walls as if he couldn't see his targets, yelling his lungs sore, “Fucking Death Eaters and their...
whores, sick fucking bitches, trying to kill me, kill us all, they want to take over the world, revolting murderers!

Hermione readied herself, quivering with the memories of the recent past, looking out from the left corner of the sofa and waiting for him to turn his back on her, when he did she shot up from her hiding place, “Petrificus Totalus!”

He became immediately silent, wand clattering to the floor as he swayed for a moment, rolling on the balls of his feet before crashing face down to the edge of the rug. Everything was smoky with magic residue and silence and no one pretended they didn't hear the sound when his nose broke sickeningly as it slammed against the stone floor.

“What on earth is happening?” Mcgonagall exclaimed.

And to Hermione’s relief she was standing in the doorway, a black outline against the mist, staring incredulously at Ernie’s corpse like shape on the floor and the door flat and off its hinges, Madam Pomfrey and Pansy behind her.

“Thank Merlin you’re here,” Hermione breathed, “I can explain.”

So she did. Zabini found their wands and unlocked Nott from the curse that had accidentally frozen him, Malfoy seized Ernie’s wand and Pansy and Pomfrey shot up the staircase without another word.

Mcgonagall listened quietly, her face weathered by time and war and with every word Hermione spoke she could see her face drawing sourer. She was sickened by this, tired of violence, they all were.

‘Thank you, Miss Granger.’ She said gravely, levitating Ernie in to the air and making to leave, “I better get down to St Mungo’s with him immediately. I’m very proud of you all for working together so well tonight.”

Hermione smiled weakly at her, arms crossed beneath her breasts, taking in the true meaning behind what Mcgonagall had said. Because they had worked together and they had succeeded and the old animosity was merely memory between them now. It felt like hope, like not all things good and peaceful had been lost in their world.
Hermione collapsed on to the sofa and Zabini joined her, letting out a long breath.

“Happy fucking Halloween.”

Hermione began to laugh unexpectedly, buzzing from the adrenaline of it all, “Same to you.”

“I thought you weren't going to help us for a moment there and then we would have really been fucked because you’re the only one stupidly brave enough to walk in to cross fire that insane,” He teased.

“Of course I was, I was just choosing my moment properly, that’s how you save yourself from accidental body binds and punches in the eye.” She replied, eye shifting to Malfoy who was sitting in the arm chair across from them, the top of his cheekbone turning blue.

“So that’s why they call you the brightest witch of our age.” Nott said sarcastically, grinning.

“That and the fact that I’ve memorised every good spell in the book.” She shot back, smiling slightly at the calmness before them that tumbled amongst them like a slow wave after the storm.

Madam Pomfrey was walking down the stairs of the common room now, Neville behind her. The reality of the situation crashed before Hermione and she wanted to kick herself for feeling anything close to happy when her friend was upstairs in severe pain.

“She’s sleeping and stable. Just keep an eye on her and I’ll be back first thing in the morning,” Pomfrey explained, stepping over the door that was still flattened on the floor before her, tutting as if a foolish child had simply littered, following the staircase outside and shrinking further in to the distance.

“Did everything go alright?” Neville asked.

“Crazy’s off to St Mungo’s and no one died so I’d say so.” Zabini hummed, eyeing the clock on the mantelpiece and rising from the sofa, “I’m going to go and sleep it off. See you in the morning, team.”
“Good night, Zabini.” Hermione snorted, *team*, as if they were a friendly squad of Aurors.

Nott and Neville followed him, evidently drained from being accidentally attacked and looking after Hannah. Now the common room was empty but for two.

Hermione stood up when she heard their dorm door shut and moved to sit on the carpet by Malfoy’s chair, “Thanks for earlier. Sorry about your eye.”

“It’s nothing Pomfrey can’t sort out in the morning.” He shrugged tiredly, looking at her like he had been an hour ago, softness in his eyes, she felt woozy again but it wasn't because of blood and bruises this time.

“Are you going to bed? Or do you want to do duty with me?” She asked him.

Because she knew she wouldn’t be able to sleep, nor did she want to stay in a room that was still steamy with magic, it reminded her too much of those wooden benches in the aftermath of the final battle, she could admit to herself that she was entirely scared of the night to come.

“We can sit against the wall outside the dorm and talk.” She said, trying to convince him in to keeping her company although she wouldn't know why he’d agree. They hadn’t spoken for weeks and she’d avoided him like the plague but right now he was all she wanted. The pain and anguish was over now and he seemed to be carrying for her the light and optimism of a fresh day. Although she couldn't exactly figure out why.

He must have understood her silent plea anyway or else he really was interested in spending a dull night with her against a stone cold wall as he nodded and followed her up the stairs in silence.

She poked her head around the door, Pansy was sitting at the foot of Hannah’s bed, who’s blackened body was sleeping seemingly peacefully. Hermione was glad she would have that tonight, before tomorrow came and statements were made and life had to be confronted like the ugly giant it was.

“You can go to sleep, I’ll stay up.” Hermione whispered to Pansy and she didn’t say anything when she saw her red eyes and shaken expression.

Pansy nodded in thanks, tip toeing over to her own bed and sinking beneath the sheets. As she closed the door halfway and leaned against the opposite wall with Malfoy so she could see Hannah
through the crack of the door, she pretended not to hear the quick clink of two potion bottles either.
“What a night.”

“Yeah I know,” Hermione nodded, wrapping her arms around her legs and performing an extra silencing charm to be sure no one could hear them, “At least he’s getting help, at least Hannah will be okay.”

“Do you think she’ll press charges?”

“I don’t know, she’s so scared, she thinks it’s her fault.”

Although there was no light to fill the hallway the orange glow from the common room a staircase down was climbing towards them, pooling at their feet like a sunset. Hermione dipped a foot in to the strip of light and listened to the calm. Hannah’s deep breaths, Pansy’s sheets rustling delicately as she turned over, the soft clatter as Hermione placed her wand on the stone floor besides her.

It made everything feel worse. The scars and bruises Hannah would have to live with, the feel of her body against her side, the tears and all the times she’d wondered if Ernie was taking things too far, treating her like an insolent child in a vicious manner. She did not think she’d forgive herself for all the wasted opportunities any time soon.

“She’s safe now though. With you.”

His voice brought her back from the darkness she’d faded in to. It startled her slightly, how soft spoken he could be, how his kindness shone through when his barriers were slightly lower for lack of sleep or something else, she could not know. How he’d jumped to save her from Ernie’s wrath when he knew full well she could handle him herself- she had been the one to bring him down after all.

“I don’t know about that.” She admitted shyly, unable to look at him, instead she kept her eye on Hannah’s figure, the rise and fall of her chest, studying it carefully as if afraid she might stop breathing.

An owl fluttered by, hooting loudly as wind lazily licked the glass windows.
“What were you saying to me earlier? Before hell broke lose?” She asked. She had spent the recent moments she’d had free of emotional stress wondering what he would’ve said if she hadn’t had to leave when Hannah sent for her. It was at the back of her mind, tugging at her gently, reminding her there were doors yet to close.

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” Malfoy shrugged.

“No, tell me. We’re going to be here all night anyway, you might as well.”

_Because we could still die tomorrow. It looks like we don’t need wars for people to shoot unforgivables at us anymore._

“Just that-

He hesitated. Hermione tilted herself sideways and leaned towards him,

“Yeah?”

“You know how-

Malfoy paused again, struggling to get the words out, so unlike himself.

“Probably.” Hermione said encouragingly, although for all she knew he could be talking about quidditch.

“Basically, just that-

But he fell silent again. He flicked his tongue out to swipe it against his lower lip and she watched it dart out. She traced the curve of them with her eyes, the full bottom lip, the sharp cupids bow, trying to equate the softness of feel to look.
It was only a second later she realised she’d spent entirely too long staring at his lips so she shot her eyes back up to his, feeling her cheeks warm when she knew he’d been watching her do it.

“You were saying?”

“I was.” He whispered.

For a moment she thought she’d missed something but then they seemed to fall in to each other, she felt his smirk against her mouth as they kissed. Soft closed presses at first, trying to figure out if either of them was about to have a crisis and leave, whether either of them had done something terribly wrong. But then no one moved away so Malfoy let his hands sink in to the thickness of her hair and Hermione let her lips part, feeling the pad of his tongue against her own.

Then he slid his hands to her waist as if to shift her closer to him. This time she stopped. Pressing two hands against his chest she pushed herself away from him, looking at him seriously, “No games?”

“No games.” He echoed solemnly. This time there was no hesitation and she wondered if that had been what he’d been trying to say all along.

In that single moment, amongst the dark and the quiet, the residue of battle and the saving of life, she realised she wasn't afraid of drowning anymore, because this time she knew he’d be right there with her.
“Rise and shine, you fools.” Pansy called as she stepped over them, traipsing down the stairs.

Hermione slowly opened her eyes. The first thing she saw was the door to the dormitory wide open, Neville and Hannah talking on her bed. She looked bright with the effects of a good nights sleep and a dose of whatever potion Pomfrey had given her and Hermione smiled warmly at the sight of it.

It was then her neck began to ache with pain and she pressed a hand to it, rolling her head against her shoulders and hearing a grunt as she realised she had disturbed Malfoy. They had slept side by side, Hermione’s cheek against his cotton robes, his head resting on hers. It was funny. She should feel anger at herself for letting him win her over, disgust at how easily she’d caved, but sitting painfully against a stone castle wall with his side emitting a seemingly unnatural warmth, she realised she was at peace.

She peeled herself away from Malfoy’s side. He was sitting there now, blinking himself in to existence again, probably as distastefully aware of the crook in his back as Hermione was.

“We’ve got to stop doing this.” He said, voice thick with sleep.

She watched him as he stood up and shook out his shirtsleeves, swiping over his hair to comb it out and rubbing his hands against his eyes. She wondered if he looked this vulnerable every morning.

“Accidentally falling asleep in various parts of the castle?” Hermione smiled. Then she felt a stab in her chest that told her last night might have been a result of exhaustion, a tired agreement to terms he was in no state to fathom, so she risked testing the waters, feeling the heat as it washed against her ankles, worried he might bite, “And accidentally kissing?”

“Maybe not the kissing.” He admitted, a dead serious expression on his face that was so alarming she thought it might all be a practical joke.

“Did you mean it? No games?” She asked him, feeling foolish for doing so but sometimes she could never, for the life of her, read him.

“No games.” He repeated confidently, then, as he buttoned the cuff of his left sleeve and turned it upwards he paused, “Is that okay?”
“Yeah.” She smiled, short for breath, feeling the coolness of relief.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” She nodded again, unable to keep the smile on her face from growing. It was as if with dawn came fresh promises, new possibilities. As if the darkness had been cleansed for a moment.

Malfoy looked at her and she looked at him for a very long second. They were both still puzzles to each other. Vessels of foreign wisdom and morals and personalities and Hermione couldn’t wait to know more about him now, to learn his heart like the pages of a book.

As if debating whether or not to do something, Malfoy rolled on his feet precariously, lips pursed in contemplation. Then without warning he grabbed her by the waist, pressing her against the wall as she yelped in happy surprise.

She could feel him against her, taller than she was, rubbing a thumb against her spine, as warm as the sun, so peculiar in the sense that he always looked like glass, so smooth and cold. She shivered at the sensation, tipping her head back to look closely at his face, cool eyes, high cheekbones and a thin nose, flushed slightly red with the colour of morning sunshine- she thought he could be a work of art. Slowly, she stroked her hands over him, down his cheekbones and stubbly neck, across his chest, twining her fingers through his empty belt loops, feeling him wholly for once. Because this was not a fleeting moment, it could last as long as they liked.

Just as their lips were about to touch there was a crash from the common room and Pansy shouted up at them again,

“Can one of you idiots come and help me put this door back straight? We’re one man short!”
Flowers and Chocolate

It was when she had dotted a full stop at the end of her first sentence that she felt someone sit down besides her. She didn't look up at first, determined to finish what she was copying up before the lesson started but then she realised it wasn't Ginny and raised her head anyway.

It was Malfoy. He smiled at her and she smiled back and a million feelings rushed through her at once when she realised that this was them now, no games, and he'd just made the first move to prove it.

“You know Ginny’s going to be really mad you took her seat when she gets here right?” Hermione told him, wiping the excess ink off her quill and placing it next to her notes.

“There’s a convenient vacancy next to Pansy now so I’m not too sure about that.”

“We’re being replaced.” She moaned dramatically, laughing a little.

He moved his arm so it hung around the back of her chair and she could feel it against her back. He was closer to her now, leaning in to her side and she could see every texture to his skin, almost feel his cool breath against her face,

“It’s a tragedy isn't it? They’ve got no time for us anymore.”

Hermione hadn't seen this side of him in a long time and it was never usually directed at her, “Exactly. What will we do with all those lonely free hours without companionship?”

“I don’t know,” He falsely contemplated, evidently enjoying every second of this, “We could go to the Astronomy tower, read that book you keep going on about…”

“Which one?”

She went on about a lot of books, it was hard to keep track sometimes.
“Romeo and Juliet.”

She laughed, “I never took you for a romantic.”

“I’m not, I just think this Shakespeare bloke has a lot to offer that I haven’t had chance to appreciate yet.”

“So no flowers and chocolates in my future then?” She teased. Her cheeks instantly flushed, feeling slightly embarrassed she had been so blunt and then after a moment, when he made no indication it was something she should not have said, she continued retrospectively, “I’ve never really been bothered about that stuff, honestly.”

He was smirking now, “See, we’re perfect for each other, Granger.”

It was one of those questions Hermione felt strange about answering honestly, like opening up her heart and letting him hold it in his hands, so instead she rolled her eyes, “Whatever you say, Malfoy.”

Her cheeks felt strained with smiling and this felt for the first time in a while like one of those brief happy moments, like laughing with Ginny or reading with Neville, listening to the rain thrum against the windows, it was strong and it left her almost content. And when she turned her head, a giggle still on the cusp of her lips, she saw Ginny next to Pansy at the desk closest to the far wall, watching her with an affectionate but exhausted sort of smile on her face that told Hermione, quite happily, you win.
“So there’s something I should probably tell you.”

Blaise didn't even look up from his book, “That you’re finally with Hermione Granger?”

Pansy snorted from behind her magazine but Draco was so dumbfounded he didn't even think to throw her a glare.

“Why is it that no one can have a private life around here?” He asked them, somewhat bitterly. The element of surprise was something he realised he greatly missed now, “What do you all do, stalk me?”

“Nah,” Theo joked, “We just read your diary, all those mopey entries about being love sick.”

“Yeah, I bet you would've done, if I actually had a diary.”

Theo was grinning now but his head was still turned downwards and he was filling in a line in a newspaper crossword. No one else seemed to care either.

Pansy rolled her eyes, “Relax Draco, you're just easy to read is all.”

“She’s right,” Blaise added, “The brooding, reading muggle books, staring at her and thinking we don't notice.”

Draco grimaced at the thought of them watching him twist himself up over a girl, enjoying themselves as if it was a play and finding satisfaction in knowing he had no idea at all that they knew what was going on. He always knew Pansy was aware, deep down beneath all that denial he loved to cage himself with. She had been the reason he’d tried to talk to Granger again after their argument that Hogsmeade afternoon. Pansy had always been his reason for hope, he realised. She was always there, unwaveringly constant, waiting for the storm to subside to shift him gently on the right track so he didn't ruin any more of his life than was necessary and he was quietly grateful for it.

“So none of you have any opinion on this whatsoever?” He asked incredulously.
He’d expected something. Blaise to say something accidental, obliviously racist, Theo to grunt a little nervously in a way that neither said yes or no but I’d rather you got bad press for it than me, or for Pansy to at least make one of those who would’ve thought it comments that made them all look back on the years before them like they were vague nightmares they tried not to think about come morning. But nothing. Maybe this was an indicator of how far they’d come in to the light, how far they were separated from their pasts now, it wouldn't be a bad thing at all to disconnect from all the pain and evil. Draco decided that this was promising.

“Why would I have any opinion? Granger’s practically my best friend now.” Blaise said.

Draco stared at him, “You duelled a crackpot Hufflepuff together, that doesn't exactly make you soulmates.”

‘What Blaise is trying to say,” Pansy interjected impatiently, “Is that we all tolerate Hermione and some of us might just even like her. She’s more than welcome to join us whenever she likes.”

“How peculiarly generous of you.” Draco replied slowly, still baffled.

Before they all delved back in to the silence of their respective activities, leaving Draco to ponder just how much the world around them had changed in recent years and how they'd transformed with it, Theo lifted his head in a jovial wink, “Don’t get used to it.”
She’d counted three hundred ticks of her clock in the darkness before she gave in and got up, stumbling in the darkness to get dressed and brushing her teeth as quietly as possible as to not wake Pansy before six am. It was one of those quiet mornings where if you stopped moving for more than a second you’d be forced to think about the horribly dark things that emptied your heart and Hermione wasn't planning on letting that happen.

Hannah’s bed was empty but unmade and as Hermione made it to the bottom of the stairs she could see her, sitting in a chair next to a wide window, watching the weak winter sun rise in a sombre silence. It had been three days since Ernie had left and she hadn't spoken to anyone yet, just drifted through the halls in a seemingly pensive state, fragile and ghostly.

Hermione decided to try anyway, “Good morning.”

She hadn't noticed her and flinched slightly as she jerked her head and upon realising it was Hermione she gathered herself and smiled gently, shyly, watching as Hermione pulled up a chair next to her and averted her gaze to the view from the window.

Amongst the slopes of the mountains was an overcast sky. The trees looked like ice, sugared in frost, leaning heavily over crisp stretches of grass, the coldness made clear by the white puffs of mist that escaped Hermione’s mouth as she spoke. She expected it would snow soon.

“How are you?”

“Allright,” Hannah admitted. Then she paused and Hermione bit the inside of her cheek in anticipation, hoping she’d say something more, “McGonagall is giving me until the end of the week to decide if I want to press charges.”

“Ah,” Hermione breathed, unsure of what to say, of what she had done to evoke such honesty, “… Are you planning to?”

Hannah still wouldn't look at her but the lack of eye contact seemed to give her more confidence, allowing her to say more. Her hair looked almost grey in the light and her eyes seemed glassy and wet but she wasn't shaking, there was no tremor to her shoulders or tremble of her lips, she seemed to sit taller now, like she was less afraid.

“I know what he did to me was wrong, I think I always did know,” She started quietly. Hermione
said nothing, waiting for her to go on, “I just could never see a way out of it, I thought I’d be stuck there forever. And now…I’m not mad, Hermione, I’m relieved. Can you understand that?”

Hermione thought about the shake of her bones, the pain of a cruciatus curse, Bellatrix Lestrange’s corpse cold against the floor of the great hall, empty eyed and inhuman, “…I think so.”

“I care too much about him to be the reason he’s in Azkaban.”

“You do realise it’s not your fault, Hannah? None of this was because of you.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t his either.”

Hermione didn’t necessarily agree with that, she tried to keep the bite out of her tone, “Well he’s in hospital now isn't he?”

She nodded, staring out at the grounds for three minutes more before speaking again, “Did you ever think you’d survive the war?”

Hermione hadn’t expected that sort of question but she was already wading in to the dark introspective waters she’d feared sinking in to only moments before, so she was honest, “Not at times, no.”

“Me neither. It’s funny isn’t it? That this is our life now. School and quidditch…like nothings changed.”

“Time moves on,” Hermione declared softly, “Just because we’re stuck somewhere else in our heads doesn't mean the world stays in standstill.”

This time Hannah looked at her and a single tear rolled down her left cheek, Hermione supposed she was realising she wasn't the only one that felt that way too.

It was too much seeing her like that, wide blue eyes frozen and cracked, so she inhaled as if hoping to suck her emotions back in through the emptiness of her lungs.
“Seeing as we're both awake, do you want to come to the library with me? I want to do some research and I’d love some company.”

“Yeah,” Hannah nodded, this time without anxiety or hesitation or fear of what was to come, “sure, why not.”

Hermione mustered a smile, as bright as she could make it, “I was hoping you’d say that.”
Heating Charms

“These heating charms are doing nothing!” Hermione groaned, shoving her book in to Malfoy’s hand so she could wrap her robes tighter around herself, teeth chattering with the bitter chill.

“It is November.”

“It’s ridiculous,” She seethed, “Maybe I should see if I can modify the spell so it’ll last longer.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes at her affectionately, “Or we could just read in the common room.”

“No, I like it here,” She admitted, “It’s your space, I like that.”

_I feel closer to you._

There was something about sitting beneath the stars in which he’d found so much solace over the years that made her never want to leave the tower, it seemed at times like an extension of him, as if she could run her hands along the stone indentations on the walls and feel his presence amongst the crumble of it.

“Come here.” He said.

She peered around at him, he’d moved sideways so his back was against the stone pillar and parted his legs.

“What are you-

“Lean against me,” He instructed. When she didn't move he took her waist and guided her to him and when her back was flat against his chest she could feel the fan of his breath against her neck and her breath hitched a little, “Like this.”

She remained tense at first, getting used to the feel of him against her, this was the closest they’d ever consciously been, with just thin layers of clothing keeping them from being skin to skin. Hermione imagined the smoothness of his chest against her back and she was glad he couldn't see her because
her cheeks were flushing red. Malfoy wrapped his arms around her middle and rested his chin on her shoulder, kissing it briefly as if coaxing her body in to loosening in his arms.

“Warmer?” He asked.

Despite the bitterness of the cold - *something lying against him was not helping with at all* - she melted in to him more comfortably, placing the hand that wasn't holding her book on his knee, slowly becoming acquainted with his body, learning how it felt beyond fleeting touch, she smiled to herself at the ease of it all, “A little.”

“You’re still freezing aren’t you?”

“What, no! I’m fine, Malfoy, honestly,” She lied, hoping he wouldn't move, “You’re very…hot.”

Silence.

She heard the smirk in his voice, “You really think so?”

“Your body heat, you prat!”

She twisted around to face him as best she could, latching a hand around the back of his neck, the other swirling patterns against his clothed chest with her fingertips, trying not to grin too much at his teasing. She felt utterly euphoric here. She was willing to freeze to the bone if it meant they could lie here like this all night, talking and reading and being free to act as themselves.

“Sure. But you meant me too, didn’t you?”

“Of course not,” She beamed, “Your face is off-putting.”

“That’s why you stare at it so often.” He quipped cockily, pressing a kiss to her lips.

She giggled against the softness of them, “*I do not!*”
“You really do.”

He didn't let her reply, just kissed her again, his lips finding their way to her jaw. She let him nuzzle in to her neck and breathe her in and she tried not to let out anything more than a breathy sigh- that would give him *more* ammunition.

“One more word against me and I’m taking Shakespeare and leaving.” She threatened, still breathing heavily.

His head shot up immediately, “Fine, I give in, I have to know how it ends.”

She smiled, marvelling at his interest, kissing him once full on the lips like a reward, before turning back around and opening the right page against their knees, “It’s awfully depressing to be honest.”

He returned his chin to the spot on her shoulder, sighing in a way she could only describe as contentedness, “So is life.”

“Yeah, I guess it is.”
She stirred the spoon through her tea slowly, feeling the last of the heat escape its surface, her fingertips wrapped around the base turning colder by the second, “When can we go in?”

“Ten minutes.” Neville said quietly.

They were sitting in the tea room at St Mungo’s silently waiting for visiting hour. Neville looked incredibly anxious and Hermione wanted to fix for him things she could not. She wanted to find a spell or a cure and do what she always does best. But there are some things, she realised, that you cannot stop at all and it is how you choose to watch them happen that defines you. So she went with him, sitting in a stuffy London hospital amongst the injured and the dying, the old women visitors drinking tea and reading Witch Weekly and talking to one another in sombre tones about their ill friends and children hobbling past on crutches with beaming smiles from accidental magic accidents no doubt. It was the very least she could do.

He sniffed a little and dropped his gaze back to the table gloomily, “I never told you,” His voice was shaking so she put her hand in his and he squeezed weakly, “It’s the effects of a curse she got hit with during the war. It was dormant, invisible until this year. No one really knows what it is, there’s no cure, we’re just…waiting it out now.”

“I’m so sorry, Neville.” She whispered, feeling her throat growing thick and her eyes blurring with tears, she had to tilt her head away and blink fast to keep them at bay.

“It’s alright, I have gran. I’ve still got dad too, even if he doesn’t really know who I am its still nice to know he’s okay, I can see him. I wish I could save her, of course I do. But I can’t.”

It took Hermione’s breath away, how strong Neville was. How much of a heart he had and how he’d never let it harden over the terrors of his life and instead let it mature, grow with him in to something that could accept horrible things that could not be changed and fight with all his power against those that could. This man, who had spent his entire life with neither parent knowing his name, was able to accept that his time with one of them was coming to an end, without anger and without malice, only with compassion and understanding and the strength to stand by and do whatever possible to help. She saw the pale and fragile boy before her and knew he was remarkably strong.

“You’re here for her now, that’s all that matters.” She said, smothering his hand with her other one and throwing him a watery smile.
It was a bare room. White and clinical and hopeless. No photo frame or stack of books to hint at a life well lived here, just a water jug and narrow bed where Alice Longbottom lay, grey and tired with life, sleeping with a wrinkle between her brows and a hand over her heart.

Hermione had her hand in Neville’s and she didn’t let go, not even when he pulled up a second chair for her and settled in the first, wrapping his second hand gently around his mother’s papery palm. He watched her chest rise and fall, looked at her skeletal features, cheekbones hollower than even Malfoy’s, hair ashy and almost white. She looked old beyond her years, weak as dry sand against a gust of wind.

Hermione felt as if she was intruding on something very private—she was. She felt a strong urge to jump up and apologise, run outside and cry for him silently in the toilets and then wait for him by the fireplace until he was done. But she couldn't leave him. Not when he’d asked her to stay.

From the bed, Alice began to move, feebly lolling her head over to where they were sitting, her eyes slowly opening, lashes fluttering against her pale cheeks.

“Hi mum,” Neville rasped, “It’s me, Neville. It’s your son.”

“My son?” She replied weakly, lifting her head from her pillow but not managing to sit up and letting it fall back down with a too heavy huff of breath.

Neville nodded, “Yeah, I’m here.”

He rested his forehead on the side of the bed and his back began to shake and Hermione knew he was crying, desperate not to let his mother see. She rubbed his back in slow circles and tried to stay calm, watching the rain sliding down the enchanted window across from them and the angry black clouds rolling against the sky.

“Who are you?”

It took Hermione a moment to realise she was speaking to her and it shocked her in to momentary silence, she had felt almost invisible up until then.

“I’m Hermione, I’m just his friend.”
Alice seemed to ponder on this for a moment, then, as her eyes began to slide shut again and her breathing begin to smooth she murmured, “That’s nice.”

Then she was drawn back in to sleep again, looking so peacefully still despite wearing so much pain. Hermione swallowed hard.

“She sleeps most of the time,” Neville ran his sleeve over his cheeks, “It was nice to hear her voice. I usually miss her being awake, I’m always in class.”
“Hannah, what a surprise!”

She was the last person Pansy was expecting to see as she walked through the propped open oak door to group therapy. Although seemingly happier than she was when Ernie was around she expected her to need a lot more convincing to leave the common room for anything other than classes. When Pansy greeted her with wide eyes and an astonished sort of smile she grinned back at her nervously, hands intertwined in her lap, fingers picking at her nails as if she was waiting for them to bleed.

“I thought I’d come this week.” She explained tamely, unsure of where to put her eyes so settling her gaze to her palms again.

It tugged at Pansy’s hard cold heart and she felt the urge to say something that would make her more comfortable, “I’m glad you did, it’s getting extremely boring with just them.”

“Oh just sit down for once, will you?” Hermione called out.

Pansy swished around and was met with the sight of Hermione underneath Draco’s arm, as he had done so many times with her in their younger years, looking alarmingly happy all slouched against the sofa with their feet on the coffee table.

Pansy smirked, “You look awfully cosy-

She was about to continue with some careless jibe when Draco interrupted her, “Strike one.”

“What was that?” She stood back a little, glaring at him in surprise and he looked back at her with an open, challenging look on his face that told her Hermione was one of the very few things he was incredibly serious about keeping away from too much of Pansy’s occasion cruelness, “You’re giving me strikes now? Like a misbehaved child?”

“If you stand down now, Pansy, you might not get strike two.” Hermione added, amused by it all.
If Pansy didn’t understand Draco like she did, how he had gone from being so alone and lost to looking so seemingly almost whole, she might have hit him for it. But there was a softness in Pansy that she despised sometimes, wishing she could suppress it until it was dust against the surface of her bones.

“I could destroy your asses, I have destroyed your asses.” She said proudly, swooping back around and sitting next to Ginny on the opposite side of the table.

“Believe me, we know.”

Pansy grinned at his confession, satisfied, “How long until christmas break again?”

“Three weeks, why?” Hermione asked, wrapping a finger carelessly around her wild curls.

“Just so I know how soon I can get rid of you lot.”

“Pansy, we literally live together.” Draco told her flatly.

“A painful sacrifice I’ll have to make for a little more peace.”

She ignored it when he rolled his eyes and instead was made very aware that Ginny had just swept her hand against her arm. Pansy was starting to regret choosing to sit next to her and not attempting to sandwich herself between Draco and Hermione or sit on the arm of Hannah’s chair instead because sometimes it was a little hard to control how she reacted to her touch and it was the last thing she wanted to be doing in public away from the solace of their bedsheets and an empty dorm. She could feel the goosebumps under her robes and breathed out hard as if to siphon away the feelings she wanted to ignore.

“I’d let you stay with me but something tells me you wouldn't want to be in the same house as Harry Potter and Ron Weasley.”

“You’re a fucking mastermind, Ginny.” She gushed mockingly, hoping it hadn't showed that she’d let her feelings get away with her for more than a moment.
She could feel the blood rushing to her head, heating up her cheeks and straining her back so she pulled herself back up and draped her arms over his legs, looking up at his face, there was a finger lodged between his white teeth in concentration at the astronomy book open across his thighs.

“Give me the main ingredients used in polyjuice potion.” She requested.

They were testing each other. Hermione had come to realise very quickly that studying with Malfoy meant competitive rounds of quick fire questions that usually ended in aggressive debate over who had won. There was something greatly satisfying about having an intellectual equal to work with that she’d never got to experience over the years of correcting Ron and Harry’s essays and reminding them that they actually had homework to do, they never enjoyed education like she did, they never had to thrive on their intelligence alone.

“Lacewing flies, leeches, powdered bicorn horn, knotgrass, fluxweed, shredded boomslang skin and a bit of the person one wants to turn into.”

He smiled at her victoriously, having taken no breath between her question and his answer and Hermione bit her lip.

“What about Golpalot’s third law?”

“The antidote for a blended poison will be equal to more than the sum of the antidotes for each of the separate components.”

“You’re alarmingly fast.” She conceded.

“Says the girl who’s beaten me as top of the year ever since she got here.”

He said it as if it gave him slight pain.

“You’re always one behind.” She smirked.
“I got so much flack off my parents for that. They hated that I wasn’t superior in every sense.”

Hermione already had a million things to ask him in response to that, a million questions he probably didn’t want to answer or didn’t know how to, but there would be time in the near future to open hearts like doors and simmer in the closed window stuffiness. Instead she climbed up so that they were the same height, so she could see the expression on his face clearly, which was now beginning to wane in to a deep reminiscence. She imagined him in the darkest corner, the faint light from the windows outside his feelings unable to reach him.

“I think it did you good. Your ego was already unfathomably huge, never mind being top of the year too.”

He looked at her as if he didn’t quite know how to reply, but his lips quirked up a little and that was enough.

‘And that proves it still is.” She grinned.

He closed his book and hit her with it so she fell back against the purple sheets theatrically, hair splayed across the cotton and pink flushing her cheeks. She pulled herself up on her elbows and glared at him.

“So where’s home for you nowadays?”

“Why do you ask?” He said, the faint ghost of a smile still across his lips.

“I thought we might do something over christmas.”

She wasted no time in telling him but inhaled sharply all the same, having to remind herself she was allowed to say things like this now, that it didn't have to be awkward anymore.

He crossed his legs and rested his back against her headboard, “We’ve all been staying with Theo.”
“Ah. Think they can cope without you on the 20th?”

He raised a brow at her smile, it seemed too innocent for Hermione Granger, “What are you planning?”

“Shall we call it a date? I think that’s the name for it.”

“Granger,” Malfoy let out a withering breath, like disappointment, “I’m supposed to organise the dates.”

“Says who? Your twisted pureblood misogyny?”

“Says tradition.”

“Still sounds like misogyny to me.” She retorted, wanting to roll her eyes at the way his upbringing still shone through in the most foolish of ways, “Anyways, you should probably go, It’s almost eleven and I’d rather Hannah not feel uncomfortable coming to bed, we’ve only just got her out of one tough situation.”

“Right,” He sighed, letting her pull him off her bed with a tug of his arm, “Am I at least allowed to take my things with me?”

Hermione frowned at the forgotten mess on her bed and swiped her wand, shuffling his books neatly in to his bag which she grabbed and pushed in to his chest, smiling.

“Sorted.”

“You know where I am if you can’t sleep.” He said, his tone soft.

Her stomach swooped a little because she knew what it meant. *If your nightmares are too much to handle. If you need to read and not be spoken to. If you need to escape.*

She nodded, wrapping a hand around the back of his neck and leaning up on her toes to press a kiss
to his lips.

Afterwards, she looked in to his eyes for a second longer, savouring the moment, then fell back on to her bed as she listened to his steps descend the staircase in to the common room below, feeling the ominous taste of whisky on her lips that hadn't been there a minute before.
Snow was beginning to fall. Hermione watched it as it slid against the moving train windows, melting down the glass like cold tear drops and merging with the iciness in the air. She held her hands over the jar of flashing blue light she’d conjured when they first boarded, desperate to feel the heat, it was mid December and the cold was chilling them all to the bone.

“Are you sure you won’t come with us?” Ginny asked Neville for the hundredth time.

Neville huffed out a breath, “Honestly, Ginny, I’m fine, we’re fine. I’ll owl if something happens.”

“Your gran can stay with us too,” Ginny pressed on, “Grimauld Place is fucking massive.”

“Thank you.” He replied firmly, and by the look in his eyes Ginny knew she could persuade him no further.

“Well I’ll be seeing you on New Years Eve though, you too Luna,” She smiled, nudging her in the thigh with her foot.

Luna looked up from the magazine she was reading vertically and nodded, entirely unfazed by everything, “I’ve never been to a New Years Eve party before.”

“Me neither.” Hermione admitted. When she looked back on her pre Hogwarts childhood she realised she spent most of New Year reading in front of the window, catching glimpses of fireworks bursting in to the night and blinding her with colour. It always thrilled her, it felt like magic at a time when she didn't even know it existed.

“Have you told the boys yet?”

Ginny looked at Hermione for a very long second, then began speaking slowly, “Not exactly. I got their permission for the party, obviously, it is their house. They just don’t know about the guest list yet.”

“You mean they don’t know that Slytherins will be there?”
Hermione wasn't sure why she asked, she already knew the answer.

“I’m stalling, okay?” Ginny confessed, “I’m just not prepared for the Ron Weasley mental breakdown or the Harry Potter twelve hour silence treatment before he comes to his senses.”

“They’re not that bad-

“Hermione, the entirety of the week after Malfoy’s trial Ron couldn’t stop talking about how the slimy git only just got away and that Harry was too kind for his own good.”

Hermione cringed, “You might be right there.”

“But they’ll see wont they?” Neville interjected, “They’ll see how decent they are. I’ve shared a dorm with Nott, Zabini and Malfoy for the best of four months and the worst thing that’s happened is awkward eye contact.”

Ginny laughed bitterly, “Try telling that to Ron, you know he’ll overreact.”

“It’s only because they don’t know them,” Luna said, “An afternoon in each other’s company and they’ll all be fine.”

“Sometimes I admire your optimism, Luna,” Ginny marvelled, looking at her as if she was a pure and untainted snowflake like the ones gathering in the crooks of the windowsill across from them, “And other times I think you really underestimate how long it’s going to take them to work through seven years of shit that they’ve yet to confront.”

“And when they’ve got over that you’re going to have to tell them you’re with Parkinson and Malfoy,” Neville added bluntly, looking warily between Hermione and Ginny, “Can’t wait to see how that goes.”

“Harry already knows about Malfoy- kind of. He wasn’t happy though. Ron will have a fucking coronary.” Hermione realised, biting her thumb nail and staring out on to the fast moving trees, coated in white that glowed like icing sugar.
“Let’s enjoy this train ride then,” Ginny said, leaning back and making herself comfortable, “It might be the last bit of peace we get for the next two weeks.”
Welcome Home

Grimmauld Place looked brighter than it used to. The walls had been painted a lighter grey, everything was cleaner and the chandeliers seemed to gleam. It was like walking in to an entirely different house, no longer the dark decay she’d stumbled upon three years ago but a proper home now, a real place for them to live.

Everywhere was silent so Hermione nudged her head around the kitchen door, not wanting to be noticed just yet, and saw Ron sitting at the kitchen table working through a stack of paperwork, a mug of tea to his side and his head between his hands, letting out an elongated sigh that ruffled the curled edges of the sheets before him. She smiled, coughing to get his attention.

“Hermione!” He looked up at her with a grin, eyes bright and ice blue under a sheet of tousled red hair.

“Hey you,” She beamed, attacking him with a hug that almost topped him from his chair, “Ginny’s coming, she’s just putting her bags in her room first.”

He nodded, summoning another two mugs with his wand and flicking on the kettle and she took the moment to get a good look at him. He yawned in to his palm, seemingly exhausted, but there wasn't any darkness in his eyes anymore, nothing to tell her he was unhappy and it made her heart swell just a little, seeing him so content with life.

She looked over at the mess on the table, eyeing up the bank statements and various other paperwork for the shop, “Where’s Harry, is he still at work?”

“Yeah,” Ron said, though his tone was almost bitter, “he’s doing a lot of overtime nowadays.”

Hermione didn’t know whether she should say anything further so she just listened to the sound of him stirring sugar in to the mugs and the soothing clinking of metal against pot before she spoke again.

“How’s the shop coming along?”

He smiled, “Brilliant. We should be opening in January. Both of us.”
There was a gleam in his eye and Hermione knew that meant George was getting better, that he was ready to participate in life once again. Nothing could have pleased her more than knowing he was healing, she often feared he’d be the worst damaged, war was never kind to those with the most to lose.

“I can’t wait to see everyone,” She added, remembering all the warm Christmases with the Weasley’s, the perpetual scent of cinnamon and flickering of candle light that seemed so far away, “it feels like it’s been forever.”

Ron didn’t have chance to reply because Ginny’s voice was echoing loudly through the house,

“Ron! Put all of this shit back in your room!”

Ron cringed, looking as if he was almost about to slam his head against the kitchen counter.

Hermione’s lips curved upwards, “What’s she talking about?”

“Cardboard boxes,” Ron explained unenthusiastically, like every syllable was a chore, “I couldn't be bothered to unpack.”

Hermione was incredulous, “What so you just shoved them in the guest rooms? Charming.”

He looked as if he was attempting to come up with a viable explanation for four months procrastination to the most efficient woman he knew when a resounding crash thudded above them and Ginny, now hanging over the bannister at the top of the staircase, with three cardboard boxes filled with orange at her feet, shouted,

“I guess I could just throw this box of Canons stuff on the fireplace if you’re not willing to come and move it all!”

The effect was immediate. Ron quickly uncapped the milk and sloshed a little in the two mugs, spilling it over the counter in the process and slamming them down on to the table, “Shit. Got to go.”
Hermione shook her head at him as he raced up the stairs, patting the table dry with the cuff of her coat sleeve and standing up to get a cloth to mop up the milk before it began to settle and turn bitter, seemingly unable to shake the smile that had spread across her lips and was causing her cheeks to ache a little.
“Finally, he returns!” Ginny exclaimed the minute Harry made his way through the living room door, latching her foot underneath his jacket and dragging him back until he tumbled on to the sofa between herself and Hermione, using so much force that he ended up almost on top of Ginny in the process, leaving them laughing like fools.

“When did you two get here?” He asked, tugging Hermione in to the hug until she was sandwiched between the cold leather of his jacket and a sheet of Ginny’s hair and she was beginning to feel incredibly suffocated.

“Five,” Hermione kissed his forehead, “Did you forget?”

“Yeah,” He frowned, “…busy day.”

“I’ve heard.”

Silence followed as Harry turned to sit down in a more appropriate manner and Hermione had chance to process what he’d said. She tried to catch his eye but he was turned away from her, trying to pretend he hadn’t sensed the tension.

“So seeing as you’re both here. You know the New Years Eve party?” Ginny said bluntly, leaning forwards on her thighs, meaning complete and utter business.

Hermione cringed, rubbing her face in to her hands momentarily, knowing she had less than five seconds to prepare for the storm.

“What about it?” Ron said, pouring Harry some wine from the bottle they’d been sharing, immersed in the quiet crackling of whatever radio station they’d switched on to, the weak buzz of thick London traffic behind the heavy curtains, glasses glittering in the light from the fireplace.

“We’ve invited some of…our friends.” Ginny continued simply.

Harry laughed, evidently confused, “Obviously.”
Hermione observed Ginny, the steady freckle drenched paleness of her face, glowing calmness of her eyes, looseness of her hands as they lay between her knees. There was no nervousness in her face at all, “Slytherin friends.”

The reaction was instantaneous.

Ron choked on his wine in disbelief, dotting his jumper with specks of red, “Slytherin what?”

“Draco, Pansy, Blaise, Theodore, that’s all.” Hermione said slowly, feeling the way Draco sounded on her tongue and letting it sink in to her soul for a moment, wondering if it would be alright for her to call him that next time she saw him. A peculiar heat erupted in her chest.

But then Harry threw Hermione a meaningful look and she knew this was no time to consider her relationship which was still fresh and terrifying and tender, so she stared back at him, eager for him to drop his line of thought, aware of exactly what was on his mind.

“We’re having parties with Draco Malfoy and his cronies now?” Ron scoffed, “Since fucking when?”

“Since we went back to school with them and formed certain sorts of,” Hermione paused, unsure of what to say, “…bonds.”

Ginny almost snorted, that was one way of putting it.

Ron seemed to stare at her for a moment, completely unblinking, as if she were alien to him. Then he took in a sharp breath and said harshly, “Sorry, Hermione, but have you lost your fucking mind?”

Ginny snapped at him before she had any chance to defend herself, “No she hasn’t, Ron, stop living in the past for God’s sake!”

Ron’s fists were clenching and he was rising from his chair now, “The past? The war only ended seven months ago!”
“Exactly!” Hermione shouted, plunging the rest of them in to silence, “Seven long months in which everyone grew up and learned to be more mature.”

Ron laughed unkindly, “This is a joke.”

“They’re not monsters! I consider Pansy and Malfoy close friends and Zabini and Nott are great people to have a conversation with.”

“Yeah I bet they’ve got loads of torture stories to reminisce about with you.”

“Ron.”

It was the first thing Harry had said. Hermione hadn't realised how long he’d been sitting there in silence, listening to the rest of them scream and protest until their lungs ached, staring at the fire and letting his hands melt in to the warmth, considering every word they said.

Ron looked at Harry, then back at Ginny and Hermione, who were barely breathing now, unsure of what to do next.

“Just…leave it,” Ron said tiredly, snatching his empty glass from the table and walking past them, refusing to make eye contact. “I’m going to bed.”

The three of them sat there. Ginny tapping her wand angrily against her thigh, occasional sparks escaping the tip like frenzied fireworks.

Hermione looked at him, following the frames of his round glasses with her eyes, “Harry?”

He spoke after five more minutes, seemingly weighing up what to say, how to feel, as if they’d just admitted they’d commit a terrible crime and they were now fractured to him, like broken shards of a mirror dashed across the floor, piercing the soles of his feet as he walked through the fall out.

“I’m sure you have your reasons. Both of you. Just don’t expect me to understand them yet.”
Ginny let out a pained sigh at the slam of the door as he left them too, crashing her head on to Hermione’s shoulder, “Well, if worse comes to worst we’ll have to have it at Nott’s. I’m sure he has enough room.”

Hermione rested hers against Ginny’s hair, feeling the weight of the past between them as she choked out a faint chuckle, “That’s a bit of an understatement.”
London kept Hermione terrified and awake just as much as Hogwarts did. She thought the constancy of traffic and sound would soothe her in a way that the silence and echoing wind of Hogwarts couldn’t, but instead she found herself in front of her window at two in the morning, pushing back the shimmery-white net curtains and staring out on to the night before her, forehead resting against the glass which was chilling in to frost.

She inhaled and exhaled, watching the mist of her breath crawl across the window and then disappear in to nothing, thinking about how life was still so difficult, how it would be difficult for the rest of her life. It wasn’t just the stares and the insane popularity, but the fact that everywhere she and Malfoy went she knew there must be trouble before peace, that peace may never come at all. She had always known this, she was fully prepared to deal with it, it was worth it for the possibility of a little more happiness, she just didn’t expect to be fighting these fights within the walls of her temporary home, amongst her closest friends who were all she had that she could call family. It was exhausting.

Sitting against the hard window became tiresome and Hermione slid out of her door, down the creaking staircase and in to the kitchen in search of a hot cup of tea. What she didn't expect was the door to be slightly open, a glowing ribbon of light outlining it like a burning sun.

“Its difficult. Moving on.”

Hermione knew exactly who that voice belonged to. She pushed the door open and looked at him directly in the eye, where he was sitting on the kitchen table, a mug of tea between his hands, his wand lit and besides him on a rickety chair.

“I know.”

“I expect Remus to walk through the door when I’m with Teddy. I expect everything to be the same.”

Harry’s voice was weak and gruff and she could tell he had been crying. So she quietly put a tea bag in to an empty mug, pouring the still hot water and taking it to the table, jumping up next to him.

“It’s weird not going on some mad holiday with my parents for Christmas,” She admitted honestly, it was the first time in a while she’d spoken about them out loud, “I hope they went back to France this year. They love France.”
As they sat there, sipping their tea, listening to Ron’s snoring in the distance, Hermione came to realise that it was not Harry’s opposition she was fighting, but his pain, the internalised maze his heart strings had wrapped in to over the last tiresome eighteen years.

“I keep waiting for my luck to run out,” He said softly, taking off his glasses as they filled with steam, rubbing the scratched lenses against the sleeve of his hoodie, “I keep waiting for Voldemort, to be pushed back in to Privet Drive.”

“It’s over, Harry, for real. I promise you.”

“I know that, I do, it’s just-

“An adjustment? For once in our lives were not in danger and it’s a little hard to comprehend?”

“Exactly,” He nodded, plunging them in to silence again.

The kitchen was ghostly with only wand light to brighten it, figures and shapes danced in the long corners like horrifying tricks of the eye and being in here at night made her think of all the terrors they’d experienced in the proximity of this gaudy home. Arthur Weasley’s bloody attack, the night Sirius tumbled lifelessly in to the veil, the beginnings of a horcrux hunt they barely survived. It all flickered through her mind like a stream of cruel and unrelenting film and it would have swallowed her alive if Harry hadn't spoken when he did.

“It’s not that I have anything against him. His mother saved my life. I know he has a heart somewhere deep down. It’s just-

He seemed to be battling for what to say so she supplied him with the words, “An adjustment?”

“Yeah.”

“Pansy’s the same as she always was,” Hermione smiled slightly, thinking of her good will and bad temper, and the darkness that had merged around her began to crack in to the lightness stemming from Harry’s wand, “the only difference is she doesn’t direct her cruelty at you anymore. And if she does its in good humour.”
“That’s good to know considering last time I saw her she was trying to give me up to Voldemort.” He scoffed, tipping back his mug to swallow the last dregs of hot tea.

“She was scared, Harry, they all were,” She was thinking of Malfoy now and the conflicted disdain in which he talked about his father, how he scratched his arm when he didn't think she would notice, how he was always wearing robes or sleeves, “imagine growing up on the other side of that mess of a war.”

“I still don’t understand,” He sighed, looking at her for the first time since she’d walked through the door, “But you’re smart, Hermione, you always have been, you can look after yourself. And if you’re saying I should give them a chance then…I will.”

“Thank you.” She smiled, squeezing his shoulder with her hand, feeling that maybe this bitterness would not exist forever after all.

“I’m sure Ron will come around,” Harry took a long pause, “eventually.”

She laughed weakly, “Yeah in ten years time.”

“So, Draco Malfoy?” He asked, a slight awkwardness to his tone and she could tell he was trying but it made her want to go red and melt in to the floor slightly all the same.

“It’s new. Very new.”

“And you really like him?”

“A scary amount.”

“You know if he hurts you I will literally-

“Yes! I get it,” She rolled her eyes, a bigger smile painting her lips at the look of Harry’s clumsy grin, entirely new to this territory that had been built upon peace and the beginnings of
understanding, “Big bad Chosen One. Consider him warned.”

“It’s mental.” He confessed, looking as baffled as he felt.

“You’ll get used to him. You’re quite similar to be honest,” She smirked at this, knowing exactly how he would react, “a sarcastic quip for everything.”

“Fucking fantastic, that’s what I always wanted, to be told I’m similar to Draco Malfoy.”

“He’s not that bad anymore,” She conceded, an amused brightness in her eyes that had not been there a few moments before, “He’s even a little bit great.”
“Is there a reason as to why you bought a tree too big for the room?”

Harry glared at her from behind a branch, trying his hardest to push it out of the way so that he could move it in to the corner of the room, “I thought we were putting it in the hallway.”

“Why would we put it in the hallway? No one can see it if its in the hall all the time.”

“I’ll be sure to consult you more explicitly next time.”

“Good idea, Potter.” She smirked, watching him indulgently as he struggled to shift it in to the depths of the room for a few more moments.

Ginny leaned down in to a box filled with glittering tinsel and baubles, catching a glimpse of Ron opposite to her, sitting on the grey suede sofa and stirring his spoon around a bowl of hot porridge, staring vacantly at the wall as if she and Hermione weren't even in the room. She threw a gold bauble at him, missing his face by a quarter of an inch and frowning. He flinched, diving out of the way, on to the soft cushions to his left. But he still didn't look at her. That's fucking dedication, she thought.

“Could you untangle these for me, Hermione? You’re better at those kinds of charms than me.”

Ginny poured a string of decorative beads in to Hermione’s lap, crouching down besides her.

“Sure. Is everything alright?”

She let her stare tilt back at her ridiculous brother, “When do you think he’s going to stop giving us the silent treatment?”

“Who knows?” Hermione marvelled, twisting her wand around smoothly as the chains began to unravel. Ginny always thought she made wandwork look effortless, a beautiful stream of spells that looked more like art than magic, “Have you heard anything from Neville?”

“No, do you think he’s okay?”
She felt her stomach twist a little, over the last few days she’d completely forgotten about Neville’s ordeal, how he was probably spending winter in the grey halls of St Mungo’s, waiting for bad news to tumble unstoppably towards him, whilst she and Hermione had been unpacking, drinking copious amounts of butterbeer and playing board games with Harry, laughing until their lungs ached.

“Yeah, he would’ve told us if something was wrong,” Hermione nodded, as if trying to convince herself as much as Ginny, “It’s Luna’s week at the hospital, I’ll send her an owl,” Then, as an afterthought once she’d returned the unravelled stream of silver in to Ginny’s open arms, said, “Maybe we should invite her over for lunch today?”

“Oh, I won’t be here.” She replied immediately, without really thinking about where she was and that despite Ron’s frozen glare that he could still hear them perfectly clearly.

“Why?”

She bit her lip, wondering exactly how to phrase it, “Important meeting in approximately sixty minutes?”

Hermione grinned, laughing inwardly in a way that made her shoulders shift, before looking at Ginny and mouthing, “Subtle.”

“What?” She shot back, perfectly aloud.

“Nothing it’s just-,” Hermione paused, unable to grasp at words that usually came so easily to her, “nothing.”

“That was a surprisingly illiterate sentence for Hermione Granger.”

Wordlessly, Hermione pushed her in the shoulder with a single finger, toppling her over on to the floor, which she hit with an exaggerated shriek by Ron’s feet.

Sliding closer to him, she pat the orange wool of his socks, “Come on then, Sulky, make use of some of that tinsel.”
Leaning over to retrieve the mass of tinsel she’d dragged out of the box two seconds ago and throwing it in to Ron’s lap, narrowly missing his bowl of porridge, he let out an almost inaudible grunt, unhappily getting to his feet and walking over to Harry who had finally found a perfect position for the tree and was now attempting several shrinking charms- none of which seemed to be working perfectly.

Ginny stretched against the floor, tipping her head back at Hermione, her long red hair splaying out beneath her like a blaze of fire, saying loudly to her, “Can you believe thats the first noise he’s made in two days?”
The kitchen was filled with cinnamon. It was like she and Ginny were trying to compensate for the bleak Christmas receding them by making the upcoming one as sickeningly festive as possible. The countertops were dashed in flour, as were Hermione’s clothes, and the comforting scent of baking cookies wrapped itself around the room like a warm and forgiving blanket.

Hermione could picture it in her mind, her mother holding her up against the worktop as she messily stirred the ingredients together with a wooden spoon. If she closed her eyes, concentrating sharply enough, she could almost taste the scent of her perfume which lingered on the back of her neck when she hugged her, she could almost feel her arms around her tiny body, hear her gleeful laugh as her father dashed a puff of flour over her mother’s clothes and pulled her in for a kiss which Hermione had found repulsive at that time in her childhood. She’d frown and cringe and pretend to be sick, the sort of childish theatricalities that were provoked by the display of true love, and her mother and father would look at her and laugh, amused by their bright, shining daughter, sitting on the countertop with a wooden spoon in hand, watching them like they were her whole world.

“I don’t see why we couldn’t have used a little magic.” Ginny said, cleaning off her jeans with the pat of her hands, watching the flour fly off them in to the sugared air.

“Oh come on, it was way more fun without,” Hermione grinned, the image of her parents fading from her mind in to distant but no less painful silhouettes.

“I did enjoy using a cookie cutter, though,” She smiled almost mischievously, “It made me feel like a kid.”

“See? This is what Christmas should be about. Being kids.”

Ginny was just about to get up and prise the baking from the oven when an owl abruptly fluttered through the kitchen door, dropping a letter on to the table and flying over to where Hermione’s hand lay, who let out a pained hiss when the bird began pecking at her fingers until she picked it up.

“How the fuck did that thing get in here?”

“Someone must have left the window open?” Hermione suggested weakly, realising how ridiculous the notion was when Ginny looked at her hopelessly and said that it was fucking December.
Once they had come to the conclusion that Ron or Harry must’ve let it in through a window in one of the rooms at the front of the house and Hermione had sucked the blood from her finger with an bitter expression on her face, she opened the sheet of parchment to read it.

It was like all the candles had snuffed out. The scent of Christmas that had monopolised the air only moments ago became unidentifiable to her senses, it was almost as if someone had opened the door and let the cold winter air in, allowing the warmth of the fires to escape in to the streets.

She looked up to Ginny, unsure of what exactly to say, but she didn't need to have worried because she just nodded, flicking the oven off so nothing burned and turning for the door, “We should go.”

Hermione was always grateful of Floo travel in the winter months. The thought of stepping out in to a freezing December night did not entice her at all. Though in this situation a part of her longed for the drudge through London, perhaps a tube ride or two, anything to delay the inevitable.

Out of the fireplace. Up the creaking staircases to the fourth floor. Like clockwork they marched past the decorative fur trees and mistletoe, immune to the extra brightness in the air, the bells attached to doors, christmas cards sitting on desks, tokens of joy that seemed blasphemous when Hermione could barely hear her footsteps for the thudding of her heart and the sickness rising up her throat.

“Luna!”

She was at the very end of the hall. It was ghostly and silent, Single yellow lights glowing from cubicles and private rooms in a way that seemed almost sinister now.

Hermione crushed her in to a hug unlike any way she’d ever expected to hug Luna Lovegood, letting Ginny jump on them too and wrap her arms around their shoulders. When they broke apart she could see Neville’s dark blue coat folded in her arms and Hermione felt as if she could cry at the sight of it.

“He’s in there with Augusta. It won’t be long now. I promised we’d take him back to Grimmauld Place, is that alright?” Luna asked.

Her serene eyes had a tint of sadness to them that Hermione didn't think she’d ever seen before. Her voice wasn't quivering, Luna could handle grief better than the best of them, but there was something so open and empty about the way she was looking from Ginny to Hermione and she expected that they all must look just as thick with pain for their friend, someone they’d fought an entire war
alongside just to watch as the universe claimed his mother after the fire had been extinguished and everyone had found a place to call home.

“Of course he can come, I did spend half of the last week at Hogwarts convincing him to stay the whole three weeks break,” Ginny told her.

And so they waited. Sitting in a row on a wooden bench, staring at the weak light pooling around the door of Alice Longbottom’s room. Waiting for the curtains to close.

Thirty minutes passed and the door finally creaked open, sounding alien in the silence of the hall. But it wasn't Neville who walked out, nor his grandmother, it was a Healer, he was grey and old and crooked and as he passed them, scribbling down a note on a worn clipboard, he offered them a melancholy smile, then disappeared down the corridor.

Hermione felt herself crumble inwards, watching as the door swayed on its hinges, opening once again. This time it was Augusta Longbottom, her face like steel. She paused before the three of them, wringing her hands around a shiny red handbag and said,

“I must go and let the right people know. Do look after him.”

It was Ginny who replied.

“Of course,” she whispered hoarsely, so unlike her usual brash loudness, in that second she sounded smaller than a child.

Finally, finally, he stumbled through the door, fixing his eyes on the three of them, which were sore and red and he was trembling all over, the collar of his shirt damp with the tide of his tears. He said nothing. Ginny stood, opened her arms to him and he collapsed in to them, sobbing on her jumper harder than he’d ever done before. She dug her face in to his shoulder, muttering out choked words that sounded like cajoling shhh’s and hidden tears at the same time.

Quietly, feeling the weight of the world against them and holding Neville up as he ventured shakily for the fireplace, they all went home.
Asleep

Neville was finally sleeping and the other five of them were gathered around the kitchen table holding cups of tea that had long gone cold. No one could think of anything to say, but when Harry stood up and murmured something about *an early start at work the next day* everyone seemed to stream out after him. First it was Ron, who rose from his seat and took their cups to the sink, setting off various cleaning charms in his wake, then Luna, softly asking if it was alright for her to take the room next door to Neville before weightlessly slipping out of the kitchen. Then, only a few moments later, Ginny stood up.

“You coming?”

Hermione looked up from her cold cup, feeling a particular sort of emptiness she didn't quite know how to describe, “No, I'm going to stay here for a little while.”

“I'll stay with you,” Ginny offered, making to sit back down next to her.

But Hermione smiled as best she could, “Honestly, I’m fine. You go and get some sleep, it’s been a long night.”

It took three minutes of stubbornness and eye contact before Ginny finally nodded, leaving unspoken sadness between them as she moved from the lowlight of the kitchen and in to the sea of darkness in the corridor in front of her.

Hermione let out a long breath, collapsing her head in to her arms against the wooden table top and listening to the silence. *Don’t cry. Don’t cry.* The dry gasps she drew in those still seconds sounded loud and harsh and pathetic and it made her want to sink in to non existence. *But the silence didn't feel right.* It came to her almost immediately, like the flick of the switch besides her old bedroom door, and she wasn't sure if she was being incredibly foolish or simply just *human.* The longer she thought about it the more she wanted to do it, so she stood up, stuffed her wand in the back pocket of her jeans and stepped in to the fire place, letting a shock of emerald fire engulf her and take her to the only place she wanted to be.

Slowly, stepping from the tall black fireplace and in to an empty living room lined with stiff sofas and glass whisky cabinets, she made her way in to a long hall with so many doors to choose from that she instantly regretted not sending an owl first.
But she wasn't alone for long. Abruptly, footsteps began to pound down the staircase and Hermione found herself face to face with Blaise Zabini, looking alarmingly different to how he usually did in her presence, almost obscene in his shirtless-ness and frayed grey sweatpants that she could never believe belonged to him.

“Ah, Granger!” His face lit up amusedly, he looked entirely baffled, “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

There was a lump in her throat for her to swallow before she could speak, “Do you know where Malfoy is?”

“Probably the kitchen,” He said slowly, a wariness to his voice, as if he was trying to work out what was happening behind her eyes, “Just that way.”

He lingered after she’d thanked him. It was almost as if he was about to ask what was wrong.

The kitchen was closer than she’d expected. Hermione stood there nervously, the door cracked open, watching Malfoy at a counter, pouring what resembled whiskey in to a steaming mug, reading the label of the glass bottle whilst he stirred his drink for something to occupy himself with. He seemed incredibly calm, no line or frown pained his face, there was nothing to tell of his sadness. Glancing down at his long sleeved arms, she noticed they were free, there was no hand wrapped around his forearm, no subconscious scratching or constant rearrangement of sleeves. Hermione supposed that had something to do with the familiarity of an old friends home, the walls in which he’d no doubt gathered hundreds of sunny memories between before the darkness crashed against their childhood like a harsh wave, dragging them away with the current, in to an unrecognisable future.

Acknowledging that she’d been gaping at him for far too long than was acceptable and fearing if she didn’t do it now she’d just escape to the living room and floo straight home, she opened the door entirely, making herself known. He looked up at her instantly. Brows furrowed in surprise, he loosened his grip on the bottle he was holding and walked over to her on bare feet, his coffee left completely forgotten against the marble.

“I thought I wasn't seeing you until next week?” He inquired, cupping her face in his hands and kissing her as if he had no thought about it,

She closed her eyes, feeling his skin against her hot cheeks and trying not to feel stupid for finding solace in her boyfriend because she was finding it difficult to grapple with someone else’s grief, “Really bad day.”
He ran his thumbs smoothly across her cheeks with solemnity that suggested nothing but an offer of comfort, “Do you want to go to bed?”

Hermione nodded, letting him take her hand and lead her up two staircases, past elaborate sleeping portraits which were no doubt rowdy and racist in the daylight and to the end of the third floor corridor, to a room so large it could’ve contained three bedrooms.

Despite the outrageous scale it was just as gloomy as the rest of the place. But there were fresh white bed sheets and stacks of books, clothes strewn over chairs and the slight scent of musky cologne stemming from opened bottles on the dresser, hinting that this room didn't house someone as sinister as it looked like it should have.

“Will this shirt do?”

She whipped her head around from gaping at the high walls and swishing curtains as he threw her an old Slytherin quidditch shirt, Malfoy and 07 etched on the back in silver. It felt like the strangest thing when she nodded her head, holding the weight of it in her hands, even more so when she began to slip her thick grey jumper over her head, hyper aware of the exposed lace clasp of her bra against her back. Then she noticed Malfoy had started turning down the bed covers, paying no attention to her bare skin at all. She smiled slightly. Perhaps those twisted Slytherin traditions had done a little good.

Once she’d slipped out of her jeans, left in shamelessly gaudy christmas socks and his top which fell down to her thighs, smelling just like the uncapped musky cologne on the table besides her, she made her way over to the bed.

As she ran her hands over the softness of the sheets, Hermione suddenly became very aware that this was a step to somewhere beyond where they’d ever ventured before, it was like stretching out a shaking foot and hoping to God you’d reach the next stone and not tumble in to the river, but she was filled with so much emptiness, so much aching pain that she was being perpetually dragged down by it, the death and coldness of the hospital air could not escape her senses, so she barely cared to analyse something as feeble in comparison as a relationship development for longer than the time it took her to settle her head on to the pillow.

Malfoy opened his arms to her and she sunk down besides him, slipping a knee between his slim thighs and feeling the softness of his shirt against her cheek. She heard him snuff out the lamp but not for one second did she open her eyes.
Lying there, feeling the comforting touch of his fingers in her thick hair, she listened to the thud of his heart and let it tell her that they were still alive. And without any warning at all, Hermione began to cry. Not quiet sobs, the type you could muffle under a pillow, but something quite loud and painful and she dug her face in to his shoulder, feeling as the wetness from her eyes painted his sleeve. It was all becoming loud and clear in her mind, the day she kissed her parents for the last time, when she twisted that wand around in her grasp until they were strangers to her, how deeply she missed them, how it was a permanent stomach ache, always at the back of her mind when she saw Neville and Alice together, knowing all the things she couldn't be there to see, the goodbye’s she’d never be able to say. It felt like fire and ice and knives all at once and it hurt like hell.

Malfoy said nothing, he didn't have to. He just hugged her tighter, closer - if it were possible - and let his lips press against her forehead in a silent plea in which he hoped that she might know she was safe there, between him and the blanket of night. Hermione was past shame now, she used his warm body like a shield, breathing him in as he let her cry until there was nothing left in her other than the blazing soreness of her throat. She let him look after her, she let him occasionally swipe a thumb under the waterline of her eye, leaving it wet and salty, she let him rock her as steadily as he could, eventually soothing her in to something less like hurricane and more like an wailing evening breeze.

Gasping and sniffing, she wiped her hands over her cheeks and let her head fall back against the open plane of his chest.

“I’m sorry for barging in on you like that,” She whispered, her voice still shaking uneasily as she tilted her head up so her eyes could trace his face, see the sharpness of his jaw as it almost met her lips, the rare obvious sorrow in his eyes, shaded by the darkness of the room but made to glow by a slit of moonlight forcing its way between the heavy curtains.

“Shut up,” He told her softly, “I’m glad you came.”

It was in that moment, she knew for certain she felt the same. She was glad it was Draco Malfoy who was holding her, she was glad it was Draco Malfoy who watched her process her grief. Because he understood. He asked no questions and told no falsehoods. Instead he held her against his heart until she calmed, letting tingles soothingly creep up her spine at the feel of him stroking her hair. There was no forceful questioning, no lectures of advice, just the sadness shared between them until it became less difficult to handle alone.

“Me too,” She confessed, the fleeting emotions of shame and foolishness evaporating in to thin air.

Feeling her breath begin to slow and her cheeks dry and soften, she began to lose touch with the world as it closed around her, dark blue, muffled and drugged with tiredness, until the only feeling she remained aware of was the way his arms felt wrapped around her and how securely, how tightly she was pressed against him.
The next minute, they were asleep.
Healing

Hermione rolled over, tugging the sheets that had slipped down to her waist in the night back up to her neck, feeling the chill of goosebumps across exposed skin, letting her eyes flutter open in to the haziness of the morning.

The curtains were thick and closed but a line of white light between them told her it was day again. Her throat felt thick and achy with crying, her mouth raw and dry when she gulped, causing her to throw her face in to a deep grimace, wondering if she could manage to find her way down to the kitchen again for a glass of water without getting lost.

Behind her, she could hear delicate snores that sounded more like heavy breathing and deep sleep. Twisting around to look, she became aware of the fact that they'd parted far over the course of the night, leaving them dwindling on opposite ends of the bed, clutching to stretched sheets. She scanned the back of his blonde head with her eyes and came to realise she couldn't stop stupidly smiling to herself at the sight of it, his wrinkled grey shirt slipping up a his hip, those arms a lengthy tangle of unconscious whim. Hermione made a mental note to make sure they shared a real bed more often, not a cold wall or narrow sofa, there was something incredibly endearing about seeing Malfoy properly wrapped up in his dreams.

Shuffling quite a way forwards, until she was so close to him she could feel the heat of his skin, she ran a slim finger up his back and to his neck, letting it glide over the pulsing vein by his ear as she leaned in, with thoughtless intention based only on momentary desire, and kissed him behind his ear, waiting impatiently for him to stir. Which he didn’t. So she tried again, dotting a line of rose coloured kisses from his jaw to the dip of his collarbone, leaning back in satisfaction when he began to shift, turning until he was facing her, hair a tousled mess, eyes heavy and his cheeks lined with soft sleep marks that made his sharp features more subdued. Hermione thought he was gorgeous like this.

He said nothing, looking at her for a little while whilst the robins chirped beyond their window and the harsh wind rattled the walls a little. There was a line forming between his brows as he searched her face for anymore signs of deep sorrow, seemingly unable to feel content until she smiled at him like she was made of sunshine.

Instead, Hermione reached for the hand buried beneath his pillow and clutched it to her heart, looking in to his stormy eyes with the mustering of all her effort and strength.

“Neville’s mum died last night. I’m sad for Neville, of course, but that’s grief I can live with. It just got a bit much for me last night because it made me think of…my parents. The goodbyes I’ll never be able to say to them.”
It felt bizarre to say it aloud. It had been a secret she’d wrapped up inside herself for so long, rarely daring to speak of it. So much so that to be entirely honest now felt like removing a heavy weight from crushing her ribs but equally so anxious she felt a little sick. She was waiting for him to get up and leave like he’d done the last time she’d dared to tell him of something so close to her. But he didn’t. Malfoy nodded, rubbing his thumb in a soothing rhythm over the back of the hand of hers he was holding, waiting for her to continue.

“It’s much better now I’ve slept on it. Actually slept for once. I’m fine- seriously,” and it was the truth, even if she did say it so severely just to make sure she could get that unnervingly open look off his face, one that she was so unused to. Then, in a softer sort of way, so she could convey everything she wanted him to know in no more than two syllables, she said, “Thank you.”

“No need,” He told her, “I…want to be there for you. That much must be obvious by now.”

The slight teasing, the lazy lopsided smirk that melted in to the feather stuffed pillow under his head did nothing to soften the blow for Hermione, it hit her hard and she felt as if this was not real life. She’d never heard him talk that way before, not since he admitted that he actually liked her. From the hesitation, the way he clicked his teeth together before uttering it out, playing it off as if it were some humorous confession, she knew that this was Draco Malfoy opening his heavily guarded heart up to her, letting her past the bolted iron gates, amongst the spongy walls, allowing her to press right up against its warmth.

At the look of growing insecurity on his face, in the way he was beginning to close up like a turtle, a prisoner in its shell, she hastened a reply she knew he would be at ease with, “Really? I’d never have guessed, looks like there is a heart in there after all.”

She pressed her free hand against his chest, right over his thudding heart and thought silently of his requests for her to join him when she couldn’t sleep through the nights, the reading sessions in the cold of the tower and how he’d wrap her up, determined to keep her warm, the way he’d held her last night as if he never wanted to let her go.

“Its shockingly large,” He confessed jovially, smiling in a way that made him look happy, not smug or proud- just happy, ”When you get past the barbed wire and the glass shards that is.”

“I’m sure,” She leaned in to kiss him deeply then, slotting her leg between his and tangling them together again, so unable to stop smiling that he had to give up on capturing her lips properly and instead nipped and sucked her plump bottom lip, letting his hands skim her bare stomach, the shirt he had given her a night ago now bunched around her chest. Her stomach swooped and flipped and Hermione felt that this elicited a thrill not unlike that of flying- except with far less fear and far more urgency to peel the shirt away from his torso.
She wanted to tell him he was gorgeous, feeling that if any time was the right time to say such a thing, it was certainly when his tongue was halfway down her throat and she could feel him becoming hard in his pants. But then the door slammed open and Hermione let out a shriek of surprise and pushed Malfoy away, gathering the covers around her neck and peering over them to see who the hell it was who had ruined such a promising morning.

“Pansy,” Malfoy groaned, throwing his arms over his eyes and staying that way for quite a long time, as if he was waiting for her to disappear before he looked up again.

“Hermione!” She completely ignored Malfoy, sitting between them on the bed and setting a mug of tea on the table at Malfoy’s side “When the hell did you get here and why did I not know about it?”

“Probably because I didn’t know either,” She confessed, folding over the covers she’d thrown over herself in momentary panic and sitting up on crossed legs, watching as Malfoy slowly peered between the space in his white arms.

“You’re not leaving are you?” He inquired suspiciously.

“Not a chance.” Pansy said.

He grunted, leaning over to inspect the tea to his left and taking a cautious sip of it.

Pansy rolled her eyes at him, “For fuck’s sake its not poisoned.”

“How am I supposed to know? You don’t usually wake me up with tea on a Tuesday morning do you?”

Hermione stole it from Malfoy’s grip without a word, smiling as she did so, as if to soften the blow, gulping it down and feeling the dryness in her throat subside satisfactorily, ignoring the look of glaring protest on his face.

“Well you don't usually stay brooding in your room until two in the afternoon, sorry for wanting to make sure you weren’t dead or anything.”
Hermione burned the tip of her tongue, “It’s two?”

“What’s the problem?” Pansy asked, entirely unfazed by the way Hermione climbed from the bed and began collecting yesterdays clothes from their place strewn over the floor as if she’d just figured out she’d missed an important transfiguration exam.

“I didn’t tell anyone I was leaving, I didn’t think, I thought I’d be back before they woke up.” She explained, tugging on her jeans quickly and deciding that the shirt could wait, throwing her jumper over it in order to save time.

“Does it matter, they’re not exactly your fucking guardians are they?” Malfoy asked her, catching her wrists in his hands when she leaned over to kiss him a quick goodbye.

“It’s complicated, I’ll tell you later,” She muttered, trying not to think of the implications of saying such a thing as she reached the doorway, utterly breathless, “I’ll see you next Friday. Great to see you, Pansy.”

And she was out of the door and apparating on to the front doorstep of Grimmauld Place so fast that she didn't hear Pansy’s huff of amused confusion, or see the death glares Malfoy was throwing at his shameless best friend for having the audacity to interrupt them in the first place.
Coming through the front door instead of the teeming metropolis that was the kitchen fireplace, Hermione thought she would be able to slip in unseen and unquestioned, perhaps grab a glass of water and lock herself in Ginny’s room for an hour’s talk, walking out afterwards as if she’d never been away. But when she slipped through the door, trying to move it as slowly as possible, muffling the loud creaks as best she could until it finally clicked, she turned around to see Harry, standing there, eating a sandwich. She suspected he’d been watching her theatrically lock the door like a particularly interesting film for the last five minutes.

“So you didn’t leave us to travel the world last night?” He asked her tonelessly. There was no place for a smile on his lips, he was studying her instead.

“Of course not.”

“We were starting to think you’d been kidnapped.”

“I was just staying over at Malfoy’s,” She sighed, her head swishing towards the tall staircase, inwardly paranoid someone would be standing at the top, listening closely to what she was saying.

“Ah.”

Hermione cringed, “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“That thing,” She pressed, “with your face.”

“I’m not doing anything with my face,” He replied indignantly, taking another bite of his sandwich, still incessantly doing the thing.

“It’s all stiff and weird,” She frowned.
“Thanks a lot.”

“Anytime.”

This was her moment to escape. Spinning around the Banister and on to the first step with every intention of running and not stopping until she sought out Ginny, Harry called to her again.

“Oh and Hermione?”

She twisted her head to look at him, so much smaller at the bottom of thirty stairs than he was stood besides her.

“The clock’s ticking.”

Hermione was never one to run away from problems. She usually researched a million ways to solve them and had it sorted by breakfast. But there was a part of her that hated the idea of telling Ron, seeing him drift farther and farther away from her in his own pathetic stupor. She knew he’d come back eventually. That was almost a certainty. But she missed her best friend despite him being set in his infuriating ways, and she wished she could avoid telling him for as long as possible, staying in this cold silence, comfortably aware that it would shift by Christmas morning.

“I know,” She admitted, mostly to herself, connecting the dots in her mind, imagining the outcome and calculating the damage, “I’ll work it out.”
Die Hard: Part One

Having a conversation with Hannah Abbot in school robes, amongst a mass of history of magic essays was entirely different to having a conversation with Hannah Abbot at Grimmauld Place. A week back at home seemed to have done her more good than any of them could have expected and she had knocked on the door at seven o clock that evening with chocolate intended to nurse Neville through his dark hours and a sympathetic smile on her face. Hermione ignored the shake in her hands as they hugged, feeling it between her shoulder blades, the only visible sign that there was something in Hannah still ebbing and flowing, drifting towards some sort of recovery.

Hermione and Ginny had impulsively bought a television that morning as they were traipsing through the frosty streets of muggle London. They thought of it as a dare, a grand experiment to see if they could get electricity working in a house that had never used it yet, to see if the dusty plugs still functioned, if the box clad with mouldy dials in the basement would flick on and glare a bright shining red.

So they were all gathered together. Neville wrapped amongst a soft blue blanket on a frayed sofa, Luna cross legged besides him, Ron and Harry in the armchairs they had claimed as their own since they’d first moved in and added them to the space and Hermione, Ginny and Hannah were sprawled on the floor, wands and dusters and cables in hand, trying to make at least one of the videos they had bought work.

“I don’t think it’s going to work,” Ron said bitterly, evidently irritated by how long it was all taking. There had been progress in the last few days. The silent treatment had upgraded to polite greetings, good mornings, see you laters and the occasional do you fancy a cup of tea?

Hermione saw the way he would actually make eye contact with her now and how if Ginny was in the same room as him he didn't seem to notice as much, like she was a gruesomely large spider in the centre of the carpet. It gave her hope. Hope that, after dropping many casual remarks and warming him up to the idea, on Christmas Eve, he would accept her invitation to spend the evening at Theodore Nott’s house, with their friends who, surprisingly, were not demons nor Salazar Slytherins many reincarnations, but young adults just like them who had fought a long, hard war, except with the disadvantage of having malice indoctrinated in to them since the age of one. That was the plan that had kept her awake all night, wondering whether she’d be able to successfully pull it off and merge her friendship groups on the principles of forgiveness and acceptance and a cauldron load of maturity.

“It will,” Hermione reassured him, not looking up from her book, “If I can just find something that will work with electricity to trigger the power to flow back in through the wires-
“I’ve done it!” Ginny screamed suddenly.

Hannah jerked a little, dropping her wand in to her lap.

“What?” Hermione gasped, leaning over eagerly at the crackly grey screen and now bright green on button, “How?”

“I don’t know really, I just tried all those different wires and some of those spells and kicked the box a few times.”

“You have to be kidding me.”

“How about thank you Ginny, you saved the day, now we can watch Die Hard, whatever the hell that is.”

Hannah laughed excitedly, “You’re a literal genius.”

“Nah, thats Hermione, I’m just lucky.”

“Lucky at kicking boxes.” Hermione retorted, shaking her head affectionately and clicking open the plastic box of the video, slotting it in to the tv and watching the screen flicker in to something reminiscent of an actual working film, exactly how she remembered it when she was a child, leaning against her fathers side and staying awake beyond her bedtime, until the night turned velvet blue and stars shimmered between tree branches.

“I’ll make some hot chocolate then,” Harry announced, standing up and leaving for the kitchen.

And as they settled down to watch the film, something so mundane and ordinary, listening to the occasional remarks from Luna and Ginny and Ron, those who had never seen a television flicker in to action properly before, laughing and explaining and passing around christmas cookies Hermione had remade the day before, she felt as if there was a distinct light in her vision now, a circle of whiteness in the distance that could only get closer.
He looked up at her over the edge of his blanket, nodding silently and opening one of the folds. Hermione slid down next to him, resting her head against his shoulder and smelling the chocolate on his breath. In all honesty, she was in no need of a cuddle, but Neville looked as if he was in a trance, barely watching the films they’d had on all night and although he’d never admit it, she knew he needed someone close.

“How are you enjoying muggle life?” She asked him, still watching Beauty and the Beast as it played, lighting the darkness of the room in blue.

Everything was quiet around them. Harry had left for bed and the rest of them were leaning against one another, dozing, or silently watching the film, letting their eyes flutter shut now and again. It was almost two in the morning and every tick of the clock lulled them onwards into the haziness of early morning.

“It’s fascinating,” Neville said quietly, “What they can do without magic.”

“Science is extremely interesting,” Hermione agreed, “It’s one of the things I miss being at Hogwarts. But potions and astronomy make up for it in a way.”

He nodded. She could feel the rustle of the blankets where he was tearing skin from the beds of his nails, making them bloody and tender and as pained as his heart. Then he cleared his throat, practically speaking in a whisper.

“We’re having the funeral in January, we decided this morning.”

She hadn’t been expecting him to want to talk about it at all but she squeezed his waist all the same, letting her head rest against the frayed grey softness of the hoodie he’d worn since fifth year, waiting for him to continue, red blood no doubt gathering in the dips of his cuticles, his under eyes blue and raw.

“You’ll come wont you? All of you? I-its fine if you don’t want to, I mean after everything you’ve already done for me-
He was getting himself in an anxious fit so Hermione interrupted him, “Shhhh, of course we will, we want to be there for you. More than anything.”

“It’s nice you know.”

“What is?”

“Having all of you. I mean you were nice to me at Hogwarts, you all talked to me and I lived with Ron and Harry for years but it wasn't until the DA that I got so close to Ginny and Luna and not until after the war that I got so close to you. I’ve felt so lonely in my life, I’ve always been a failure at friendship as much as everything else. Having you lot has been the best thing to ever happen to me and I’m so grateful, Hermione, so grateful.”

It tumbled out in a sort of thick blur, his eyes swirled with tears and Hermione could feel a stinging behind hers too. She’d never realised they had touched him like this, deep within his soul, the reason he could walk around Hogwarts now and know wherever he turned there would be those who loved him dearly. It reminded Hermione of her childhood with stacks of books as her only friends, of Malfoy loitering in the corners of the common room, alone and troubled by an impossible task, of Harry sitting in his box of a bedroom at Privet Drive, waiting for letters that seldom arrived.

She hugged him tighter, feeling so much love for Neville, so much safety within his arms.

“We love you so much,” She told him firmly, “We’re going to get through this together. And after, when it hurts a little less, we’re going to have so much fun. Hey, we might even find you a real boyfriend.”

Neville laughed, it was wonderful to hear, “Dean was my real boyfriend. We danced.”

“For three hours.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers, Hermione, it was one night with Dean Thomas or nothing, there weren’t exactly a lot of options back in the day considering it seemed everyone was either taken, closeted, or on the Puddlemere United team and so old it would've been illegal.”
“Not anymore,” Hermione grinned suggestively, delighted a the brightness slowly filling his features, “You should owl Oliver, he might just say yes.”

“Never in a million years.”

“What, scared?”

“Of course!” He gushed, “Have you seen him? He’s six foot one of pure muscle.”

“He was always fucking hot,” Hermione marvelled, picturing the photograph of him from the sports section of last weeks paper in her head, sculpted back muscles flexing on a loop, relentless and rock hard, “even when he was fifteen.”

“I’m sure Malfoy would love hearing that.”

“He doesn’t have to know. Besides, I’m sure he has a thing for Eloise Midgen or Millicent Bullstrode or something, he just hasn't told me.”

Neville paused, speechless, and looked down at Hermione, sprawled out against him. She looked back at him, raising an eyebrow like it was a challenge. They stared at each other, lips shaking, chests trembling, and then burst out in to laughter so loud Ron jerked awake, startled.

He shot up, scanning the room dozily, “Wha-at’s going on?”

It only made them laugh harder. Hermione dug her head in his shoulder and Neville felt close to tears and Ron just stared at them, shaking and giggling like he was the funniest person they’d ever seen.

“Are you going to tell me what’s so funny?” He tried again, “At all?”

“Calm down Won Won, they’re not laughing at you, go back to sleep.” Ginny murmured from a heap of cushions and blankets on the floor, sounding exhausted and irritated by how obscenely loud her brother was being, with only streaks of fiery red hair splayed across the carpet to indicate that she was there at all.
Hermione whipped her head around at him as Ginny sunk back under her heap of cushions, grunting distastefully. She gasped for breath at the look of pure oblivion on his face, “Nothing you need to worry about, Ronald.”

And collapsed in to lung aching giggles once more.
“Are you going to tell me where we’re going yet?”

They were sitting on a bench in St James’ park, watching the sun melt in to the skyline all red and soft, coats drawn up to their necks and wands tucked inside their coats as not to be seen. The traffic of Londoners had thinned down to evening joggers and restless locals, watching the sunset, wrapped in thick blankets, with flasks of tea and mulled wine, enjoying the solace and entirely fearless of a cold.

“I’m going to show you,” Hermione told him, smiling to herself as she took a brown envelope out of her coat pocket and picked up one of his hands in hers so she could place it on his palm. She kissed his cheek, “Happy Christmas, It’s your present too.”

It was the wrong thing to say.

“This is why you need to tell me things, Granger,” Malfoy huffed, “Because I didn’t bring your present, I had no idea we were doing it so early and-

“Just be quiet and open it,” Hermione interrupted, rolling her eyes at his rigidity, “You’ll understand why I’m giving it to you now when you see what it is.”

He let out a snarky, irritated sigh but ripped open the closed flap all the same, taking a slim leather glove off to do so, his hands pale against prominent blue veins.

Hermione waited for his reaction as he read the paper, which manifested in a slow satisfied smile, growing wider as he read on.

“Do you like it?” She asked, though she already knew the answer.

“Yeah. Thank you. Great idea.” He nodded, “taking me to see the first play we ever read together.”

“There’s nothing better than Shakespeare on stage.”
“I’m sure,” He leaned in and kissed her and she twisted his arm around from the base of her neck back to his side so she could loop her own through it, tugging him to his feet.

She was small enough to fit in the nook between his shoulder and arm if she wanted to and the black wool coat he was wearing was warmer than her almost flimsy trench. So she tightened her grip on his forearm, walking as close to him as possible, soaking up all the heat in an attempt to extinguish the cold. December was brutal in its winds and rains, there had even been a sharp hailstorm that afternoon, dark clouds and frosty mornings were beckoning for snow, none of which had come just yet. It resulted in icy red raw hands and the kind of feeling fuelled by the innocence of childhood when it got so close to Christmas, that something profoundly exciting was near.

“We have thirty minutes to get to the theatre so I thought we could walk, it’s not that far away, maybe we could stop by Waterstones and pick up a few contemporaries for when we get back to Hogwarts?”

Hermione hoped he’d remembered the blurted offer to take him to her favourite book shop all that time ago, before she’d felt the touch of the skin beneath his shirt or the tongue against his teeth. It seemed as if he had, because he laughed in a way that was more of a snicker, covering his mouth with a leather clad hand to mask his white teeth and if Hermione didn’t know any better she’d say he was embarrassed by his inability to remain stoic, like emotions were still his enemy. But after a second Malfoy squeezed her arm, drawing her closer to his side, emitting a puff of cold white air as he breathed.

“Sounds alright.” He shrugged.

“I thought so too.”
They were almost at Grimmauld Place, having walked through the city hand in hand, talking about the play and the actors and the costume, passing by neon shop lights and ghostly park gates that soaked in the air of cigarette smoke.

Something had shifted between them and everything was more comfortable now. Malfoy could lift her hand up, still clasped with his, so he could scratch his cheek, kissing it afterwards in a silent apology, there was no more treading around one another apprehensively, instead they seemed to sink in to each other, to allow themselves to touch and talk and look, like they’d written a book of silent rules.

They’d scanned the high shelves in the book shop and Hermione had found herself in a corner, flipping through a book of Sylvia Plath’s poetry, reading her old favourites and tracing the words with her fingertips as if they could flourish in to life if she tried hard enough.

“What’s that?”

She tugged her gaze away from the book and smiled at him excitedly, “Sylvia Plath’s poetry. I read The Bell Jar a few years ago when I found it in a second hand bookshop near Grimmauld Place and fell in love. She was a tortured soul, wrote some fantastic stuff.”

She offered the copy of *Ariel* to him and he took it, opening on the page she had left wide for him, watching him read with eagerness.

“She does have a way with words,” He admitted, giving it back to her as she slipped it between the other books she’d been walking around with, intending to buy.

“That one’s my favourite. It’s so angry and raw, you can feel the rage coming off the pages.”

“Yeah.”

And in his eyes, Hermione thought she saw someone who could more than understand.
But then he jerked and stopped, standing in front of a stack of children’s books, an elaborate cartoon witch etched across the covers.

“What the hell is that about?”

Hermione shrugged it off, “Muggles think we’re green.”

“Sorry?”

“It’s a fairy tale thing,” She explained, “Like Beedle’s stories. You had babbity rabbity and muggle kids have the wicked witch of the west.”

“Well that’s horrifically offensive,” He said sarcastically, still staring at the glossy page as if he couldn't take his eyes away.

She laughed warmly, “They don’t know we actually exist. They don’t know what we’re like.”

He stayed silent for a moment and Hermione listened to the sliding automatic doors at the front of the shop, the car horns blaring beyond the pavement, and if she concentrated hard enough she could almost hear the cogs twisting around in his head.

“Father always said that muggles were idiotic and cruel.”

It should've sounded bitter but he said it so softly Hermione barely heard. This was more than just fascination with a muggle children's book, this was his childhood, his paces back in to the darkness in which he grew up, returning to the strands of toxicity that were planted in his flesh, which blossomed in to purple veins filled with blood that was almost impossible to clean, that made his entire being, that paved the way for his entire future, that made him in to the boy he was before, the man he so desperately tried not to be now.

“Some of them are,” Hermione conceded, now was not the time to argue something she was sure he already knew, “But so was Voldemort.”
Sometimes, so were you.

He looked at her and gulped thickly, something foggy behind his eyes, sighing heavily as if breathing out old words, “I know, there’s not as much difference there as some would have me believe.”

Chapter End Notes

(the poem Draco read was Daddy if anyone is interested, my all time fave)
When they made it to the steps that led to the ashy black door of number twelve, the clouds seemed to break and fat puffs of snow began to twirl down around them as if they’d shaken a snow globe and watched the glitter drift amongst the water. It dotted Hermione’s hair and melted on Malfoy’s nose.

Hermione grinned, tipping her head back and up at the white flurry in the sky, opening her palms to feel the coolness as it landed on her skin, soft as velvet, cold as ice. She had been waiting for this as she always did, the first snow of the year. There was something about how it iced houses like christmas cakes and blanketed a thrumming world that made her giddy, she loved the pure whiteness of it as it first met the ground, the untouched perfection of snowfall overnight, peeling back curtains to see a sheet of sugariness surrounding her. It was beautiful, like rain after a hot summer or a rainbow after a storm and it reminded her of the good in the world, of its beauty, that after darkness there always had to be light.

“It’s gorgeous isn't it?” She said as she faced the moon, her arms still spread, looking up at the starry night.

She couldn't see him but she knew he was staring at her, she could feel the burn of his gaze when he spoke softly.

“Yeah.”

And then, quite suddenly, as she closed her eyes to feel the flush of snow against her lids, she felt his lips kiss hers and a part of her thought that it might not have been the snow he was talking about.

She closed her arms around him, letting him snog her senseless in a blue and empty street, stumbling backwards until her back was pressed to the door and his tongue was sliding against hers and a thrilling swoop was soaring through her stomach, a kind of exciting sensation she wished would never end.

His hands slipped up, beneath her open coat, tracing the curve under her breasts with his thumbs, running his hands over covered skin, as he dropped his mouth to the dip between her shoulder and neck. Hermione was imagining him clothes-less now, soft and supple under her fingertips, his hands finally on her bare breasts. She wanted him, entirely and completely.
But a sharp gust of wind slashed their faces and the snow had began to melt between the heat of them and she was reminded of the freezing air, so she leaned away from him reluctantly, clutching his jaw between her fingers.

“It’s getting cold,” She breathed.

It acted like a trigger. He straightened immediately, removing his hands from her top and stuffing them in his pockets, coughing thickly, “Hm, right, I’ll be going then.”

That was the last thing she wanted, she grabbed his forearm before he could disappear in to the darkness, “Well, I mean-

“What?”

“Would you like to come in?”

She hoped the lift of her brow was explanation enough and when he nodded and smiled a little she knew it had been.

She couldn't bare him standing so far away so she tugged him back up against her, kissing him once, twice, three times, then pressed a finger against his lip to pause him- causing him to groan involuntarily- and slipped the key in the lock to click it open. When she turned back around to him he was haloed by the streetlights, snow a stark white against his coat shoulders, redness worked up on his cheeks.

“Quietly,” She told him, slowly creaking open the door, seeing the dim lamps and desolate space. She twined her fingers through his, “Follow me.”
My hiatus still stands but I thought I’d split the chapter and post the half I have completed now so the wait isn’t too long. I’m even busier than I usually am right now—apologies!

It was easier than expected and when she finally closed the door to her room she turned back around to where he was sitting on her bed, the moonlight pouring over him, turning him pearlescent.

“I never thought I’d come here. I heard a lot about it when I was a kid,” Malfoy told her, head tilted back, looking at the clean white walls as if he was trying to picture how it looked five years ago, painting the grime back on with his glare.

“Well it was in an absolute state until about a few years ago, you’re seeing it at its best.”

Hermione moved to sit next to him and suddenly everything felt awkward. They were sitting together at the edge of her bed wrapped in coats and scarves, talking about interior design like it was a Sunday afternoon. She looked down to her lap, picking at the edge of her thumbnail for a moment, wondering how on earth it had only just begun to hit her that she was going to have sex with Draco Malfoy tonight. If she’d had been told this a year ago she would’ve thought the messenger was a candidate for St Mungo’s. But here she was, day dreaming about stripping him bare whilst trying not to look him in the eye at the same time.

“I’m on birth control.”

Silence. She cringed.

“Sorry?”

“You have no idea what that is do you?”

Her suspicions were confirmed when he shook his head and she felt like letting the ground swallow her up for a moment.
“It’s a form of muggle contraception,” She explained hastily, “I like it, no spells needed, that’s all I meant to say.”

Her cheeks were warm and she was glad of the darkness.

“So are we just going to sit here and stare at the carpet, or?”

She locked eyes with him at this and despite the moonlight she was sure his were glistening, it was the sort of thing that was so him to say, so purely Malfoy, so typically sarcastic and so slightly arrogant that you weren’t sure if you wanted to slap him or laugh. Biting her lip in an attempt to suppress one or the other and offering him a sharp and mocking smile, she raised her hands to the top button of her coat, undoing them in a quick column and letting it slip off her shoulders and on to the floor,

“Better?”

“Much.”

Malfoy shrugged off his coat too and when he folded it neatly and put it on a nearby chair she laughed aloud.

“It was expensive, Granger.”

Dipping her finger under the heels of her shoes, she flipped them off and lifted herself on to his lap without a further word, letting herself sink down against his groin and feel the heat of his skin and the dip of anticipation in her stomach that felt like the high of a drug.

They kissed and he wrapped his arms around her back and felt her breasts against his chest and she elicited a moan that made him churn, heady with lust.

She breathed heavily, sedated with the warmth of his lips, dragging herself from his mouth and slipping her fingers underneath the hem of his jumper, forcing him to raise his arms as she pushed it over his head, lightheaded with lust in a way that removed whatever filter she had restraining her honesty, “I meant to tell you this a while ago, but you’re gorgeous, do you know that?”
He dragged his hands over her thighs, a slight smirk against his lips, fumbling with the belt loops of her jeans and she felt the hardness of him underneath her. She pressed down, grinding against him.

“You’re crazy for me aren’t you?” He teased, letting his breath run over her neck as he slid his hands up her shirt, demanding softly, “arms.”

And in one swift movement her top was on the floor and Malfoy’s mouth at the edge of her bra, pressing kisses against the swell of her breasts, cupping the blue lace and squeezing them maddeningly.

“Possibly,” She admitted, watching his tongue slash out against her skin, feeling every nerve in her on fire when he clicked the clasp of her bra open and cupped her left breast wholly in his hand, latching on to her nipple with his teeth.

She moaned again, louder this time, “God, Malfoy, what was I saying?”

He slid his tongue from her breast with a damp lick, “I’m that good am I?”

“Oh shut the fuck up, it’s been a while,” She growled, taking his wrists and pushing him back on the bed so that she was hanging over him, hair tumbling down over the edges of his face.

But something was wrong. He seemed choked up and let out a muffled don’t! that was too little too late to have stopped her. Hermione didn’t know what she’d done.

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” He murmured, slipping his arms from her grasp, “Can I just-

It was in that moment that she knew exactly why he’d hidden his arms away from her and she suddenly felt a deep melancholy overwhelm her, it reminded her of old darkness and a knife at her throat and dirt under her fingernails.

“Malfoy,” She whispered, sitting back on his thighs and combing his hair back with her fingers in what she hoped was a calming notion, “It’s alright, I know its there.”
“Well I’d rather you didn’t, so if I can just-

He began to sit up but she wouldn't let him, “We haven't got this far for you to fall down now, don’t shut me out, please.”

“I’m not shutting you out Granger,” He said honestly, “I just don’t like to be reminded that its there and I certainly don't like my girlfriend having to see the last thing she saw before she almost died.”

“Actually, that was a chandelier,” She joked weakly. When he didn't smile back at her she knew she had to try harder.

It came to her without thought, she picked up his wrist, refusing to let him protest and slowly lay down a finger against the scar. Because that’s what it was now. An old, faded, grey scar. A battle mark. It had lost all it’s magic, it didn't pulse with the drag of her fingertip and it didn't glare red like she saw in her nightmares. She was haunted by it, almost fascinated. A relic of everything he had overcome.

Malfoy was silent, his breath gave away his nervousness because it jumped like a heartbeat as he watched her twist her finger around his veins. When she pressed a kiss to the centre of it he might as well have stopped breathing all together.

She dotted several more over it, feeling the softening ridges against her lips, finding herself almost calm. He had laid back down against her sheets again and when she had finished kissing his arm she placed it gently on his chest, smiling almost as if she was satisfied- maybe she was.

“I don’t understand you,” Malfoy said gruffly, looking at her like she was a puzzle to solve.

“Here,” She lifted his hand to her neck and placed his finger against the protruding pink line just under her jaw, “That’s mine.”

“That’s an honourable scar, Granger, mine cost me everything I loved.”

Her parents flit through her mind for a second, “Mine sort of did too.
“Just because you were on the other side of that war doesn't mean you weren't a victim.”

He scoffed cruelly, “I was horrible, Granger, I terrorised you and Potter and Weasley, I never stood up for you at the Manor, I poisoned people for fuck’s sake.”

“And why did you do that?”

“Because I was a dick.”

She laughed, “You still are. I mean the other stuff.”

No explanation was needed there.

“But…” She wasn’t sure if he would admit it, “I was… scared.”

“You’re human, Malfoy, it’s time you started forgiving yourself,” He was watching her like she was wearing the face of another person but she leaned down against his bare torso so that her breasts were flush against his chest and she kissed him long and deep and said, in a tone so unlike any he’d ever heard before it made his kneecaps dissolve, “So, are you going to fuck me or not?”
She had his jeans around his ankles when she blurted it out.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit..weird?”

He propped himself up on his elbows, “What?”

“That we’re getting naked together and still calling each other by our last names.”

“I don’t know, I never really thought about it, it’s just … us.”

She climbed back up to his face, letting her hands trace his jaw.

“Yeah, but,” She tilted her lips to his ear, biting down on his lobe and swirling her tongue around it, “Wouldn’t you like to hear me scream your name?”

“That does sound like an enticing option,” He said it like he was bored, as if he was toying with her words, waiting for her to become frustrated with his evasiveness.

“And then maybe we could just keep on doing it? Like normally, in the day time, when we’re in school robes.”

She let out a breath she didn't know she was holding when he nodded, smirking a little, like he knew something she didn’t, and Hermione was simply relieved he’d found the idea of using their first names appealing instead of bizarre. There was something in his name that made her feel closer to him, like he had let in through those gates and accepted her as a fixture in his life, it gave her a feeling of pride and comfort she couldn't quite explain.

“Sure,” He conceded, and then, as an afterthought, “…Hermione.”
She leaned her forehead against his chest and laughed.

“What? I know I didn’t pronounce it wrong.”

“Nothing, it’s just… new, I like it.”

He brushed her heavy curls from her eyes, “Me too.”

And then they were kissing again and Hermione had shaken off her jeans and they were fumbling with the covers, the cold had become more and more pronounced with every layer they slid off, biting in to them like ice.

Once they were beneath the warmth of her duvet, lying on their sides and trying to catch their breath it was like everything had stopped moving. The cars trundling past their window seemed to slow, the snowfall settled against the pane, Hermione could hear his breathing as distinct as if it were the only sound left in the universe.

He gulped, running his index finger over her bare shoulder, down her spine, it made her shiver when he cupped her jaw in his palm and said the next two words so softly they sounded as if they didn't belong to him, “You’re beautiful.”

Hermione couldn't even reply. There they were, in the diluted blue light of midnight, wrapped amongst sheets and each others skin, pouring their hearts in to each others eyes like they were desperate for it, desperate to melt in to each other, to feel every pulse and curve and hear every laugh and sigh like they were listing off their favourite books or music, listening to an echoing symphony only they understood.

She didn’t love him. Not yet. But in that moment she could imagine doing so. She could see herself loving him, falling deep and hard and by the shaken quietness across Draco’s face she knew he was thinking the same thing too.

So she smiled satisfactorily, inching down to his thighs and dragging his underwear down with her nails, taking in the head of his cock against her tongue and swirling it around her lips until he moaned. She loved the sound, making him so desperate and so unlike his imperturbable self.
And when she stripped herself bare and straddled him and he slid a hand between her thighs, pressing his thumb against her softly, teasingly, sending her so mad she could barely wait a moment longer, she leaned down to kiss him, deep and rough and full of teeth and tongue and want.

He grasped on to her sides as she slid down on to him entirely, rocking her hips tauntingly against his, tipping her head back, a profound feeling of warmth and satisfaction that was striving to be totally fulfilled, tying a knot at her centre.

“Merlin Hermione, are you trying to kill me?” He breathed, pushing up from beneath her, desperately attempting to get her to move a little faster, a little harder.

“The exact opposite actually.”

She untwined his grip from her hips and laced their fingers together, running the back of his hands across her breasts, between her legs where they were connected, and then pressed them back on to the pillow at either side of his head, pinning him there with a hot kiss at the vein throbbing in his neck.

Finally, she picked up the pace, pounding in to him, breasts shaking, eyes shut tight against the world, urgently seeking their high. His hands burned against her thighs and she leaned forwards, pressing their foreheads together, leaving dotting kisses over his skin, throwing her head back so her neck was exposed as he sucked her skin between his tongue.

“Draco.”

He made a peculiar noise that she was almost too gone to catch on too.

“You like that don’t you? When I say your name when you’re inside me.”

“I never knew you were so filthy,” He told her, breaking from her grasp and toppling her over by her waist.

She laughed, sinking in to the pillows at his velvet touch, slipping her hand between her thighs, sweat sticking them to the sheets.
“I’m so close, Hermione, god.”

“I know,” She dug her nails in to his back and dragged them down until she could squeeze at his ass, “Come for me.”

And like that he was gone, collapsing in to her shoulder and throbbing between her thighs, moaning in a low pitch that made her chest vibrate with the sound.

Hermione was close behind, sliding the pad of her thumb against herself until she climaxed, convulsing against him, feeling so fucking good and trying to stay quiet, her teeth against his shoulder.

They were panting. Spent and succumbing to the doziness of ecstasy, Draco slid on to her, resting his head on her breast so he could hear the pounding of her heart, his sweaty hair against her neck, close enough for her to bend down and kiss his crown.

“That was amazing,” Hermione gasped, feeling his palm against her stomach, staring at the ceiling that was speckled with low light from the silent streets.

“Hmm, it really was.”

It was a comfortable silence. One so delicate and peaceful that Hermione felt herself falling from it, tumbling in to a deep sleep and not even worrying that it might be plagued by memories for once, but then she was suddenly bare and cold and awake, jolting open her eyes as she saw him at the end of her bed, tugging his shirt on.

“Where the hell are you going?”

“I’m not sure Weasley would want to see me when he’s up here bringing you your morning tea.”

“Ron doesn't bring me tea to my bedroom,” She said indifferently.

He peered at her over his shoulder, hair messy and tousled and white, “Rather be safe than sorry, Hermione.”
She couldn't help herself smiling at the sound of her name on his tongue.

“How about I set an alarm? So you can sneak out? Just…stay. It’s cold and…well, I have a thing for morning sex.”

He laughed, “You do, do you? Well now I have to stay.”

Leaning back over to her on the bed he pressed a slow, soft, lingering kiss on her lips and she could smell the coffee on his breath.

“Good.” She grinned, tugging him back until he was flush up against her, tangled so closely that neither of them could be sure who’s limbs were which, indulging in the afterglow of their orgasms, enjoying a rare fragment of what it felt like to be content.

Chapter End Notes

My first time writing explicit smut. Tried to keep it as realistic as possible. Felt like an idiot writing it. Hope it wasn’t too bad.
There was a brightness that illuminated dull wintry mornings in the form of crisp untouched snow. It glittered against the pavement like a beating sun and shone in to the window, lighting their backs and gathering condensation against the panes, slippery and cold.

“Morning.”

Hermione slipped open an eye, hearing the tone in his voice, it’s lightness, like a cloud that wasn't being weighed down by rain. He was resting his head on his arms, looking at the curve of her lip as she whetted it with her tongue, blinking open tired eyes.

“Hmm, hey, good sleep?”

It was a question that was becoming a fixture for them now, a masked way of asking if either of them were teetering on breaking point or not and whether they needed catching by the wrist.

“Surprisingly.”

She grinned, it was becoming such a common occurrence that her cheeks had begun to ache. And it made him smile too, as if he was marvelling the shape of her mouth, as if he loved to see her so happy, “I’m glad, Draco,

But he cringed a little at that, stiffening an almost unrecognisable amount.

“Still weird?”

“A little.” He admitted.

She shuffled closer towards him, resting a hand on his shoulder, feeling the softness of his skin under her palm, “Good weird though?”

“Oh, yeah.”
He dipped down until his lips met hers and they kissed deeply, dry mouthed and slightly stale but made wonderful with the gratification of the night before.

“Woah, woah, wait,” Draco pressed a finger against her lips, “…what time is it?”

“What?” It took a moment for Hermione to realise why that mattered at all, “Oh, oh god, um, ten past eight.”

“And let me guess, Weasley doesn't have a day job,” He said bitterly.

“Not until January,” Hermione admitted, staring around at the room as if hoping it would give her an answer, “Look, it’s fine, don’t worry, just get dressed and I’ll get Ginny to help smuggle you out.”

She jumped out of bed, wrapping herself in a dressing gown and watching as he smashed his face in to her pillow.

“Why the fuck can I not apparate out of here?”

“Weird protection spells. I’ve tried to get past them. They’re grounded, sorry.”

“It’s alright,” He dragged himself up from the pillow in a huff of resignation, matting down his unusually messy hair, “I expected nothing less from Walburga.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed, “How do you-

“Stories. Most of them were told on Halloween.”

He let out a chuckle at that, the same kind of chuckle he made when talking about his father.

“I see. I’ll be two seconds. And as much as I’m happy to see that ass I don’t want Ginny to be scarred.”
She had glanced up at him from tying her robe in a knot around her waist, realising he’d shaken the covers off so he was bare to his milky ankles, she could see every contour of him better than she had seen in the darkness. From the satisfying curve of his ass and slightly muscled shoulder blades, to the tender scars that looked like open wounds that slashed his back and the shape of his waist as it drilled in to his sides and bared his ribs, a visible manifestation of what it was like to be your own enemy. Hermione promised herself she’d explore him soon, map him out like a penned depiction of France, learn what made him wild, learn what he was afraid of admitting, learn who he was inside.

“Fuck you!” He shouted, just as she’d made to open the door.

“Shhh!” She hissed, biting back a laugh and turning to slip outside, bashing in to something hard.

“Ahh! God, Ginny, ouch, what the fuck are you doing?”

Ginny was standing before her, hand on the stair rail, in an old Harpies t shirt and pyjama pants that Hermione were sure had pygmy puffs on them.

“Helping,” She deadpanned as if it was obvious, “I’ll go to the kitchen and distract Ron.”

All Hermione could think about was how it was too early in the morning for her to be thinking clearly, ’How do you know he’s here?’

“Hermione,” Ginny started solemnly, using the kind of voice one used to tell people their children had died, “You forgot about a silencing spell.”

“Fucking hell.”

“Fucking hell indeed.”

She covered her face in her hands, “Was it…

“Scarring? Yes. But lucky for you Harry and Ron sleep like the dead and Neville’s moved to Luna’s
for the weekend.”

“Merlin.”

“Well you can make it up to me by getting him out before shit hits the fan,” She was smiling now, hopelessly amused, stepping down a few steps as she talked to her, “When you finally do tell him you’re fucking Malfoy it should be in a room with cushioned walls.”

Hermione stared at her imploringly, “You underestimate his acceptance.”

“Perhaps. But you underestimate how quickly he can calm down.”

Hermione knew she wasn't wrong.
College is absolutely killing me guys, it looks like I'll only be able to post once a week for now

“There you are,” Pansy said, “I’ve been waiting for you for hours.”

When he walked in to the kitchen, hoping for solitude and bitter coffee and a satisfying few minutes to replay the last twelve hours in his head before he was bothered, Pansy was standing in the glow of the window, a mug of tea in hand and a stack of textbooks and parchment on the table. It looked as if she’d been doing homework all night and for a moment he wondered whether he’d somehow accidentally walked straight back in to Grimmauld Place.

“Missed me that much have you? Is it really so dry when I’m not around?”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Pansy smiled, waving her wand to brown some toast and pour him a cup of tea, “we had a very good time scrapbooking newspaper clippings about ourselves and taking shots depending on the quality of insult.”

Draco blinked, “Did you actually?”

“Of course not.”

She shoved a slice of buttered toast between his teeth.

“Oh and your girlfriend?” He said, through a mouthful of crumbs, “Not as irritable as she would have me believe.”

Draco pretended he hadn’t noticed the way she tensed a little.

“Not my girlfriend. What did she do?”
“Distracted Weasley so he didn't have a stroke while I escaped the house.”

“This is getting stupid, Draco, she needs to tell him.”

“Says you?”

“Me and Ginny aren’t- anything,” She struggled to get the words out, “nothing like you and Hermione anyway, the way things are going next news you’ll be marrying her.”

That was certainly something he didn’t want empty time to contemplate. So he gulped his tea and sat down for good measure, feeling the weight of his body press down against his knees more heavily than before, like there were stones filling his pockets.

“What did you want me for so desperately anyways?”

Now that she was sitting across from him he could see a stray dash of strawberry jam against her lower lip, “Oh that, yeah. Come to afternoon tea with me tomorrow.”

“Who else is coming?”

“My mother.”

“If this is a scheme I’m not going to-

“It’s not a scheme, I just need…moral support.”

Draco gawped, “Since when did you need protection?”

There was the Pansy who avoided questions and danced around her emotions, feeling like the plague was closing in on her every time they loomed near, but this Pansy, the Pansy who couldn't stomach an argument with her mother alone, was entirely new to Draco, entirely different. Not bad, not
fragile, just...strange, vulnerable. Like she was nearing a breakthrough but hadn’t just punched through the glass yet.

“I don’t. I need my snarky best friend there so appropriate and fitting inside jokes can be made afterwards.”

He knew testing her wouldn’t help matters, “Sure. Fine. Whatever.”

Then she walked over to him and squeezed his face between her cold hands so hard he pouted.

“I hate your pointy ridiculous Hermione Granger loving face, you know that?”

“Oh course,” He couldn’t help smiling, “I hate you too.”

She kissed him soundly on the head and messed up his hair with the shake of her hands before climbing the stairs back up to her bedroom. He heard the portraits murmuring and the creak of the stairs and an almost ghostly, echoing laugh that was coming from Theo in the room next door. He let it settle in him for a moment, the sound, the taste, the thud of his heart...the girl he had had underneath him, dragging her nails down his back, her twisted hair, strewn over the white pillows, the colour rising hotly against her freckled cheeks...and tipped his face in to his drink, feeling all sorts of things he wasn’t exactly sure what to name yet, but perhaps he just wasn’t exactly sure if he could say the words aloud.
“Hey you, I’m off to Diagon Alley for some last minute christmas presents, want to come?”

It took five long gruelling seconds before Ron looked up at her but Hermione didn’t give up - things had been getting back to normal after all- instead she stood in the kitchen doorway smiling at him and tying her grey scarf as if nothing bad had ever happened to them.

“Um, no. No thanks.”

He brushed her off like he hadn’t spent the last seven years fighting evil with her and a further three months in her bed.

Hermione frowned, “Is anything wrong?”

He shook his head and sipped his tea, turning back to the letter he was writing, no doubt last minute preparations for the reopening of the joke shop.

“It’s not Skeeter again is it?” She tried, finding herself becoming desperate for him to engage her, “I’m working on a way to bring her down, I’ve already read through five hundred years worth of legislation.”

The last part she said with amusement in her voice and a reserved smile because she knew if everything was fine he’d puff out his cheeks and say bloody hell and try to comprehend how she hadn’t died of boredom yet.

But he replied bluntly, head over his parchment, “Nothing’s wrong, Hermione, I’m fine.”

“You know you can tell me anything right?”

She was thinking about that hazy harrowed pillow talk when the air was too hot and the sheets stuck to their backs and they whispered in the darkness about how alone they felt, how sad and how terrified and how much they wish they could have turned back time. She didn’t love Ron romantically anymore, but she loved being his best friend, and seeing him slip away like water
between her spread fingers made her heart deflate with misery.

“Sure.” He replied, distracted.

So she huffed out a sigh and began to head for the door, “I’ll tell Harry you said hi when I see him on his lunch break.”

Hermione listened long and hard and there was not even a mumble of acknowledgement to be heard from behind her.
Life, Death, War

It was a muggle cafe on the outskirts of Diagon Alley, just on the edge of the Leaky Cauldron entrance, small and wooden and warm, smelling like sugar and fresh bread and coffee, the windows steamy with condensation and the sprinkling of snow. They could watch the hectic movement of freezing shoppers from their table behind the huge glass window and relish in the warmth of the coffee shop walls.

“There’s something wrong with him, I know it Harry, I fucking know it.”

She bit into her sandwich angrily and Harry looked at her as if concerned about the breads wellbeing.

“He’s not stupid, Hermione.”

She spluttered, “When did I ever say he was? You know how I feel about Ronald, I never once implied he was dimwitted-

“But your actions do.'

Hermione couldn't reply in the face of Harry’s glare. His green eyes were boring into hers as if speaking streams of meaningful silent speech that contained the force to punch her in the chest twenty times over.

“Hermione. Do you really think you can hide an entire relationship from him? He knows somethings going on and I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s already put two and two together and you’re hurting more than you’re helping by refusing to be honest with him.”

Harry’s sarcasm felt sharp at times but his honesty hurt more.

“I-,” Her eyes filled with hot tears and she blinked desperately, dropping her sandwich back to her plate and rubbing her eyes with her palms, whispering, “I’m scared, Harry.”

She felt a hand on her wrist, tugging her arm away from her face and she let him wrap his warm
hands around hers, a white lump of skin glaring over her hands with the inscription *I must not tell lies.* She almost sobbed at the irony.

“He loves you, he’ll come around, and if he doesn’t he’s an idiot,” Harry told her, “Besides, maybe if we got to see the new and reformed Malfoy we wouldn’t be so wary of him.”

Hermione laughed wetly, “He’s not that new and reformed, he’s just learned how to channel his cruelty in to other mediums... *like alcohol.*”

Once she realised she’d said it she immediately cringed. It was something she hadn’t been willing to admit out loud, something she was scared of saying because it meant it would become a truth she could no longer ignore.

“He has a problem?” Harry asked gruffly.

Hermione shook her head and said softly, “His business.”

He nodded, letting the silence envelope them while the words melted in to their brains as they sipped steaming hot cappuccinos.

Hermione suddenly had a thought, “What about you, though? Surely Ron would’ve told you if he thought I was with Draco...has he?”

“No.”

“So there’s nothing to worry about then,” She breathed, ”I can tell him in his own time, he doesn’t suspect a thing.”

“Not necessarily, Hermione. We haven’t been talking much as of late, he doesn’t tell me things anymore.”

The way Harry struggled to get the words out confirmed the ideas that had been floating around in her mind since she’d arrived home. There was a distance between them. Harry worked as if it was his only choice in life and Ron made slight comments about the fact and at times they both looked
around each other like they couldn't bare to be face to face.

“How did that happen?”

“Life?” Harry blurted, struggling to keep his voice in check so severely that Hermione momentarily entertained the idea of casting a discreet *muffliato*, “Death? War? I don't know, I have no answers to give you, it's tough alright? It's really tough. I’m just trying to focus on work and maybe it’ll all go the fuck away.”

“We’ll figure all of this out, together,” She was speaking like she had a plan forming in her mind, colour coded and researched and scheduled and it was true, “You’re taking leave for Christmas, it is in three days, we’re having coffee in the kitchen at 3 pm tomorrow and we’re not leaving until we work out why the hell we’re so screwed up, alright? No point avoiding our problems if there’s no Voldemort to distract us anymore.”

During the brief flicker of determination that fired her up and set her blood running, she saw Harry’s lips turn up in to a grin and for the first time since the war she felt *in control*.

Harry was right after all, what point was there in being a Gryffindor if you weren’t going to be brave?
Cream Scones

The tea was far too sweet and the atmosphere at the table far too bitter. Not only were there ominous glares from the waiting staff who clearly recognised who they were and hushed whispers from those seated nearest to them, but Catherine kept glancing at her, gaze flitting from her tea cup to her daughters eyes and Pansy saw the pursed line of her red lips and the fire in her dark eyes and restrained herself from clutching Draco’s hand under the table.

“So, how’s school going?”

The red tips of her nails were glinting against the glass table top, her smile refusing to meet her eyes. She looked like plastic, melted in to one solid shape that couldn't be altered, her ugliness always too obvious to mistake for being kind. Pansy thought of the owls and the portkey paperwork and the lease for the penthouse in the beating heart of Paris, the ultimatum and the most recent letter, the very blackmail that had landed her at this lunch in the first place. It made her feel sick.

“Brilliant, thank you,” Draco said, filling in for her grappling silence.

It was always an amusing event. Watching the kids who had used unforgivables in the darkened corridors of Snape’s Hogwarts talk like meek, well mannered children to their murderous parents, as if they had to please the people who ruined their lives in the first place. That’s why Pansy had always held her ground. She didn’t want to give Catherine the satisfaction of thinking she was the one in control, of thinking her daughter had any more than mild tolerance for her after the night she’d heard her and her father clicking together glasses of cognac and planning Pansy’s future as a Death Eater like it was a bloody path to eternal glory.

“And are you two still…getting along?”

Pansy almost missed her scone and bit her tongue instead. It was only then she realised how long she’d been away from her mother for, how far apart they were from each other now. It was like talking to a stranger.

“Still gay, mother,” She rolled her eyes, watching the irritated twitch in her mother’s smile, as she tried to remain composed. Now this was darkly amusing.

“I thought you’d be done with that nonsense by now.”
Pansy could feel herself bubbling, the kind of anger that made her want to drag her mother out in to the street by her hair and see what everyone thought of her after that.

It was Draco who stepped in again, cool and collected, over the sound of her thumping heart.

“Pans is very happy with her girlfriend, Catherine, as I am with mine.”

Now she was debating whether bringing him was truly a good idea or not. Every time he said that godforsaken word she was met with the kinds of thoughts that made her feel weak and hot, the kind of thoughts that dragged a finger past the birthmark below the curve of her breast and laughed in to her freckled shoulder when she told her about one of the run ins she’d had in school, or the sinking, empty feeling of watching that hair flit with footsteps and wondering if she could ever stop feeling this gut wrenching conflict. It was sex, she said every time, just sex. And without even thinking about it her hands were fumbling beneath the table, slipping open a vial and spiking her tea.

“A girlfriend, Draco? How lovely,” Catherine told him, ignoring half of what he had said and continuing with the line of thought that Pansy was sure did not make her regret the fact that she hadn’t managed to get her daughter accidentally killed in the war, “Let me guess, that younger Greengrass girl? Narcissa always said you’d be wonderful together, I daresay if we still did arranged marriages that would have been your parents pick for you. It’s a shame we don’t do that anymore, it was such a good way, of you know, making sure no one strayed.”

She whispered the last part and spun her old diamond engagement ring around the circumference of her finger, no doubt thinking of the great scandal that was Andromeda Black escaping the clutches of her mad family to marry a filthy muggle. The smirk on her face made Pansy cringe, it was almost as if she relished in the unhappiness of war.

“No, actually,” Draco replied.

Pansy held her breath, wondering if he’d actually tell her.

“She’s called Hermione Granger.”

He said it as if she was an elusive character no one had ever heard of before instead of her being a world renowned war hero since the age of eleven, fighting the good fight with the chosen one and his pet dog.
Catherine stared at him disbelievingly, “The… the mudblood?”

“No, the war hero.”

Pansy smirked in to her cup.
“Who wants tea?”

“I’ll have a firewhisky, actually,” Harry said, and Hermione nodded her head with acute understanding and slid three glasses on to the table before them.

It was almost laughable how awkward this felt. Ron, staring at the frayed edges of his newspaper, baring the back page, covered in Quidditch Tournament updates. She though she saw a flash of red and a pair of heavy brows but pointing out the fact that Viktor was staring up at all of them at this particular moment in time perhaps wasn't the best thing to do- she’d write to him and they’d catch up later.

Harry had his glasses off, cleaning them on the edge of his shirt and looking up occasionally at Hermione as if begging her to start the conversation.

She sucked in a breath, her stomach twisting itself so tightly she felt a little sick, “So, um, I thought it was time we talked about what’s been keeping us apart lately.”

Ron raised his eyes to her and Hermione could see the clench in his jaw, looking almost as angry as when he’d had a heavy gold locket lain over his heart, sapping out all of his optimism until he was a bursting vial of malice.

“Like your secrets, Hermione?”

She gulped but her mouth was stinging and dry from the whisky and she couldn't look at Harry because she knew he’d have that look on his face that told her he knew his gut intuition had been right- as it always was.

“Yes, I suppose so,” She admitted shakily, clutching the glass tightly and wondering blearily if she could understand why Draco seemed to love the sourness of alcohol so much, “I'm, um, I mean we… are together. Draco and I, we’re in a relationship.”

Ron laughed but he wasn't smiling, “Took you a while didn't it? I heard the two of you on the landing, Ginny promising to distract me while you let him slip out of the house like the filthy criminal he is.”
Her heart was sinking and Harry’s arms were crossed, his gaze on the table as she whispered, “That’s not fair Ron, blame me, not him.”

“Oh I’m blaming you too, don’t worry,” He bit back at her, “He’s the guy isn't he? The one you were so hung up on in October? The one you ran all the way back to Hogwarts for?”

Hermione nodded, she couldn't get any words out.

“All this time, and you’ve been fucking him. I thought friendship was bad but this? This is worse. How could you, Hermione? After everything he’s done, everything he’s been?”

“He’s not the same person, Ron,” She spluttered, fists against the table, digging in to the wood like she was begging for splinters, “would I be with him if he was?”

“Well, I’m starting to fucking wonder.”

She could telling there was something else- something he wasn't telling her.

“What are you talking about?”

He snorted, “Like you don’t know.”

“I really don’t,” She snapped, feeling heat flush her cheeks, “enlighten me.”

He looked back down at the newspaper as if considering his options before chucking it face up across the table so it landed loud and heavy in front of Hermione. She…laughed. She couldn’t help it. Every bit of rage that had filled her up dissipated like water between the punctures of a sieve, It was so ridiculous she couldn't see it as anything but funny. The photograph was still, she was clutching Harry’s hands, they were smiling a little behind the condensed windows of that little muggle cafe they’d been in the day before, surrounded by traffic and icy patches of old snow.

“Ron, you seriously can’t believe Harry and I are in a covert relationship? Especially considering I’m
Harry looked up now, evidently startled, “Sorry?”

“Here,” Hermione threw it to him, “Skeeter’s at it again. No wonder we never spotted anyone, it’s a muggle photo, it’s not moving.”

Harry grinned as he skimmed along the article, incredibly amused. The air in the room wasn’t suffocating either of them anymore but Ron looked from one to the other grimacing, as if waiting for some sordid explanation.

“You were right about Draco and I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you, truly, I was just so afraid of losing you, but this, this is bullshit. The whole reason we were holding hands was because I was getting upset about how much I missed you, Ron.” Hermione explained, searching for something heart wrenchingly vacant in his eyes that would be able to falsely reassure her that it was all going to be okay.

He was silent, looking at the wall behind her as he spoke with a tone of gruff hurt, “Doesn’t make a difference, though does it? It was still Malfoy over me.”

“No,” She shook her head hard, “it’s both of you, you’re my best friend.”

They looked at each other and Hermione wanted to hug him but the coldness hadn't left his demeanour and she couldn't handle rejection at this point so instead she changed the subject.

‘What about you two, why are you not talking anymore?’

“If he hasn’t figured that out yet I’m really fucking worried about his career choice,” Ron spat, swilling the whisky around his cup now and taking a long gulp as if to fuel the fire inside him.

“That’s enough, Ron,” Harry bellowed, “Tell me what the fuck I’ve done wrong or go back to live at The Burrow if you hate me that much.”

Hermione’s breath caught in her throat, “Harry-
“No, Hermione, I want answers.”

“It’s always about you isn’t it?” Ron burst out, roughly wiping his mouth with the back of his jumper sleeve, “You being an auror, you working over time, you giving a shit about your life and never about mine.”

“What? I’m sorry I have a job and you dropped out of yours!”

“Harry, that’s not true, he has the joke shop.”

“The joke shop you never fucking go to!”

“Bullshit, I helped out that weekend with Hermione-

“Once, Harry, once! Do you know how hard it is to do all of that on your own when your brother’s barely holding himself together still?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realise, I-

“No, you didn’t did you.”

Heavy breathing and the clink of glass against wood filled their surroundings. Hermione could barely think, Harry had his face in his hands, Ron looked close to smashing his glass against the copper clock she’d bought last summer and proudly hung up on the wall.

“I’m going to go and inform Ginny about this mess,” She choked out, clutching the paper in her hand as she stood up, intent on escaping the way Ron was staring at her, no longer as if she was his whole world, but like she had hacked his to pieces with her mistakes, “Ron, Harry and I are so sorry for our mistakes, but it’s been a tough year for all of us and we cannot let a few misunderstandings or new social circles tear us apart. We’re a team. We always have been. I’ll come and see you later, hopefully everything will be a bit better, I’ll even referee a game of chess for you if you like.”
She was almost out of the door, satisfied with her attempt at sober cheerfulness and optimism, imagining what the evening would bring and if they’d all be laughing and playing games before the fire by nightfall when Ron spoke again, the roughness of his voice stopping her in her tracks like a stunning spell.

“I can’t do this, Hermione, I can’t see him, I can’t know he’s here, I just can’t. You brought the person who said he wanted you dead when he was twelve years old in to your life and you’re not bringing him in to mine too. Come and find me when you’re back to your senses.”

She couldn’t move, she just stood there paralysed, looking at the dark hall, the gold handle of the door at the end glinting dully in the lamp light, feeling the smallness of it all closing in on her as hot tears she couldn’t stop slid down her cheeks, wondering how long it would take them to hack down these newly cemented walls so she could meld them in to a bridge where they could all finally meet in the middle.

*He’s angry, she told herself, give him time, he’ll come around, he always does.*

But she wasn’t so sure in herself anymore. Everything inside her ached. And she knew she was the one to blame.
I have no classes for two weeks so even though I'm still studying I have a bunch more free time not taken up by class or daily travel so I'm going to try and post daily to make up for the painfully long absences :) enjoy the chapter, everyone

“How long have you been here?”

“Five minutes,” She smiled, stretching her arms out against his bed and watching the movement of his body as he neared her, all damp from the shower and pink skinned, his hair flat and slightly grey against his forehead.

“You’re early,” Draco told her, his grasp slipping from the towel at his waist as he climbed over her and gave her a sound kiss.

She pushed his wet hair back from his eyes so she could see the silver grey specks beneath his brows, feeling her shirt beginning to stick to her skin, “And you’re making me wet.”

With a sort of groan of reluctance he slid off her and walked over to the end of the bed, opening a dark wood drawer to find some suitable clothing.

Hermione watched the barely there muscles in his back slide as he dug through piles of shirts and jumpers, his thighs and ass delectably bare. She sometimes forgot what it was like to feel something as mundane as lust, there was no time for this kind of happiness when they were fighting the Dark Lord and the rush of pleasure inching towards her centre was beginning to make her consider giving up on attending the get together completely and ringing in Christmas under Theo’s unnaturally soft sheets instead.

“So you told him,” Draco slipped a pair of black boxers up his thighs and threw a jumper and some pants on the bed, covering Hermione’s feet, “Is he here?”

“God no. It went horribly to be honest.”
That was an understatement. She hadn’t slept the entire night. With a beaten up paperback and a cup of coffee she’d slid around an arm chair to face the window and dragged the curtains dressing the living room back so she could watch the ever shifting blackness as she read Miranda Goshawk’s autobiography and tried not to cry about how her life seemed to be turning into something she’d never wanted and that she was powerless to stop it.

“He didn’t-

Hermione looked at his heavy stare and was reminded of how he threw himself in front of her when Ernie lost his mind and how he was so scarred, sculpted with pain and that perhaps it wasn’t ill thought of Ron that made his mind go immediately to violence.

“No, he didn’t, he wouldn’t. He basically- disinherited me until i decide to dump you,” She admitted sourly.

He shoved a black jumper over his head and when he had shaken it down to his hips and she could see his face again he was looking at her with a brooding expression, a sad vacancy that reminded her of how he had looked roaming the halls in sixth year.

“I told you it wouldn’t be easy, Hermione,” He said softly, “If you want to end this I get it.”

She laughed warmly, there was no hesitation, “Don’t be stupid. You’re stuck with me for now.”

It was as if her toothy smile soothed him, nursed him back in to his sarcastic ways, “Damn, I really thought that would work.”

She watched the fumbling of his long fingers as he buttoned his trousers and tried not to grin any wider, not wanting to spoil the facade by breaking in to girlish giggles against his pillows, “Trying to get rid of me are you?”

He shook his head as if defeated, “You’re too smart for me, Granger.”

Sitting up, Hermione dragged herself to the edge of his bed, trapping him between her thighs and looping her fingers around the belt of his pants, “Tough luck.”
He toppled forwards when she tugged him on top of her and his wine breath melded with hers as his tongue lapped between her lips and Hermione began to forget about everything that had been haunting her, it was turning in to a dark blur at the back of her head, struggling to remain in her minds eye, growing weaker by the second.

“Merry Christmas, gorgeous,” She breathed, her fingers intertwined in his quickly drying hair, sighing as he rubbed a hand over the inside of her thigh.

“Merry Christmas indeed,” He said, then he took in a breath and looked down at her inquisitively, “Is that what you’re calling me now- gorgeous?”

Hermione couldn't help the heat that warmed her cheeks, “What, you don’t like it?”

“No it’s not that, I just, the only other thing you’ve ever called me is a cockroach.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’d be delighted to use that one too. It’d cheer up Ron a bit at least.” She joked darkly.

Before she could say anything more Draco’s face had gone blank and he was climbing up from the bed and unlocking the cabinet of his bedside table with his wand.

“I forgot,” He said, shuffling through shelves of what seemed to be various books and paperwork, “your present.”

“I thought we were doing those with the others?”

“Not this one.”

Hermione choked out a stunned laugh, “Are you insinuating you bought me underwear?”

“No, I’m insinuating that you should open it now.”

He held it out to her, thick and heavy and covered in brown paper and she took it from him and sat
up cross legged so it could rest in her lap. It was a book. That much was obvious. But as she peeled the paper away and caught glimpses of the look of unreadable suspense on Malfoy’s face, she began to feel her breath go with every bit of gold and blue the paper revealed.

“…Draco. How did you-?”

“You were always reading it at Hogwarts,” He said slowly, like he was embarrassed, “Every time I walked in to the Great Hall it was there propped up against a milk jug or underneath an essay you were finishing. And I knew you must’ve lost it when you weren’t whipping it out for us to read every five seconds. So I scoured the entire country and I found a first edition.”

“I did,” She breathed, unable to stop staring at how it glittered in the lamp light, the delicate lettering spelling out Hogwarts, A History, how the heavy silver dipped pages were a slight yellow with age, a beautiful sign of authenticity, “When the snatchers caught us and dragged us to your Manor, it must’ve been left in the forest, I-”

“Please consider this an apology,” He said firmly, guiltily.

She tore her eyes from the hardback cover and looked at him, a baffled grin across her lips, wondering how she could ever convey to him how much this meant to her, “Thank you. It’s stunning.”

“I thought you’d like it.”

She grabbed him by his neck and kissed him stupidly, until he was laughing against her lips, her eyes clouding over- then she suddenly jolted backwards, “What time is it?” She asked, breathing heavily.

Draco leaned over her to his bedside table and tugged at the downturned watch next to his lamp, “Nine fifteen.”

“We’re late to a party thats taking place one floor beneath us,” Hermione said, shaking her head and gently wrapping the paper around the book again, treating it as if it was as fragile as glass.

“Come on then, we can finish this later.”
She took his hand and he snuffed out the lights with the twist of his wand.

“You’re going to make me late for Christmas Day at The Burrow too?” She teased him, following the staircase until they could hear the distant buzz of talk and laughter in the distance, the radio humming out some incomprehensible tune.

“Not unless you hurry up,” He threatened, “Blaise and Pansy will start teasing us soon.”
The room in which they were all sitting looked nothing like the rest of the house. For one, it was full. There was no empty, dead feeling, no darkness looming around every corner. Instead, extra sofas had been dragged in and Ginny and Pansy were sitting together, laughing like their lungs could burst, Neville, Luna and Hannah were conversing quietly in a corner, stirring their drinks with slim straws and Blaise and Theo were standing by the liquor cabinet, switching radio channels and arguing quietly. It felt almost like being back at Hogwarts - apart from the levitating glass jars, filled with gold glittering lights - Pansy’s attempt at Christmas. She’d told Hermione this when she’d arrived earlier, because under no circumstances were they ever going to get something as ridiculous as a tree.

“Hey, everyone.”

Blaise turned around with an insincere smile, “Granger! Took you long enough. Is he really that irresistible? I always found him a bit too pointy for my liking.”

Draco leaned in to her ear and she felt a tantalising fan of warm breath when he whispered an unsurprised told you before sliding his hand from the centre of her back and leaving the doorway to find clean glasses to fill. But before Hermione could participate in anything remotely like conversation three loud knocks sounded at the door.

Pansy frowned, “Who the fuck is that?”

“I’ll go,” Hermione offered, unknowingly feeling for her wand in her back pocket.

She didn’t know whether she was expecting a Death Eater or some sort of mad muggle but when she opened the door it was Harry who was standing across from her, arms crossed and shivering, in an old leather jacket that she guessed had probably been Sirius’ at one point.

“Harry!”

“Hey,” He said through chattering teeth, stepping in to the almost unnoticeably warmer house, “I thought I’d come…try.”

When Hermione had mentioned it she hadn’t expected him to show up. Especially not after the row
in the kitchen, the final breakdown between themselves and Ron. She couldn’t help the warmth that overcame her. She hoped that Harry knew just how much she loved him for showing up there tonight amidst a raucous argument and even crueler weather.

When they reached the living room again she coughed a little, announcing Harry’s presence and trying to strain her face in to a serious kind of expression, biting her lip against the amused grin that was threatening to swallow her face.

As expected, everyone turned to stare at him and Theo froze mid sip, his glass floating beneath his chin as he tried to comprehend how the fuck Harry Potter found his house.

“Hold on a second Potter, how do you know my address?”

“Being an auror is a useful thing,” Harry said smoothly, removing his jacket and remaining in the centre of the room, clutching it in his hands and standing out like a sore thumb.

Silence.

“I’m kidding, I asked Ginny.”

Ginny snorted and Theo nodded in a way that made him seem as if Harry Potter hadn’t just fooled him and the tension seemed to dissipate a little after that.

It was Blaise who spoke next, as if in awe, “You’re witty. Weird.”

Hermione was constantly amused by Blaise Zabini’s ability to underestimate the Gryffindors he grew up hating, it was like watching a small child stand back in shock as he realised there were people more intelligent than him in the world.

Harry was about to reply when Neville stood up, “Come and sit between me and Hannah, I’ll get you a drink.”

“Thanks, Neville.”
All that could be heard between all of the shuffling of feet and clinking of glass was the radio, still blaring a painfully bad *Weird Sisters* record, whilst everyone else sat around awkwardly unsure of what to say next. Everything seemed different with Harry around. Hermione realised how close they’d all grown in the last four months, how cut off from the world in their lofty tower at Hogwarts they were, how unreal it was to find friendship in such a way as this.

But Draco cleared his throat and made what Hermione suspected was a brave attempt at something like friendship, “Potter.”

Harry looked around disbelievingly as if completely unsure if the greeting had really come from Draco or not and when his eyes fell on him, his hair all fluffy and clean, face sharp and calm as if seeing him for the first time, as if they were strangers who happened to collide at a mutual friends will, Harry nodded his head stiffly, “Malfoy.”

Hermione laughed in to her hand, looking at them sitting so uncomfortably across from one another, not sure of where to look or what to do when they could no longer be at each others throats anymore- when they had no choice but to be *civil*.

“I never thought I’d see the day,” She sighed, going over to sit on the arm of Draco’s chair and feeling as he wrapped an arm around her waist and presented her with a glass of white wine.

Harry was watching them unblinkingly, “Trust me, I’m still not entirely sure this isn't an elaborate hallucination.”

“How’s Ron?”

“Moody.”

Ginny rolled her eyes, “Can you two stop worrying for one second and have a good time? I suggest a game of truth or dare.”

Pansy sniggered, “What are you, *twelve*?”

But Ginny ran her tongue against her teeth, “Someone’s scared.”
She knew Pansy would do anything to beat down an assumption like that. And she wasn’t wrong.

Pansy stood up and hiked the waistband of her skirt a little higher above her hips, leather and the same red as her lipstick, the same red as blood.

She kicked the coffee table to the end of the room, “You’re on. Empty me a bottle, Theo.”

“Not a problem at all,” He said lazily, pouring the last of some whisky in to his cup and downing it.
Christmas Eve: Part Three

He turned around when the door opened and laughter flooded in to the night. Someone was screaming something and it sounded like a glass had smashed against the floorboards and Theo was glad to be outside of it all, wrapped in the coldness of the night with only a burning orange roll up to keep him company.

“You alright, Longbottom?” Theo asked over his shoulder, squinting at his silhouette in the light, waiting for him to shut the door.

“Not particularly,” He replied heavily, unsure of where to put himself.

Theo placed his hand on the cold concrete step next to him, “Come here.”

When he seemed hesitant Theo rolled his eyes, “I don’t bite, you should know that by now, have one of these- takes the edge off.”

He held out a thin white cigarette, identical to the one that was burning between his fingers and beckoned Longbottom to sit down.

When he finally did he took it from his hands and twisted it around, staring at it like it was alien to him, “I thought it just gave you lung cancer.”

Theo laughed bitterly, “Depends on your priorities.”

Firing up a muggle lighter until it sparked a flame, he took the cigarette from Neville’s cold hand and lit it until the end blackened, offering it back to him.

He seemed to have made up his mind because there was no hesitation this time. He shoved it between his teeth and inhaled hard, coughing and spluttering out a cloud of thick smoke.

“There you go, get it all out,” Theo smiled.
He found watching people take their first drag as cathartic as seeing his fathers trial end with the conclusion of guilty, both satisfying and painful at the same time as they choked on their lungs and blackened their throats with ash.

They stayed silent for quite a while. Theo, finishing up his cigarette as far as it would go, until his thumb began to burn and he had to stamp it in to the snow and pull out another, listening to the owls and the flutter of bats as they interwove through the trees.

He risked a look at Neville. He had his oatmeal jumper sleeves bunched around his hands and he was tentatively breathing out puffs of smoke, trying to get the hang of it all, an unseen weight straining him, pronouncing a dent between his brows.

“Dad’s really upset, you can tell,” He said quietly, a shake in his voice. Theo didn’t know what to say so he listened, “Gran keeps pacing around, leaving cups of tea to go cold.”

Theo had never considered himself particularly kind. He was the epitome of a Slytherin. Quiet but cunning. Scathing when he wanted to be. After all, his idea of a great boyfriend was someone like Blaise fucking Zabini. But seeing the look of hopelessness in Longbottom’s face and thinking back to those nights with Pansy, Draco and Blaise where they’d lain awake under the covers, silent and terrified, every creak outside their door sounding like one of the Dark Lord’s footsteps, he murmured something as close to comfort as he could manage.

“I like to walk in the dark. Muggle London, early hours of the morning…it helps.”

Neville seemed to ponder this, flicking off the excess ash with the twist of his thumb and thinking hard.

“Merlin,” He finally choked out, “Why the hell am I telling you this? Sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Theo told him, hyper aware that he was consoling Neville Longbottom on his back doorstep, “We’re friends…right?”

Neville looked up at him and smiled slightly, “I suppose this was the initiation?”

“I guess so.”
Silently, he tugged out another cigarette and remained next to Neville, listening to every gasp and
cough and sniff, right up until he stamped his fag out with the heel of his shoe and stood up again,
waiting for Theo to join him, hand propping open the door. Theo tossed his burnt out cigarette in to a
patch of ice and watched it dull in to black lifelessness, took one last glance at the ghostly skeletons
of the trees, the mindless stretches of countryside, the slight glitter of a muggle town so far away he
could barely have seen it if it wasn't for his glasses, and solemnly followed Longbottom back inside.
The bottle was spinning again, glittering in the christmas lights as it rolled against the floor, slowing down, tipping, landing on Draco.

“Truth,” He said too quickly for her to even ask.

In contemplation, Pansy took a slow sip of whisky and sat back against the leg of the sofa, scanning him with a mischievous glare.

“Apart from Hermione, who else in this room would you fuck?”

Draco gave her a bitter smile and Hermione laughed because she was expecting no less. He moved his eyes slowly around the perimeter of the room, past Hannah, who was staring out of the wide window over his head at the dark blue velvet of night fall, past Potter, who noticeably jerked back when he realised he was being stared at by the victim of Pansy’s painfully suggestive questions, and settling his gaze on Blaise, who threw him a wink, clutching his lower lip between his teeth, making Theo snort.

“Blaise.”

“Why not me?” Pansy exclaimed.

It was Blaise who spoke first, that incorrigible smirk on his face, “Because obviously, I’m the most attractive person in this room.”

“Nope. Because we already tried that and it didn’t really end well did it?”

A resigned sigh bit through Pansy and he knew she was thinking of sixth year when they’d got down to their knickers in a narrow, creaking dorm bed, cold with the chill of winter and the darkness clutching at their backs, neither of them particularly enjoying themselves. It was rough and meaningless and entirely void of emotion. The memory of it made her wince.

“Point taken. Maybe it was you who turned me gay.”
Draco scoffed amusedly, “Thanks, Pans.”

“Don’t listen to her,” Hermione said loudly, a serious frown on her face as she brandished her wine glass like a sword in Pansy’s direction and squashed Draco’s face between her hands so hard his cheeks puffed up, pressing together and she noticed Potter biting back a grin.

“You’re very pretty, gorgeous,” She slurred, eyes boring in to his as if she was telling him something extremely profound, “even when you scowl like that.”

“And you’re very drunk.” Draco told her bluntly, pressing a kiss to her forehead and letting her sink in to his side, tired and heavy with alcohol.

It made Pansy nothing but uncomfortable, watching them like that, and she found she could no longer raise her head amongst the current of laughter, the idea of catching Ginny’s eye was chilling her spine.

But Ginny spoke next and Pansy imagined her shuffling brows and jovially sickened expression as she watched her best friend rolling around like an idiot and calling a Malfoy gorgeous.

“Anyways.”

Draco swung the bottle around on its side and Pansy watched the neck spin erratically with mindful concentration. When it slowed it landed at a pair of feet in abused muggle trainers, laces dark with mud, and Pansy knew exactly who it had met.

“This is going to be fun.”

“Actually, Ginny, I think it’s going to be quite awkward.”

Hannah was laughing softly, a delicate kindness sewn between her words, “Me too, Luna.”

“So, Potter,” Draco slapped his hands against his thighs, his voice thick with excitement, “truth or
“Dare?”

“Dare,” Potter said, and Pansy guessed it was probably so Draco couldn't eke out any disconcerting anecdotes from that terribly tortured past of his.

“Very Gryffindor. Take a shot.”

Everyone seemed startled in to silence, so much so that Neville blurted out in to the quiet, “Is that it?”

Pansy was expecting something more, waiting for it to drop like a punchline, because perhaps Draco wasn't a racist anymore but that certainly made him no fucking angel.

“Off ginny.”

Her heart leaped. Pansy tore her eyes from the clutter of shoes and up to Draco. Even Hermione was wide eyed and gaping, glass tipping just enough to the side that it began to spill on to the floor and Neville had to reach across the circle to tilt it upright for her again.

Draco wasn't smiling, there was no cruel smirk, no relishing in what he was about to cause. Instead he looked straight at her, as serious as he had when he’d told her his mother had died, like he was challenging her to feel something, anything. And she was feeling something. She knew his game and she couldn't breathe. It was lodged in her windpipe and she couldn't get it out and her mind was spinning and she was trying to focus on anything but him so that she couldn't be confronted by the thoughts that were threatening to drown her, nearing her neck, swallowing her whole.

But oblivious Potter smiled crookedly and shuffled over to Ginny, sloshing the floor with vodka, “Just like old times.”

And she watched. She couldn't help it. Her eyes were burning. Not with tears. Not at all. But with the unidentifiable urge to feel something. Draco’s stare was burning through her and she knew she wouldn’t walk out, she wouldn’t dig through Theo’s cigarette stash or trod around Knockturn Alley for something better than booze. She’d watch Potter and Ginny, their heavy history suspended between them, as he pressed his face against her chest and did something as immature and ridiculous as a body shot. And it was ridiculous. Truly. So why was she imagining a slick smooth sensation coursing down her throat and tackling her thudding heart from the inside out? Why was she trying to remember if her pockets were full?
“Not exactly,” Ginny was laughing and it sounded like butter, “you really need to bloody shave.”
It was when she ripped the curtains back that he was jolted awake, his eyes burning in the whiteness of the hour, sun and snow and mist.

His head felt heavy as she sat down on the edge of his bed to pull on her boots and he stretched out a hand to stroke his fingertips against her clothed spine.

At his soft touch Hermione snapped her head around at him and his heart swooped in to his stomach at the tightness of her expression.

“I’m mad at you,” she said coarsely.

Draco cringed, “I was hoping you wouldn’t remember.”

“I wasn’t that gone.”

“You were crying to Theo about house elves by three in the morning.”

She shrugged loftily, trying not to let him get in the way of her anger, “I do that all the time,”

Refusing to meet his eye and busying herself with decluttering her night stand, she slipped her wand behind her ear and in to that untameable mass of curls, folding up laundry he had left strewn over chairs and sliding them back in to drawers like it was her job to look after him, like he was a child.

“You’re having me on,” he stared at her turned back, unable to believe she was so mad over such a thing.

She slammed shut a drawer so loud it echoed and whipped her head around, “And you’re fucking with other peoples relationships!”

He hated the angry flush of red on her cheeks, how she stomped her feet against the floor as she paced back to the bed and ripped the covers off him, making him shiver when the chill soaked his
skin, leaving him looking at her entirely dumbfounded, baffled by her harshness.

“Get up.”

“I had no choice.” He argued, scrambling out of bed before she started making it with him in it, suffocating him between the mattress and sheets, “Pansy does not react well to being forced to talk about how she’s feeling, she needs to be hit in the face with it.”

“I have no time for this.” She muttered, throwing pillows against the headboard and walking past him, standing there like a fool in his underwear and socks, as she headed for the door, “I need to be at The Burrow in twenty minutes.”

Without thinking he grabbed her by the hand so she stumbled and stopped and had no choice but to pay attention to him, his breath caught in his throat when she looked at him, “Hermione-

“Enough Draco, please,” She tried weakly, and he could barely hear the murmur of her voice over the glassy fragility of her eyes. It was an exhausted plea, almost a surrender, “I’ll see you soon.”

And then she was out of the door and off to the Weasley’s and Draco was wondering if it wasn’t too early to snatch a bottle of vodka and stand in front of his mother’s gravestone for a while, offering her a Happy Christmas and trying to pretend it didn’t affect him when Hermione looked at him like that, like she used to, when she forced a fist against his obnoxious nose because he was an evil little bastard, so blissfully unaware of what living in the darkness would turn out to mean. Like she hated him again.
“Molly!”

“Oh, Hermione, it’s lovely to see you.”

She wrapped her in to a hug so tight she almost suffocated, chin against her threadbare shoulder, smelling of nutmeg powder and that witch perfume she never remembered the name of. It felt like home.

“It’s so quiet around here with all of you gone,” Molly said, cupping Hermione’s face in her hands and beaming before dragging her in to the packed living room amongst a vibrant sea of Weasley siblings.

Candles were lit and the short fat christmas tree tucked in to the far right of the room glittered and flashed, the charmed fairy spinning at the very top, bending her back slightly to avoid smacking her head against the ceiling. Plates of mince pies decked all visible surfaces and icing sugar was seeping in to the crevices of the sofas shabby upholstery but none of it mattered, because everyone was together and everyone was safe and, probably, everyone was little bit drunk too.

Hermione thought she saw a flicker of emptiness in Molly’s eyes, a sort of longing gaze, a discreet gathering of dampness as she scanned the room. But before she could linger in her head she pushed a glass of wine in to Hermione’s hand and wordlessly headed back to the steamy kitchen, flapping her wand around above her head.

“You’re not going to drink that, surely?”

It was Harry. He’d popped up behind her with a glimmer of a smile on his face, donned in another of those jumpers, blue and scratchy and with a huge orange letter ‘H’.

“Not until the room stops spinning,” She backed up until she was sitting on the arm of a chair and turned to him, “So… you had fun last night?”

“Possibly.”
Hermione grinned.

“I’ll say it was the worst experience of my life if you keep looking at me like you’ve won.”

“But I have, chosen one.”

She winked at him and tipped her glass up to her lips without thinking, catching the sourness in her throat, coughing a little and placing it as far back on the coffee table as she could, staring at it darkly.

“I mean when we got over the whole the dude we’ve been trying to get murdered is in our house phase and the vodka got going it was delightful.”

“And Draco?”

Harry’s face was solid, he hadn’t looked so serious in all the time she’d known him, “Polite.”

“What was that?” She teased him, loving the look on his face that told her he wished she’d never dragged him in to this mess of friendship and civility in the first place, like there was nothing to do with his time if he couldn't spend it hating Slytherins.

“I said,” He bit out, “He’s alright. A cock. But an alright one.”

“Two compliments,” Hermione marvelled, “Who’d have known?”

“Not fucking me,” He huffed out in disbelief.

Then he caught her eye and she couldn’t resist his comical sarcasm and he couldn't resist the madness of their conversation and then, abruptly, like an exploding can of coke they were laughing, clutching each other, unable to stop the stretching ache in their lungs, gasping for breath and wondering how they missed the very moment their lives turned up right again. Wondering how they’d survived this long.
Christmas Day: Part Two

Chapter Notes

I'm completely open to criticism, I understand that I am not a perfect writer and am fully aware of how far I have yet to go. However, if anyone else starts another fucking argument about how Draco is racist or evil or bad I will honest to god stop responding to comments and maybe not even post the end of the story and just write it for myself because I'm sick and tired of old arguments. If you don't like Draco or Dramione you shouldn't be here. Go and read some Romione or something instead and leave my inbox alone. Thanks.

Three glasses of water and one challenging conversation with Bill and Fleur later, in which she had to try not to let her attention stray to the streak of red in the background, the burgundy jumper and the way his wand was sticking out of his jean pocket, sparkling with the charge of magic, and instead focusing on Victoire, smiling and laughing and holding her fat little hand and gushing to Fleur about how gorgeous she was, Hermione she found herself quite alone. Sitting in the corner with her fingertips against the coolness of her glass, letting the draft from the snow dotted window slip past her neck and in to the gingerbread heat of the room.

She watched Ginny and Charlie leaning out from behind the christmas tree, levitating Percy’s hat until it lifted barely an inch over his hair and letting it drop again, wondering if he’d notice and what he’d do if he did, laughing like they were kids again.

Arthur and Molly were standing over the radio, trying to retune it after Teddy had bashed it off the correct station with the swipe of his hand. Arthur was brandishing a screwdriver adamant it would work but Molly looked as if she’d rather set their house on fire herself than let him use such a thing.

Harry and Ron were sitting around the sofa in deep conversation with Andromeda. She was wearing deep red robes, her hair sloping over her shoulders. There was light under her dark eyelashes, her skin lined with discreet wrinkles when she laughed, smiling wide and full lipped. Hermione thought she was gorgeous. She couldn't seem to fathom how all of those years of pain hadn’t torn her looks apart yet. Maybe it was the pure fact of living in the light that had kept her at peace for so long. Maybe you didn’t have to owe the rest of your life to your demons. Looking at her made her think of Draco. She thought about how she’d snapped at him that morning, red faced and sharp, unwilling to see past her own anger. Because no one was unhappy. Ginny was fine, Harry seemed entirely unbothered and Pansy wasn’t stupid enough not to grasp Draco’s intentions either. What would come would come now, and she’d fight her own battles with the aid of her best friend. So Hermione let herself soak in her regret, thinking of all the problems she’d caused and all the ways her life had turned out so horribly wrong.
Then, just as she was beginning to get lost in her stupor, breath fanned against her ear, warm and chocolatey, “What's with the frown? Did you not get any books today?”

She whipped her head, “George.”

Hugging him eagerly she felt how thin he’d grown, his shoulder blades dug between her palms and his thin arms twisted weakly around her waist but seeing him, regardless of the grey of his face and the sink in his skin, the dullness of his freckle spattered nose, was better than she could ever had imagined. She hadn’t seen him since July. For him it only got worse and worse, until the only time he left his bedroom was in the thickness of night when no one else was near, roaming around like a spectre, half dead, curtains closed in the daylight, Fred’s things choking with dust, sitting there because he couldn't bare to move them. Seeing him there, all tall and lanky and dressed so badly it looked good, It was like he’d risen from the dead, like being reunited with an old friend after slipping through the wateriness of the veil.

“Angelina, great to see you,” He replied, the sharpness of his wit as bold and gleaming as always.

“Very funny,” She laughed, feeling the touch of his humour the same way she felt the nostalgia woven in to those few and far between blissful dreams about her parents, where all wrongs were now right and the sky flushed with colour.

“It's part of my charm, Hermione.”

She didn’t know what to say. Her mind first went towards the shop but something told her Christmas Day was not the best time to remind him of his dead twin brother or his all encompassing depression so she waited for him to offer a question instead.

“Enjoying Hogwarts?”

“Yeah,” She nodded, relieved at having something to say that didn’t dig in to either of their hearts, “I can’t believe we only have seven months left, I’ll miss it when it’s gone.”

“You could always go to muggle university.”

“No, I want to get in to the Ministry as soon as possible, start changing things, helping people.”
George blew out a breath and leaned back against the wall, “That sounds like a lot of work.”

As always, without any self restraint at all, Hermione found herself talking, “Well I’ve already started researching legislation, finding loopholes, forming foundations for campaigns, I’ve got three folders of notes and it’s all a great starting point, although maybe I should focus a little more on Elf rights than I have been doing recently-

But she clocked his smirk and suddenly her mind was throwing her through flashbacks in which everyone decided she was a *know it all* again, “Sorry, I’m boring you aren’t I? I’ll shut up.”

“Merlin no, seriously Hermione, carry on, I like listening to you, I like…normal.”

His face was so unguarded and warm that she knew he was being honest. There was no cruel intent flitting around his mind, no joke about to burst from his lips, no futile prank, he simply wanted to sit and hear the hum of her voice as she lead him slowly through the archives of wizarding history all the way up until the turkey was ready. They filled the borders of the wobbling kitchen table, pulling crackers apart and slipping on ridiculous paper hats, eating potatoes and puddings and reading the crinkled up jokes from the cardboard of the crackers, gleefully mocking their pathetic attempts at humour, telling far better ones of their own.

Hermione kept talking to George and he kept listening and sometimes he made a comment that made her laugh in to her hot chocolate and at others he stunned her by knowing where a particular quote came from and he had to remind her they’d gone to the same school. By the end of the night, when everyone but them seemed fuzzy on wine and were huddled around the fire singing Christmas songs, Hermione wrapped her arm around his shoulder and they rocked side to side, humming along and letting the nutmeg and high spirits fill them up, soothe them with the satisfying notion of family, of eternal togetherness.
She leaned in at his door, looking at the covers piled up over him, the sun barely visible through the closed curtains.

“Hey.”

He shuffled until he could see her, sounding gruff and bitter, ‘I got the impression you never wanted to see me again.”

“What? Don’t be stupid, I’m just drained. There’s a lot going on right now.”

She went to sit down next to him, combing the hair out of his eyes and smoothing her cold fingers over the blue of his skin as he lay there subdued, blinking in to the afternoon, turning over heavy thoughts in his head.

“Yes, Weasley.”

She didn’t want to say it but she knew she had to, because there was a sharpness in his words that wasn’t there before, “Are you- are you drunk?”

“So what if I am?”

“Because its one in the afternoon?”
Her hand froze over his cheek and she didn’t know where to put it, what to do, how to feel. Ever since they’d left Hogwarts everything seemed to have been tumbling down, piling up against them and caging them amongst their mistakes, their own dust choking them, filling their lungs until none of them could breathe.

“I wouldn’t know Granger,” He drawled, “I haven't opened my curtains in 48 hours.”

“Does anyone pay attention to what you’re doing in this house?”

“Why would they?”

She frowned at him like he was stupid, “Because they’re your friends.”

But he didn’t look at her, instead he stared in to the muffled grey hue of the room, eyes empty like an icy abyss.

“They won’t be one day.”

“What does that mean?”

He was silent for a moment and Hermione thought that would be it, that she’d kiss his cheek and walk away and plan for a better tomorrow, or stay if he’d let her, pressed against his back, breathing in the scent of his cologne and the fumes of whisky, like a maddening cocktail she couldn’t control. But then he snapped, rolling over and looking up at her from his pillow, shaking the covers so violently she almost slid off.

“I’m a fuck up, didn’t you know? I sort of expected it to hit home when I called you that godforsaken word but for some reason you decided to fuck me instead.”

She was breathless, “Draco-

“No, Hermione, stop. Leave,’ It sounded like giving up, “Go back to your real friends. Go back to the people who aren’t cold calculating fucking murderers.”
She couldn’t stop the joke that burst from her in a sharp knock of shocked laughter. “Is this a confession?”

“If you want it to be.”

He looked…dark. As if the breaking point he’d been dwindling around for years had finally fallen through and he’d plunged right in to the centre amongst the bodies of the fallen and the swirling storm of his own sordid past.

“Stop messing around, it’s not funny.”

“Yes it is,” He bit out, lips in a thin line, “It’s hilarious.”

“Why are you doing this? Why are you being so-

“Cruel? Because that’s who I am. I’m cruel, Granger, I’m evil, leave me the fuck alone, you know full well I don’t deserve you.”

Her arms found themselves crossed tight against her chest, fury building up at the familiar chime of a long forgotten argument, “You don’t get to make that decision for me.”

“Well everyone else in the universe agrees,” He told her distractedly, pulling out an almost empty bottle from under the sheets and unscrewing the lid.

“Give me that,” Hermione held out her hand, her expression as hard as steel.

“Fuck you.”

She ripped it from his grip, marching away from him and never looking back, “Get some sleep, I’ll see you when you sober up.”
“Has he ever been this bad before?”

In Hermione’s mind she never could have envisioned what was happening to her at that very moment. The four of them sitting around a table in a huge airy mansion, a steaming pot of coffee passing between hands and cups.

“It started in sixth year, you know, when he joined that *blood supremacy cult,*” Blaise was talking almost lazily, like it was a story he was tired of telling, “he used to sneak firewhisky in to the dorm and lock himself in from night to noon, we ended up sleeping in the fucking common room.”

“And you just let him destroy himself like that?”

Pansy gulped down her coffee, leaving a bloody red stain against the rim, “We didn’t know how to handle him. We stole the odd bottle but it didn’t do much, I mean god forbid we actually tried to talk to him, he’d curse our limbs off.”

“I didn’t want to admit it was a problem,” Hermione sighed, “There’s so much going on, I just wanted one part of my life to be *okay.*”

“If you want that you need to find a huge fucking time turner- or a draught of living death,” Blaise smirked slightly, amused at his own ridiculous humour.

“*Blaise,*” Theo warned him.

He coughed in response, focusing his gaze on the swirling liquid in his mug, “Hm, *Sorry.*”

“Let’s just take it slowly,” Hermione suggested, rubbing her palms so vigorously about her eyes she felt they could be pushed all the way in to the back of her brain, “I’ll wait for him to sleep it off and then I’ll try talking to him about it.”

Pansy snorted, “Well, you better go in armed.”
“I’m not having an *armed* conversation with my boyfriend, Pansy, he’s not going to murder me,” and it was like a harrowing after thought when she murmured under her breath four words that she’d never thought hard over before, four words she was sure she’d always known, “he never would have.”

“I’m just trying to make the point that he’s got issues,” Pansy shrugged, “Three times what we have. Could you imagine having Bella Lestrange as an aunt? Why do you think we don’t touch the manor? It gives him panic attacks.”

“I erased my parents memories and pushed them all the way to Australia, I think I can handle a mentally deranged eighteen year old.”

The hardness in her voice, the sheer determination, made Pansy yield, enough for them all to gulp down coffee and listen to the silence of the house, the wind as it danced between the towering walls and gaping corridors, whistling, howling, begging to be heard.

“Just…don’t be disappointed if he doesn’t take any of it in. It’s not your fault, it’s just how he is.”

Hermione smiled softly, “Thanks, Theo.”
Forgiveness

She didn’t wait for him to come out, instead she walked straight in to the bathroom, inhaling the hues of steam and what smelled like particularly strongly scented shaving cream, watching as he turned to her the moment she burst in.

He was hunched shirtless over the sink, hair damp, scars racing down his back, fading grey mark burned on to his arm, subtle white scarring disappearing under the waistband of his boxers.

He looked down at her feet, mouth foamed up with toothpaste and the harsh reality of sobriety, “You’re not wearing socks.”

‘Is it against the rules?’

Hermione made sure to keep her face void of expression, she just kept boring her gaze in to him, watching the way he loosely clutched his toothbrush, a thin trickle of water still swirling down the sink as they scanned each other, wondering what to do, wondering who would crumble first, wondering if neither of them would crumble at all.

“I suppose not,” He admitted sourly, his hand wandering towards his forearm like a magnetic impulse, an impossibly relentless tick.

He dragged his fingernails across it and he didn’t grimace in pain even though Hermione could tell his skin was already red, blood dotted and dry, a physical manifestation of whatever was going around in that tormented head of his.

“About earlier-”

“Don’t,” He said.

It was almost a whisper, that immaculate mask that was always slipped over his skin was being dragged down by the weight of his tiredness, the weight of his burden, and Hermione was beginning to see the cracks, the indentations between his brows, the tight downturning of his lips. She wanted to shout at him and kiss him all at once but she stayed frozen by the door, back sweaty with the heat of the room, feet damp against the tiled floor.
“Do you want to go to bed?”

She knew he’d spent the entire day there but she didn’t want to be obscene, it was like trying to keep a snowball cold as a child, running through the house, hoping it wouldn’t melt before you reached the freezer and shoved it amongst the frozen peas, an emblem of your futile triumphs.

Draco knew what she was asking, she could tell, the look of recognition on his face was indisputable. Because it was the kind of question he asked her when he knew she was too afraid to close her eyes, when he knew she couldn’t be alone.

So he spat in to the sink and dried himself off, following Hermione back in to his bedroom, until they were under the sheets again. Not touching, just looking, trying to find a way to communicate the incommunicable, trying to stretch his heart open with the burn of her eyes.

The silence broke like a knife between the paper seal of an envelope, splitting her open as he talked, “I didn’t mean it earlier, what I said about you.”

**But you meant what you said about yourself.**

*How did that make them any different, though?* How was she on any higher plain than him? How was she in any position to help? She’d spent the last months hating herself for every mistake she made, punishing herself as if she was the catalyst for a war born from lovelessness, as if the entirety of the world assumed she was to blame.

How do you preach the morals you can barely begin to accept for yourself?

But that didn’t matter now, it couldn’t matter now. Instead she stretched out a hand and let her palm rest against his jaw, rubbing against the rough of his cheek.

“Forget it. We’ll make a better tomorrow.”

She hoped he felt the weight in her words and by the dry gulp he made she knew he had. So he nodded, initiating the beginning of a pact that deep down he still believed could ruin him. Because Malfoy’s weren’t supposed to wear their hearts on their sleeves, or rip it from their chest and place it
in their palm, wrap it in gold and give it to someone else.

“Promise?” She asked, putting up her little finger between them and watching the life begin to slowly return to him.

“Seriously, Granger?” Draco scoffed, looking at her like she had the mental capacity of a twelve year old, like she’d just asked him for a game of hopscotch in the garden.

“I’m extremely serious,” She nodded, waggling her finger at him with a straight face, heart thumping a little beneath her breast.

Draco sighed as if he couldn't resist anything she thrust in front of him, wrapping his cold finger around hers and squeezing tightly, until she squealed and laughed and ripped her hand from his, pinning his wrist above his head and leaning her weight in to him.

“You almost broke my fucking finger!” She giggled, shaking her hand as if it ached more than it really did.

He shrugged, an almost smile battling between the strength of his jaw, “I just wanted to make the point.”

“What point?” She asked him, confused, settling herself comfortably against his chest.

“I’m extremely serious too.”

And in that stale, dark, festering bedroom of heavy sadness Hermione saw a light. Far away, glowing dully, barely larger than a sickle, but it was there.

“So you’re going to try?” She asked hopefully, quietly.

“You can’t be mad at me when I fail,” He replied, head tilted up at the ceiling, unable to look her in the eyes, “It’s the only way I can-
His throat was full of heartache and he couldn't tell her yet.

“Well you’ve got me now.”

He choked out a laugh, “One on one’s with Group Therapy Granger, aren’t I lucky?”

“Yes, you are,” She ignored his mocking tone, “You're really fucking lucky.”

“Will Weasley be there on New Years Eve?”

“Probably moping in his bedroom, yeah…why?”

“Good.”

Hermione bit her lip, “Draco-

“I’m not going to turn him in to a toad, Hermione,” He rolled his eyes, squeezing her shoulder a little as if in need of support, “I need to start - learning how to live properly.”

“That does not mean you owe anything to Ronald.”

“But I do, don’t I? I don’t want to be who I was anymore.”

“B-b-You’re not,” She protested, seeing the way he was twisting himself up inside.

But he didn’t reply, he just smiled slightly at her, subdued and repentant, like he was kissing her goodbye before walking to his execution, letting the swing of an axe slice him in half.

Neither of them could live like this anymore. Hermione had always known it. And maybe, just maybe this was how they learned to forgive themselves.
“That cannot be safe.”

“Have you ever tried it?”

Pansy shook her head.

“Then how do you know?”

“Maybe because it snowed last night and this house is at least four hundred years old?” She bit back, watching Ginny hanging off the edge of the window, bare leg dangling, wearing without his knowledge, one of Blaise’s impossibly thick jumpers as a nightdress that she’d dug out of the laundry basket when she realised she’d forgotten to bring fresh clothes.

Pansy watched her in the moonlight, hair tangling in the breeze, face blue against the pushed back curtains, wishing there wasn’t a fist squeezing her heart at the sight of it all.

“If you come I’ll fuck you,” Ginny smiled, tapping her fingers against the windowsill, swinging slightly on the hinge of the opening like a fearless Chaser mid match.

Pansy scoffed, “What, on the freezing cold icy roof that my silk is far too expensive for?”

“Or in the bed, or the dining room table…or the one Blaise uses in the library when he’s trying to muster up the motivation to do his homework.”

Pansy grinned without meaning to, ‘You’re trying to manipulate me through my enjoyment of making other peoples lives miseries.”

‘Is it working?’ Ginny asked, barely stopping to wait for a reply before she carried on, “Because I don’t think you like making people’s lives awful, I think you just don’t think you’re allowed to be ridiculous without an excuse.”

“Oh really?” Pansy advanced towards her, sitting in the dip underneath the window and breathing in
the cold air, slipping a delicate hand up the inside of Ginny’s thigh until her goosebumps were not at all because of the cold.

But Ginny slapped her hand down, “Come and be ridiculous with me, then you might get to touch.”

Pansy didn’t have time to think before she was being dragged out on to the slated rooftop by Ginny’s cold hand, the bitterness of the air swirling amongst the silvery stars, shining like all they wanted was to be seen. She tilted her head back and breathed it in like it was stardust, quietly admiring the glitter of the galaxies as they melted in to the night.

“See? No one’s fallen through,” Ginny said proudly, conjuring up a blanket and applying a very strong heating charm before sitting down and dragging Pansy with her.

“Yet.”

They were lying back, eyes tilted up to the stars, shoulders pressed together, sharing body heat. It was only when Ginny lifted her hand to point up that Pansy realised she still had it clutched in her grasp. They stared at it for a second as if it were something grotesque and alien, then Ginny glanced at Pansy and Pansy looked back and something undeniable passed between them before either of them could make it stop. With a swooping in her stomach, surging all the way down to her shins, Pansy tugged her hand free and crossed her arms tightly over her chest, adamant that the only place they were wandering for the rest of the night was towards another vial of potion.

“That’s Sirius,” Ginny said softly, her voice heavy with the weight of what neither of them wanted to say. Hand still tipped up at the universe, it was like she was stirring new constellations with her fingertip, guiding the glowing stars in to complex and curious shapes, making her own future out of reliving her past.

“That’s Draco, Narcissa used to show us when we were kids and adamant we weren’t going to go to bed. How did you learn?”

Pansy let the words slip from her mouth like it was the easiest thing in the world, she didn’t even stop to feel guilty about it, to question why it was so important she told Ginny things so valuable to her beating heart that she had never even brought up to her mother.

“I had a lot of time to think over summer, somehow it became a hobby.”
Pansy smirked lazily, “Hermione?”

“That girl has books on everything.”

“The spell’s wearing off, what’s your valuable untainted possession of choice?” Ginny asked, rising to her feet and looking sickeningly angelic in the glow of the white moon.

Pansy promised herself she wouldn’t let herself believe she deserved this, but the words were out of her mouth before she could stop them.

“The bed.”

“Which one?” Ginny crumpled her nose, freckles creasing. “I’m pretty sure everyone’s in bed. Besides, do I really want to fuck you in someone else’s dirty sheets? How about Theo’s desk instead?”

And without a second thought Pansy’s eyes were rolling, her smile widening, “Our bed you idiot.”

And she didn’t even give it a second thought until she woke up cold and alone later that morning, left to think about the one thing she’d been trying to ignore the whole time, the one thing she wanted to escape.
New Years Eve: Part One

“You know back in September when I warned you of brawls?”

She gave Neville a narrow look from the side of her eye, lining up bottles of juice and sparkling water on the glass table she’d lugged out of storage along with extremely expensive and fragile looking crystal glasses. They’d been hidden away in the attic behind Harry’s dusty storage boxes for what could have been decades, even centuries. She wasn’t quite sure.

“Go on,” She told him warily, dusting off the glasses and removing them from softened paper, lining them up along the table so that their reflections glittered in the lamplight.

“Nothing,” Neville shrugged in a way that she could tell he was only pretending not to care about the decisions she made in her life, “I just think it’s a good idea to warn you again.”

“I’m doing everything I can, Neville.”

“No, I know, it’s not that, just be careful.”

He had this warm meaningful look that she couldn't ignore.

“I think Draco’s going to try to talk to Ron. Make amends.”

He smiled crookedly, gaping back through the open door and to the end of the hall which met the kitchen. Ron was standing in front of the fridge, a hard look drawn across his features, one that he'd been stuck on for days, “That’ll be something.”

“At least one of them’s being mature.”

Because Hermione knew liking Draco Malfoy was an emotional rollercoaster you couldn't convince yourself to get off. How you could graze the very heights of ignorant bliss with warm fingertips around him, how he made you feel invincible, like you'd solved all the problems, like everything was going to be alright. And then how he plunged you in to darkness in a way that you couldn’t see where he was but you could always feel the hold of his hand, unwaveringly close but so cold and
distant amongst the mist, the only part of him alive being the thump of his pulse where your thumb met his wrist, constant and hopeful, even if every other piece of him wasn’t, even if every other piece of him was ready to give up.

So Hermione slipped in to her heels and opened up the fireplace in a blaze of green fire, unwilling to give anyone up, unwilling to give anything up, unwilling to break.
New Years Eve: Part Two

The night was black, speckled in a hue of smoke and anticipation as the time dragged on closer to midnight. It had already been two hours and Hermione didn’t even think it was going that badly. Neville, Theo and Hannah seemed to be having a quiet but intense conversation by the heat of the fire and Harry and Ginny were playing exploding snap between shots of firewhisky. Hermione had caught Pansy’s gaze, discreet but piercing, taking a deep sip of red wine and trying to pretend she wasn't following the wave of Ginny’s hair as it moved behind the blurred thickness of her glass. It looked as if Draco’s tactics hadn’t worked at all, maybe they’d have to physically push them in to a locked room together until they actually communicated, until they actually figured out what it was they really wanted.

“Here,” Hermione held her hand out to Draco with a fresh glass of lemonade between her fingers. He took it with a rigid sort of smile that told her he could be enjoying himself far more in other ways than this and she slipped on to the chair besides him. Legs spilling over in to his lap, she wrapped an arm around the back of his neck, cold hands tracing the beginnings of his hairline.

“You don’t have to join in you know,” He told her, eyeing the juice in her cup and sliding a hand over her the tops of her smooth thighs, “At least one of us deserves to have fun tonight.”

“Who says we’re not having fun?”

Draco glared at her, unwilling to entertain her attempts at denial.

“Fine, you're having a shit time,” She conceded, “Happy now?”

“Very,” Draco nodded, making her roll her eyes and dig her face in the soft space between his neck and shoulder. She was about to suggest they go upstairs or have a stroll around the garden, something to take his mind off what he was missing out on, but then he spoke again, low and indecisive, “He’s been staring at me all night, you know.”

“Of course he has, you’re undesirable number one now,” She tugged at his collar to straighten it even though it was Draco and she didn’t need to straighten anything, “You should talk to him before its too late. I was sort of hoping we could get an early night after we ring in 1999.”

She slid his hand lower down the back of her velvety dress and he huffed out a strained breath, “How is it possible that you almost made the idea of arguing with your best friend sound
“Because it is,” She said quietly, leaning in to press her lips against the warm spot beneath the lobe of his ear, “No more sneaking around like we’re still a secret, no more awkward parties, no more of me having to anxiously shield charm everywhere you’re near each other.”

Draco was shivering under his skin, “Wait…you shield charm me?”

“Both of you. Short tempers are volatile.”

“Ah,” He bit out, the grumble turning in to the gentlest of moans in his throat as she dragged his earlobe between her lips, sucking against the wetness of her tongue.

“Now go, you suggested it.”

He downed his lemonade like it would give him courage and climbed out from underneath Hermione, taking the short walk across the room to the corner where Ron was doing nothing that could be described as anything but *brooding*. Draco sat down. She held her breath.
“I’d carry on walking if I was you.”

It wasn’t that Draco was afraid, he most definitely was not afraid, but he hadn’t seen Weasley this close up since they were children heckling at each other through the overfilled corridors at Hogwarts. He’d never noticed how old he looked now. How old they all looked. It was in how he clenched his fingers together and tightened the soft line of his jaw, how his skin had paled against the freckles that were displaced along his skin, creeping up his neck, unlike Ginny’s which were dotted over her cheeks and nose like pin pricks that hadn’t drawn any blood.

“I’d rather sit here;” He said in a cool greeting, sitting next to Weasley on a hard oak chair that he could’ve sworn were always lining the table of the drawing room back at the Manor.

“Come to try to kill me again?”

Draco blanched, feeling his insides tighten undetectably, frozen between the comfort of the past and the unrelenting yearning he had for a future. He couldn’t help looking over at her. She had thrown her legs over the arm of the chair, clicking the toes of her heels together and twirling her thumbs anxiously as if there was a quill between them, just like she did when she was trying to write down something she couldn't quite remember.

When Hermione’s eyes darted back to his face from Weasley’s he saw in them exactly what he never realised he needed. How the slightest turn of a smile appeared at the crooked edge of her lips, a dash of smudged pale pink lipstick against her chin from all of her nervousness; the restless fidgeting and the line she’d drawn all the way up to his ear with her hot mouth. She was cheering him on. Hermione was warm and brave and good and she wanted him to be too, maybe she already thought he was, somewhere deep down underneath the shameful buzz youthful cruelty still gave him. Underneath the part of his soul that told him he’d made all the wrong mistakes. The shadowy figure that haunted his dreams, white hair wispy in the night, eyes pooled with wetness at the tip of Draco’s wand, bluer than the green poisoned night, a memory reminding him of all the reasons why he didn't deserve to have her at his touch, her lips pressed against his and her laugh in his ear.

So he turned back to Weasley, neck stiff and face dry of any indication that he had in fact not come back to attempt murdering him again, “Can’t say I don’t like how you think but I actually just wanted to have a chat.”

Silence. Weasley had that look of fiery anger brewing in him, waiting to burst out of his veins and immerse him in his rage. Draco cringed. Could he ever not fuck things up?
“That was a joke. Sorry.”

“Not a very fucking funny one,” Weasley replied, stomping out of the room, fists clenched so that he no doubt prevented himself from ruining the evening by letting it crush Draco’s nose.

But without thinking at all Draco grabbed his arm, about to ask him to stay, that he was serious and that he had no intention of murdering anyone ever. Before he could even try to open himself up, a wand was pressed against his chest and he felt himself being dragged back until his head thudded against the opposite wall and he fell to the floor with a crunch.

“Ron!”

Hermione was kneeling next to him, examining his face in flushed dismay as he tried not to think too hard about how he felt as if his spine had crumbled in to thick dust. Her arms felt warm against his sleeves as she tugged him up to his feet, letting him lean heavily against her, breathing in gulps of air that seemed to be nowhere near the throbbing of his skull.

“What the fuck, Weasley?”

Blaise had his wand out now and Draco knew how this would end. But for the first time in his life he didn’t want it to end like this again, he didn’t want everything to remain in an inescapable cycle of animosity, he didn’t want it to hurt this much anymore.

“Blaise, it’s fine. Put your fucking wand away. I’m fine.” He choked out, fingernails digging in to the fabric at his left arm.

He imagined the blood pouring from the grey eyes of the serpent, the skull splitting in two. It brought some kind of twisted relief even though he could feel himself getting weaker, slipping in to the blackness of the empty sky.

“You just got slammed against the wall, you're clearly not fine!” Pansy interrupted, clumsily getting on to her feet, wine glass spilling a little as she slammed it down on to the table and glared at Weasley, incredibly intoxicated but somehow still managing to look as dangerous as she always did.
“If you weren’t my girlfriend’s brother I’d rip you in half for that.”

And just like that Pansy’s words were stuck in her throat. Everything had gone quiet, only the drunken shouts of passersby roaming the streets from outside could be heard, ghostly echoes of an unattainable life. Ginny was staring and Hermione’s arm that was wrapped around him was crushing his insides, Hannah had put her drink down and even Luna didn’t have anything inappropriate to say. But Draco was thinking what they all were. Fucking finally.

It was Weasley who spoke first, mouth gaping like he’d lost all the strength in his jaw, “You- you’re my sisters… what?”

“I think that’s our cue to leave,” Theo mumbled, slipping out of the room past Harry who had his head in his hands, trying to comprehend how everything had gone so horribly so fast.

It was Neville who brushed past him next, following Theo’s distant footsteps as they wandered into the empty halls of the house, escaping the thick layer of tension that was closing the walls around them, suffocating them in baffled silence.

Ginny had begun quickly pulling her coat and shoes on, offering a shaking hand to her brother. But her voice remained quiet and steady and filled with an unnatural calmness that Draco could only admire, “Ron, can we go somewhere? Talk? I just, I think Draco needs to have a lie down and I don’t feel like having a domestic right now-

“You’re fucking Pansy Parkinson?”

“Oh dear God,” Hermione groaned, her head falling to Draco’s shoulder like a dead weight.

The second he could feel her hair brushing against the line of his jaw his stomach rolled over and he couldn't feel where his feet were anymore. And he was falling. Falling in to nothingness, seeing nothing in the whites of his eyes at all.
He could feel the sweep of fingertips against his hair, brushing the smooth tendrils away from his brows and for a moment, in that foggy tired haze, Draco thought it was his mother. He could see her face again, eyes dark and wide like Aunt Bella's but so much softer when she was smiling at him, whispering him to sleep in the heart of a tumultuous storm, until his eyes closed and his breathing evened and he wasn't afraid of the strikes of lightening or the hammering of the rain anymore. Until he turned over and sucked his thumb in to his mouth and dreamt of what five year olds dream of, entirely unaware of the creaking sound of Narcissa closing the door, standing for a moment with her hands pressed against the frame, making sure no sobs were escaping between the gaps.

But then the thud in his head subsided and like blown smoke, his vision cleared. He felt the thick cotton duvet beneath him and saw Hermione’s amused smile, watching him regather his consciousness like a revived kiss victim and groaned, throat dry and voice rough as sandpaper.

“Welcome back,” Hermione said, screwing the lid on a small green potion bottle and placing it on her bedside table. It was right next to the book he recognised as the Christmas present he'd scavenged high and low and all the way across the country, “You passed out.”

“I’m pretty sure I can identify concussion for myself, Granger.”

Hermione smirked, “No brain damage today then.”

“Weasley’s not that good with a wand,” He grumbled, sitting up and leaning back against the headboard, breathing deep and long.

“It was an accident you know,” Hermione said quietly, “He came and told me while I was waiting for you to wake up. He meant to prod you with his wand and tell you to fuck off but he’s always underestimated his anger and he didn’t realise he’d end up chucking you halfway across the room.”

Draco ran his fingers across the tender bump at the back of his skull, feeling it burn and throb, “Likely story.”

“He wouldn't want to severely harm you. That’s not who he is, he’s just…passionate that’s all.”

He considered retaliating, building up another blazing argument that would end up in him relapsing
and raiding Blaise’s liquor cabinet and for Hermione’s face to become harder than it already was, cheeks red as fire as she listened to him say all the terrible things he couldn't control. But she was nervous and Draco was tired and perhaps this newfound pacifism was the secret to a contented life.

“Where is everyone?”

“I have no idea where Theo and Neville went,” Hermione told him, twirling her fingers around the fringe of the blanket he was lying on top of. “Ginny dragged Ron through the fireplace and Pansy and Blaise went home. Luna and Hannah are still here though, Harry’s keeping them company.”

He nodded, trying not to grimace against her pillowcase, “How long until midnight? I don’t have to socialise do I?”

Hermione laughed, “Let me get changed and get us some hot chocolate and then we’ll ring in the new year reading, how does that sound?”

“It sounds like you’re giving me a free pass.”

“I was the one who forced you in to the situation that caused this mess, Draco, it’s the least I can do.”

She reached over to her night stand and lugged the book over on to his chest, “Pick a chapter. Not the one about the Founders though, I reread that this morning.”

“Of course you did,” Draco snorted, flipping through the wafery pages as he listened to her footsteps stride down the stairs, wondering when he’d start to blacken and bruise.
Fireworks exploded amongst the trees, bright bursts of blinding colour sizzling in the night, illuminating a city that was very much alive.

“It’s midnight,” Theo said, hearing the faint chimes of the Clock Tower from the park bench they were sitting on, listening to the erratic cheers from the crowds gathered around the streets, watching the spectacle up close as they simmered and exploded and propelled back to earth again in ashes.

“Nineteen ninety nine,” Neville murmured, more to himself than to Theo, blowing out a puff of smoke, still choking slightly.

Theo raised the orange tip of his cigarette towards the firework filled sky, “Here’s to another monumentally shitty year.”

They remained silent until the chimes from Big Ben came to a halt and the last crackles and sparkles settled on the skyline, breathing in a new year, full of possibilities not yet plagued by the stench of war.

“Do you know what you’re going to do?” Neville asked, “After Hogwarts?”

Theo sighed, it was painfully obvious he’d never had to think about it before and Neville cringed inwardly when he thought about how diligently he counted all his Galleons now.

“More of this,” He settled on, motioning towards the ghost town of the empty muggle park they were occupying, cut off from the suffocation of the outer world, “Maybe buy a holiday home or something, having a dead parent has it’s perks after all.”

He realised what a terrible mistake he’d made before he even looked across at Neville.

“Shit. Sorry.”

“S’okay,” Neville said gruffly, “I know you didn’t mean anything by it.”
“What about you anyway?” Theo asked, toying with the frames of his glasses, anxious for the conversation to shift again.

“I’m going to teach.”

“Really?”

Because sometimes Theo still saw him as the bumbling idiot at the back of every potions class, timid and terrified of making mistakes.

“Yeah, I want to stay at Hogwarts, I like it there.”

Theo smiled, knowing exactly what he was saying, even wanting to say it, “I’ll look in to cottages in Hogsmeade then.”
“Hermione,” Ron was on her as soon as she stepped into the kitchen, yawning and wrapped in a white dressing gown, searching for bread to put in the toaster.

“Is he, um, is he-

“He’s absolutely fine, conscious even, it’s not me you should be apologising to, Ron.”

He gulped, a guilty red sheen across his cheeks as he stood there stock still watching her slot bread into the toaster and down a glass of water from the tap swirling it around the sink.

Hermione couldn’t bear the silence any longer, “He’s not a monster. He wanted to apologise.”

“By making jokes about my death?”

She rolled her eyes, dipping a knife into the butter plate and spreading it thickly on the golden surface of the toast, “You started that line of conversation, Ron, take at least some responsibility.”

“He told you then.”

“Yes, we’re friends not fuck buddies, we have conversation an awful lot actually.”

There was no affection in her tone and the longer he stared at her the more infuriated she became.

“If Draco turns out to be Voldemort reincarnated or some axe murderer I will happily dump him and tell you you were right. But he’s not, he’s just a bit of an idiot trying to make the best of his mistakes, and there’s a very pleasant personality under that scowl. So do what you want, but either way I’ll be seeing you at the shop for the opening tomorrow, happy new year Ron.”

And she left, whisking away two plates of toast back up to her bedroom, prying open the curtains on the bright white morning, snow beginning to thaw and sink into slush, leaning against Draco’s warm arm, hoping that this year would be better.
There were so many people gathered around them Hermione was almost finding it difficult to breathe. The reopening of *Weasley's Wizard Wheezes* could not have gone any better. The place was packed full of customers, the press still pacing around the outskirts of Diagon Alley, looking to capture inopportune photographs, admiring the purple orange exterior of the shop, its glittering windows and the darts of sound and bursts of colour burgeoning from within- and so was Rita Skeeter.

Hermione couldn't imagine *why* Ron had thought it a good idea to invite her but there she was nonetheless. Circling the perimeter in acid pink robes, fingers quivering over the opening of her handbag like she was just dying to whip out her quill. She'd been watching her the whole time, instilling what she hoped was something like fearsome flashbacks in to the forefront of Skeeter’s brain, a cruel reminder of what happens when you fuck with Hermione Granger. But so far nothing had escalated. She'd continued to quietly twist around the place, waiting for something, anything. And Hermione had continued to stare her down, lips in a tight line in the corner near the tills, arms crossed hard against her ribs.

“Hello.”

Hermione startled, not expecting anyone to try talking to her amongst the chaos surrounding them. But Andromeda was standing besides her, the calmest expression on her face, watching the deluge of wizards stream in from the streets, fast and pacy like an unstoppable torrent of river water.

“Andromeda! What are you doing here?”

“Harry suggested I come, he said Teddy would enjoy it.”

Hermione smiled warmly, following her line of vision to the opposite end of the shop where Harry, Teddy propped up against his arm, was showing him some extravagant display, grinning and tapping against plastic vials of joke potions and watching his little face explode in to giggles. It was beautiful and tender and everything Harry deserved.

“I’d keep an eye on him if I were you, you don’t want a canary cream finding its way in to your tea cup.”
Andromeda laughed like it was a reply, like she could see the marauder manifesting within him, birthed through bloodlines thick with mischief and adventure.

“How’s your christmas been?”

Still feeling the dull echo of all the arguments and tears and wall slamming, she knew she couldn't lie, it would show too well on her face, “A little…colourful.”

“Ah, conflict?”

“How did you know?”

Andromeda smiled tightly, “You don’t grow up a muggle sympathising Black without getting in to a few dangerous disputes.”

Hermione couldn’t find her voice, she was repeating those soft words in her head again and again and trying to find some sort of meaning within them that maybe wasn't there.

“What is it?” Andromeda asked, unable to understand why Hermione Granger of all people had ran out of things to say.

“It’s nothing I- do you ever think you could have found a way to love Narcissa again?” It had poured out of her without restraint, that Granger inquisitiveness reigning over tact- but she realised what she’d said as it was coming out of her mouth and now her cheeks were warming, mouth running dry, “God, sorry, I don’t know what’s got in to me, I barely even know you.”

But Andromeda didn’t miss a beat. There was no indication that she found Hermione’s interest in her personal life offensive at all. Instead she was watching Teddy again, who was clutching a toy wand between his fingers and waving it about, a mistiness dominating the whites of her eyes as Harry made elaborate gestures as if teaching Teddy how to perform some Hogwarts Grade One spell, clapping and cheering when he decided his Godson had got it just right.

“I regret it everyday. Not spending time with her after the war. After what she did for Harry, it confirmed what I’d known all along, she had a heart somewhere. She wasn’t mad like Bella,” She licked some dampness between her curved lips, filling her lungs with a deep breath of air before she could say anything more, “I just have to accept the fact that I can change nothing now. She probably
wouldn’t have spoken to me anyway. For someone with a supposed conscience it was very hard to pin point, fear gave out every time.”

Without thinking, Hermione laughed slightly, sadly, “I know the type.”

Andromeda tore her gaze away from Teddy’s crooked grin, facing Hermione with wide eyes, glassy and damp and full of twisted feelings, “I don’t mean to breach your privacy, Hermione, but I can’t help but wonder- is all of this because you’re worried about Draco?”

Hermione choked, “How did you-

“Harry. He gets very comfortable after a few cups of tea.”

“I’ve got so much to lose, Andromeda. So much I don’t want to lose. It’s either my surrogate family or him and I shouldn’t have to make that choice.”

Hermione wasn’t sure why she was pouring her heart out to someone she’d barely known a year, rarely seen between war and Hogwarts and death and time, but there was a gentle tugging sensation plucking at her heartstrings, telling her this was something she should do.

“You won’t.” She shook her head, a dark curl swinging from behind her ear to rest against her hollow cheekbones, “Time heals great wounds. All that matters is that everyone around you is in the light, where there’s love there’s understanding.”

“I think he’d love to meet you.” Hermione said slowly.

Andromeda blinked, “Draco?”

She nodded.

“I…have thought about it. A lot. But I didn’t know if I would be welcome.”

“He’s got his friends, they’re great for him. But I think he’d appreciate some family too.”
‘We’ve spent far too long fighting on opposite sides,’” Andromeda admitted, a slight tremor jolting the fingers she had pressed against her lips.

“Exactly,” Hermione told her, slipping her hand over the one resting against the table of a Skiving Snack Box display, it was cold and pale and Hermione’s palm was warming her knuckles, “Strength is in unity, I think he’d love having you around.”
“So, what will it be?”

He was dragging his tongue down the space between her breasts, feeling the clutch of her fingers interwoven with his hair, damp and tousled from the waves of the bedsheets. Her skin was soft and it tasted salty against his mouth but he could still smell the clementine hand cream she’d lathered on just moments ago. It was sweet and hot and when he sucked a nipple between his lips and she elicited this *perfect fucking moan* he felt himself grow harder, he was *so* gone on her now.

Lifting his head from her chest and pressing a final kiss to the sweat gathered underside of her left breast he stretched back up and kissed wherever he could reach best, lips landing soft and singularly on the edge of her chin.

Hermione giggled and squirmed and Draco tried not to let it show in his expression how wonderful he thought that was, how her nose scrunched up and her head pushed back further in to his soft mattress.

“I want to taste you,” He told her, ignoring the uptake of his heartbeat at the thought of suggesting something they’d never attempted before. It wasn’t like they were innocently shy virgins, dancing around one another with nerves jumping through their spines - the first time they’d got in to bed she’d put his cock in her mouth *for fucks sake*. But he never stopped feeling this apprehension, that one day it would all abruptly end and he’d be left alone to grow cold amongst overpriced thin sheets that craved the warmth of a second body to sustain them through the wintertime.

Hermione was grinning though, biting her lip, about to say something very much worth his time. Then, suddenly, a shout rang through the entire house, angry and shatteringly loud.

“BLAISE! WHERE THE FUCK DID YOU PUT MY SHOES?”

Footsteps. The slam of a door.

“WHICH ONES? YOU OWN LIKE EIGHTY PAIRS.”

“That sounds like a great idea,” Hermione said, voice flat, no longer feeling the rush of arousal coursing through her centre.
When it seemed as though everything had simmered down in to a peaceful quiet Draco dragged his hands down her sides, shifting down the bed and tracing the soft dark skin between her thighs, feeling her tighten against him. She was sending him insane.

“THEO, SOMEONE SPILT COFFEE ALL OVER YOUR HERBOLOGY ESSAY?”

Draco groaned, slamming his forehead against the curve of her stomach and taking slow breaths so as not to lose his temper.

“They’re fucking annoying aren’t they?” He said bitterly.

Perhaps the day before they went back to Hogwarts wasn’t the best one to ignore packing in favour of a day in bed and an impressive number of orgasms after all.

“Let me get my wand,” Hermione murmured, shifting under the weight of him and reaching towards the bedside table she’d claimed as her own, dragging it out from under a NEWT textbook with far too many pages for one person to get through on their own.

It tipped and slammed on the floor with a resounding thud and then Theo was screaming down the staircase.

“I KNOW, IT WAS NEVILLE, HE WAS OVER LAST NIGHT.”

Draco leaned over the edge of the bed to grasp the spine of the book, stretching so far he felt his legs becoming dislodged, his balance failing him…

“LONGBOTTOM’S STALKING YOU IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT NOW?”

Draco fell right to the floor the second Blaise had yelled. Hermione let out an uncontrollable laugh and leaned over so that she could see him, face down and flat against the dark floor, bashing his dead softly in to the floorboards as if he’d rather jump off a bridge than live another day in this goddamn mansion.
“Are you alright?”

“Mmm.”

“IT’S CALLED FRIENDSHIP, BLAISE,” Theo screamed as Draco climbed back on to the bed, wrapping himself up in the bedsheets and cuddling in to Hermione’s side, adequately sour.

“DRACO! DRACO? WHERE ARE YOU?”

“Oh fucking hell do the silencing charm, Hermione, please,” He begged her hastily, the shrillness of Pansy’s voice growing closer before all was suddenly drained in to a dead silence.

“I don’t think you’ve ever used that word before,” Hermione teased him, “You do know your manners after all.”

“Do a locking charm too would you? A very complex and impenetrable one.”

Hermione sighed, flicking her wand about and sealing their door in a flash of purple light before throwing it across to the other edge of the bed, “Done. No more interruptions. Now are you going to give me that orgasm or not?”

“I was aiming for two actually,” He grinned, finally having something to be satisfied about, hearing every shift and breath in her amongst the quiet of his room.

“Get on with it then.”

Later Hermione would go home to the narrow, endless halls of Grimmauld Place, pack her life up again and kiss Harry goodbye, holding him close in a hug, overcome with gratitude. Because he was her best friend. Her first friend. And he came back for her every time like a brother would. He would be gone in the morning, back on the grind at the Ministry, torturing himself over veils he could not pass.

She would eat dinner next to Ron and across from Ginny in the kitchen, the radio blaring, filling in a Prophet crossword with an old muggle pen she’d found behind a flap of fabric at the bottom of her
trunk. Ginny wouldn’t even bother with conversation, scrawling furiously to complete homework she’d spent all Christmas putting off. And then they’d sleep in the same bed later that night. Light on, door open.

And the morning would come, gloomy and pale. They’d head to 9 and 3/4 like Ginny insisted. *Fuck apparating*, she’d said, *our time with this stupid old train is limited, Hermione, we’ve got to make the most of it.*

Ron would traipse silently behind them until they made it to the front of the steaming engine, the chaos surrounding them abating just a little when heads turned and kids realised who was standing right in front of them.

Ginny would attack Ron in a hug that made him laugh and then scowl, joking; *see you later you loser.*

And Hermione would be left alone with him. Standing there, arms hopelessly by her sides as she watched the light melt from his smile. He gulped thickly, stuffing his hands in to his pockets and looking at her as if this was their last goodbye.

The tension was thick between them and she broke through it and balanced on the tips of her toes, clutching him to her, arms tight around his shoulders. She thought he would hug her back, he always hugged her back, but the cool air flushed against the surface of her coat and she held on even tighter because, God, maybe this was it after all.

Pressing a single kiss were her lips were closest, the nape of his neck, almost reaching the ginger of his hair, she whispered to him quietly enough that no one else would hear.

*I love you.*

And then she was gone. Whisked back towards the Scottish Highlands and her friends - those she loved just as much as Ron. Meeting Neville and Hannah and Luna, squashing in to a carriage together and laughing the whole way there. Seeing the distinct figure of Draco as he leaned against the stone walls that were propped up behind the train platform, grinning and kissing him like it had been weeks. And they all walked up to the castle together, Draco, Pansy, Blaise and Theo - who had all apparated for obvious reasons - and everyone else. It felt like friendship, it felt like hope, bonds tightening around their hearts, drawing them all incommunicably closer than they were in the beginning, than they were in the foreign-ness of a fresh September where new ghosts floated along the windy corridors and nothing felt like it would ever remain the same.
Hatred

“Want to sit on my lap, Ginny?”

She smirked at him, “I’d rather swap seats.”

Draco huffed out a sigh that told her he was so beyond done with their bullshit, “What’s in it for me?”

“An hour of note taking and nargle discussion?”

Draco looked over to the desk where Luna was sitting, blonde hair swirling down her back, earrings made of actual mini butterbeer bottles that neither him nor Ginny could understand the point of. And Ginny understood Luna better than any of them. She was tracing colour changing ink around her parchment with a purple quill, completely unaware of Draco and Ginny two rows behind, gawping at her with both unusual respect and absolute utter confusion.

“I’m only doing this for Hermione,” He replied, feigning a poor attempt at looking cold, hard-angsty. It made Ginny laugh.

She raised her pale palms in amused surrender, “Alright, whatever you say.”

He rolled his eyes and made his way over to Luna, dropping his bag to the floor and glaring back at Ginny as if she’d made him eat an entire box of Bertie Botts. All Ginny could do was grin, basking in his bad luck, clutching her fists together against the table so that they wouldn’t shake, hard enough that her nails were turning white and sore.

It was almost torturous to watch. Pansy swung around the door, her step faltering when she realised what had happened, feet sinking in to the stone like it was quicksand, expression hard and soft and painful all at the same time.

Ginny wasn’t smiling anymore. But she was staring. Staring at the dip of her cupids bow, how it was lined with that stupid red lipstick that was far too expensive to wear to classes all day. The transparent green blue of her eyes and how they flickered with moisture, lashes blinking, clenching, trying with all their might not to give in and reveal what she was really thinking.
Stuffing a hand in her right pocket and inhaling so visibly her chest lifted up and back down again, straining the buttons tightly across her breasts, she walked over to her desk.

They were sitting so close their robes were brushing thick and fabric-y, but neither of them could look at each other. Not now they were both so close. Not now Ginny could hear Pansy’s nails scrape against the table, not now Pansy could catch glimpses of that thick red hair she’d loved pushing her fingers through. Not now. Not anymore. Maybe not ever.

“So you're still ignoring me then.”

Pansy looked up like she was shocked to hear words coming out of Ginny’s mouth, like it was abnormal, alien, like she didn’t know the texture of the pad of her tongue when it lapped against her own.

“I’m not ignoring anyone,” She shrugged, still unable to look at anything but her textbook, flipping through the pages carelessly as if she was incredibly bored.

“Yes you are.”

Ginny was staring at her. A thick sheet of black hair that shielded the warmth of her skin, her sharp eyebrows and shadowed cheeks. It was like sitting next to a stranger.

Frustrated, she sucked in a breath, “Pansy, we need to talk-

“No we don’t.”

It came out quick and cold and punched her in the throat.

“You can’t just push me away like this,” She bit back, imploring her to look at her with every pulse of blood as it boiled underneath her skin.

“Go and find someone else to fuck Ginny,” Pansy said, low and lazily, still turning the pages of her
“I don’t want Harry—”

It was hard to keep her voice low enough at the best of times and now Flitwick had just walked in and everything around them was quiet and unforgivingly hot. Draco was leaning back in his chair, trying to catch words as they tumbled from her mouth and all Ginny wanted to do was hit him with some stupid hex and drag Pansy out into the corridor so she could shout at her properly. Shout at her until her lungs ached. Shout at her until all the frustration that was aching in her bones exploded and filled the air and released her from its clutches.

“For fuck’s sake Pansy! Is this how it’s going to be now? Us walking around each other like strangers just because you’re too damn scared to admit you have feelings for me?”

Her heart was racing so fast she didn’t even care that she’d probably said too much. Revealed what she had known and held so tightly to her chest since at least Christmas Eve. When those fluttering lights that substituted for a tree doused them all in golden light. And like a disillusionment charm melting from her shoulders, she saw Pansy change, inch by inch. Nothing she hadn’t seen before. But everything she knew she would never see again.

Pansy was holding her breath. She’d frozen over her pages and the scrape of chalk against Flitwicks’ board was the only thing louder than the palpitating beats of their hearts battling against one another, both determined to win.

“I don’t,” She finally said, tilting her head up so her hair fell back against her shoulders and that rock solid unnameable expression burned in to Ginny’s fiery eyes. It was the expression she’d adorned so often over the years. Heartless, temperature below freezing and this time, conjured up solely for her.

“Well that’s a shame,” Ginny spat out, feeling her hands slamming her books in to a pile, ripping her bag from the arm of her chair, “because I had feelings for you too.”

Every head turned as she stormed out of the classroom and slammed the wooden door behind her. She could hear the murmuring gain momentum until she was sure everyone was talking about her having a mad fit and bolting out of class, face redder than her hair. She didn’t stop running until she got to Gryffindor tower and threw herself through the portrait hole. Heart thudding in her chest, about to burst from her ribs, leaving her bloody on the ground. She threw her bag across the carpet until it skidded dangerously close to the fire, throwing herself back over the couch and pressing a cushion in to her face, glad of the solitude. She wouldn’t cry, she told herself, she really wouldn’t fucking cry.
“...and then she just slammed the door and stormed out.”

“Do you think she needs us?” Hannah asked, sitting in front of the fire with her legs crossed, a dark envelope with curling corners slipping just off her lap.

Her eyes were wide and soulful but they didn’t look sad anymore, or heavy with the weight of her existence. Just full of heart and feeling and the pure sentiment of undiluted kindness.

“Give her some time to calm down and then we’ll set up camp in Gryffindor common room,” Hermione told her and Luna.

Letting her quill roll on the floor beside her essay, Hermione tipped her head up to rest against the seat of the sofa, staring up into the wide stone ceiling above them, dappled with the hues of yellow daylight streaming in from the windows. Calm encircling the unrelenting storm of their lives.

Draco snorted from the cushion besides her, taking a slow sip of his coffee, “I’m sure the rest of the seventh years will love that.”

“Not the time,” Hermione stared at him.

“No,” He admitted, smirk softening into a sullen frown as he stared across at the fire spitting orange and red behind Hannah, “you’re right.”

“They’re idiots, the both of them,” Neville added bluntly, eyes closed, leaning far back in his armchair, almost slipping off the end of it. The double Transfiguration lesson they’d just endured having evidently exhausted him.

Blaise glanced over at him, a slight smile obstructing his solid features, “Words of wisdom, Longbottom.”

“Where even is Pansy?” Hermione sighed, letting the fading sun catch her eyes, barely heating the surface of her skin.
“Murdering the giant squid probably,” Draco contributed, stretching out an arm to comb through her hair which was sprawled out over the sofa cushion, soft and heavy, “I thought she’d realise she could let herself have what she wanted eventually. But apparently it ended up with her not talking to anyone for the entire two weeks after fucking New Years Eve.”

“She talked to me.”

“Really, Theo?”

“Yeah,” He nodded meekly, “I brought her some toast and those little pots of jam. Asked her if she wanted me to put raspberry on for her and she did this little grunty thing and rolled her eyes.”

“Practically War and Peace then,” Hermione huffed, tipping her head back up to relieve the sharpness building in her spine.

Everyone was staring at her.


Her explanation obviously piqued no one apart from Draco’s interest, “Is it a good one?”

She smiled at it. How she could get him to read practically anything now as long as she was pressed up against him, enthusiastic and absorbed, the silence of night encompassing them in a sort of safe and blanketed peace.

“I’ve never actually read it.”

“Maybe we should go to London on the weekend and…give it a go.”

Blaise’s lip curled up in disgust, “Something tells me we’re not talking about books anymore.”
Hermione choked out a laugh, leaning over to the coffee table to dip her quill back in her ink pot, listening to the low chatter teeming around her as she finished off a transfiguration essay, trying not to let her mind wander too dangerously towards Ginny or Pansy.

They were steely souls. Clashing against each other and causing sparks with deep running mechanical faults. A bolt loosening until it drops and twists a stomach inside out, a wire pushed right through the heart, pinning it to a spine, bleeding it out, *almost* impossible to wrench out.
Hopeless

“I’m not surprised, although I hoped you would be murdering the giant squid.”

“I’ve tainted your little hideout now have I?” She replied bitterly. Her back was to him, hair whipping in the wind, the oozing glow of sunset melting around her like a red hot burning halo, like she was some sort of underground goddess.

“Totally,” Draco played along, “Me and Hermione are going to have to read in the common room now- where there are other people. It’s a horrifying thought.”

He heard her breath bundle up in to a short suppressed laugh, watching as a hand twisted out from the cross of her arms and covered her mouth. Feeling it was safe to venture a little closer he walked up to the railings, standing next to her, careful not to catch her eye, watching the faint dots of movement darting across the quidditch pitch, the rippling blackness of the lake, flecked with orange diamonds. It was freezing cold, their breaths blowing in to the evening like puffs of smoke, the kind of clear January day that felt like everything was being cleansed, letting you start over again, giving you another chance you didn't deserve.

“What are you doing here?”

Pansy said it like she was tired of his presence, annoyed at it, as if she wanted to shrug him off like a bad cold. Draco knew better.

“You know why,” He told her simply, daring to shift his eyes to the side profile of her face. Her eyes were blinking against the bitterness of the chill, mascara blurring and hands shaking like nothing he’d ever seen before.

“Don’t say anything about it,” She whispered, “Please.”

Draco ignored her, “You’re free, Pans. You don’t have to hide away anymore.”

In his words he wanted her to know numerous things. That who she loved didn't make her dirty like her mother insinuated, because it hurt her sometimes, even if she didn't like to admit it. That there was no target on her back, no Dark Lord to plunge his wand point in to her arm and brand her with a black scar. That she deserved to heal like she’d helped them heal. All the chastising and blunt
honesty, the way she took care of all three of them like they were brothers. In a way she didn't need to, but they were so grateful for. She deserved to give herself the chance to open up like a lotus flower, to inhale the freshness of an unpredictable future, to let herself be gently pushed down the stream by the softness of their hands. Because she didn't need to pretend to be hard and cold and cruel all the time. She was a bitch, thats why they loved her, but she didn't need to use it like an iron shield.

She looked at him, eyes watery and overflowing, lip quivering, throat tightening, the picture of unimaginable grief. He’d only ever seen her like this during the war. And even then she’d lock them in the bathroom so no-one else saw the tears that soaked his shoulder. She bit her lip until it bled across the sleeve of his shirt so no one would hear her heart as it teared apart and deteriorated, nuts and bolts filling her lungs until she breathed every day like a broken mechanism.

“Come here,” He blurted, a soft hardness in his voice as he pulled her strongly against his chest and grounded her as she shook inside his arms.

Draco was choking up. He could feel his throat closing, eyes burning behind their lids as he shut them tight, chin against her hair. Pansy was their rock, the one who tamed Blaise and repaired Draco and pushed Theo outside the space he occupied in his head. Seeing her crumple like paper with her head hard against his chest made him feel a deep dark sort of sadness he couldn't ever remember feeling for himself. Because he loved her so much. With all his heart. Everything that burned inside of him was because of her - and now a little bit because of Hermione too - and he wanted to take it all away from her. The tears and the pain and the tremors.

“You’re going to be okay,” He declared, trying his best to smooth the shake of his voice and halt the tremble in his lip, “Everything is going to be okay.”

Then suddenly she seemed to go silent and Draco thought she had calmed down. So he pulled back from her, hands around her arms as he looked down at her expression. But something was wrong. Her eyes were spinning back in to her head, a bloodshot white, legs weakening, and he caught her around the waist just before she hit the floor.

He was paralysed, completely dumbfounded, with Pansy unconscious in his arms, the wetness of her tears still streaked across her cheeks. Like rain against against a church window, blurring amongst the black of her eyes and sharp red of her lips, they slid slowly down her lifeless face.
“Why isn’t she awake yet? Draco, why isn’t she awake?”

“I don’t fucking know Blaise, ask Madam Pomfrey.”

Hermione could hear the voices, loud and echoey against the quiet of the darkening evening as she, Ginny, Luna, Hannah, Neville and Theo burst through the doors of the hospital wing.

Panting, Hermione ran to him, capturing his frame in her arms, glimpsing the soft red skin beneath his eyes, “Draco. Theo told us, what’s-

But then Hermione turned her head and the curtains were parted, fluttering a little with the movement whirling around them.

Pansy looked like stone. If it wasn't for the frail rise and fall of her chest Hermione wouldn't have known there was any life left in her. Her skin was pale like ivory, not flushed and warm and golden anymore and Hermione knew what she’d find if she slipped a hand in to those robe pockets that her palms were half covering, protective of her secrets even when she wasn't awake to know which ones she should be guarding.

“We came as fast as we could,” Ginny added, “what the hell happened?”

Draco was stuttering, “She just collapsed, I don’t know.”

“Why the hell is she not waking up?”

“Blaise, like I said, I don’t-

But then the curtains ripped open and Madam Pomfrey looked around them. There was a bitter purse to her lips and Hermione knew she was counting them, trying to restrict them and push them outside but upon seeing their faces, something in her couldn't find her voice, didn't have the heart to tell them to get out.
“An overdose like that is usually lethal, Mr Zabini,” She continued steadily, stuffing a pillow in to its sleeve and sliding it underneath Pansy’s lolling head, “We’ve just got to wait it out. Calming draughts are strong things.”

“Then why the fuck did you give her so many?”

She turned sharply to Blaise, “You’re doing her no good screaming at me. I would never prescribe a student that much medication, she wasn't getting it from here.”

“No,” Hermione sniffed, her throat sticking like glue, “It’s this apothecary in London. She stocks up on the weekends.”

“You knew? You knew she was trying to off herself and you didn't tell us?”

“Blaise, it wasn't like that. I found her stash in September and I tried to warn her but it was helping her cope and we weren't friends then and…I didn't know what to do.”

Hermione had never seen him look like that before. Venomous, lethal, out for blood. It punched her in the stomach, made her bleed from the inside out.

“For someone so intelligent you make an awful lot of stupid decisions.”

“That’s enough,” Theo whispered, one of his hands finding Blaise’s, squeezing, “We can argue later. It’s Pansy who’s important right now.”

Without another word being said Ginny moved. Softly, instinctively towards the bed. She rubbed her thumb to catch a smudge of lipstick that had smeared beneath Pansy’s lower lip. Not saying a thing, she trailed a warm hand down her arm and clasped their fingers together, sitting besides her on the lumpy mattress. No one stopped her.

“Did you know about this, Ginny?” Draco asked.
“No,” Her voice was soft, almost like it had been caught up with the wind, a sad song that catches the ashes and embers of the dead, “I knew she was struggling. Hell, we all are-


“But I didn’t know about this.”

And so it commenced. A twisted waiting game through the blue of the night. Waiting for something. Anything. Waiting for a miracle.
It was mid morning now and Pomfrey had finally recovered from her brief bout of sympathy and kicked them out. Only Draco was allowed to stay, sitting in a cold metal chair, head in his arms against the table besides Pansy’s bed, watching her breathe with heavy eyes.

There hadn’t been another thought in his mind but her since yesterday evening. The things they’d told each other, the things they were still too afraid to tell, the things they’d not done yet, the things they’d possibly never get to do. When Draco used to see his future it was dark and solitary, the rest of his life like drowning in quicksand slowly, feeling every nerve in his body as it was dragged in to oblivion by the deluge of his mistakes. But even then Pansy was there. He wasn’t sure if she was drowning with him too. Or if she was hanging on by the tips of her fingers to the dry cusp of land before the sand consumed all. But she was there. Even though his future no longer seemed as bleak - Hermione was there and somehow that made colour a little easier to see - he couldn’t picture it whilst Pansy was lying under thin hospital sheets in her own muddy minded coma, sustained only by her beating heart.

One of the wide doors squeaked against the floor as it was opened and left to swing back in to place. Footsteps followed.

“I brought you some food.”

Hermione was standing there with toast in her hands and her ridiculously heavy bag open over her shoulder, book spines oozing out between the straining stitches.

“I’m not hungry.”

His voice was rough and gritty and he wondered how long it had been since he’d last had any water.

“Fine, you’re having this though,” She threw a bottle of pumpkin juice at him and sullied with tiredness, he barely caught it between his hands.

“Sorry,” She cringed, looking around for a chair and summoning one so she could sit next to them, intertwining her fingers through the cool threads of Draco’s hands, “How is she?”

“Nothings changed. Pomfrey says she’s stable. But you know,” He went on bitterly, feigning
something like twisted delight, “Pans always gets what she wants and it looks like this time she succeeded anyway, even if she’s technically still alive.”

Hermione brushed her unoccupied fingers through his hair and tugged at the nape of his neck, kissing his forehead full of heartfelt softness and letting him lean against her shoulder. He sunk in to her, breathing in the fresh soapy scent of her hair against his forehead, the swirl of fingertips she dragged up and down his arm as he shifted slightly, wrapping himself around the slight thickness of her waist. It grounded him. He didn’t understand how now he felt so safe.

But then there was something like a thick groan in the air and his stare was locked on Pansy. Her eyelids were flickering, fighting to open, fingertips trying to lift the solid weight of her bones.

He reached over to her, taking her hand, “Can you hear me, Pans?”

Hermione had called for Madam Pomfrey but he couldn’t even think about what would happen next. All he cared was that her eyes were opening and her breath was deepening and she was fucking alive, properly alive, not a shell of someone who’s veins ran with her blood but now blinking herself back in to the world, rising hazily from a tainted sleep.

“Mmm, -course,” She slurred, eyes still lazy and fighting against the urge to close, “For the record. Wasn’t trying…to kill myself - you - absolute…twat”

Draco laughed. A watery, unstoppable, genuine laugh that made his voice crack and his vision blur and burn.

“That’s a disappointment.”
Babysitting

“I won’t say anything else on the matter,” Hermione told her, cross legged on the floor next to her bed and pouring through an obnoxiously large pile of textbooks to find the right one, “I just think you should think it through, it could be really good.”

Pansy groaned. She’d been back in her dormitory for three hours and it already felt like nothing had changed, like she totally hadn’t almost died and come back to life by the skin of her teeth.

“I don’t see you forcing Draco in to rehab.”

“I’m not forcing anyone. I just think you should keep your options open.”

“I’d rather not,” She frowned, toying with the edges of her sheets, “Just got to not overdose again, right?”

Hermione dropped her books and turned to Pansy, hands falling to her knees as a long exhausted sigh left her lips. She was looking at Pansy with some sort of bizarre motherly affection beneath her rolling eyes.

“Talk to us. Draco, Ginny, me, it doesn’t matter. Just please don’t die, believe it or not it would genuinely pain me.”

“That’s a new one,” Pansy was grinning a little and she couldn’t seem to suppress it.

“Besides, I’m kicking Group Therapy off again next week. We should do themed sessions. We could totally start with addiction.”

Hermione was being entirely serious.

Pansy considered telling her to fuck off but she wasn’t in the mood for any type of drama because, surprisingly, headaches and sickness were a thing she had to deal with now, along with Pomfrey’s nagging and leaflets about muggle rehabilitation and their marvellous mental health work. Between that, Hermione’s unnerving determination to help her and the way Draco had insisted on sleeping on
the floor of their dormitory later that night because he ‘felt like a change’, left her feeling like a spoon fed child, impossible to find any peace because everyone was so damn worried about her hitting her head on the fireplace or scalding her hand in a hot drink. Deep down though, beneath the withdrawal symptoms and the discomfort and the bad dreams, Pansy knew they meant well.

So she didn't tell Hermione where to shove her Group Therapy idea, instead she smiled thinly and forced.

“That sounds fantastic, Hermione.”
The Funeral

It was raining. The skies were sliced open, pouring down their heartache and tears, hanging weakly in the dullness of the day. It had been a short service. Small and full of love but still so brutally cold.

Now they were circled around sinking ground, mud slashing at their heels, watching the rain from the sky flood the gold clasped dips in the hinges of Alice’s hearse.

Augusta was holding Neville’s hand. There were no tears, just a dark and empty hollowness in the silhouettes of their bowed heads. It was perhaps difficult not to have prepared for this when it had been 18 years since your Son and Daughter In Law had properly lived; breathed and laughed and understood, been terrified and brave and triumphant, sad and forgiving and compassionate. Now every aching feeling that crept up their spines were dull and weak stabs, or in Alice’s case, stiff and still underneath grass that was slowly beginning to green again.

Pansy shook, although no one was entirely sure it was because of the lifeless body beneath the ground. Surrounded by Ginny, Luna, Kingsley and every other person they’d ever known or cared for in their lives, Hermione held Harry and Ron’s hands, it seemed that animosity was forgotten when a war victim was being buried in the ground. Draco stood with Pansy, Blaise and Theo, sandwiched tight against each other under an obnoxiously large umbrella. Hermione caught Draco’s eye and she pretended she didn’t notice the quiver in his lip, remorse so heavy in his heart it almost brought him down to his knees. Hermione let the rain mix with her tears. Hot and cold and blistering the edges of her eyes.

It was a cruel day. A dark day. The day they lay another piece of a long forgotten past to rest.
I may or may not be running on no sleep and amidst a million and one exams. Just checking in to thank you for all the lovely comments which I read and adore whenever I'm not crying in to a textbook. Lots of love, L X

“That’s the most depressing funeral I’ve ever been to.”

“What? Did you dance on the graves at all the other ones?” Ginny smirked a little, wrapping her jacket tighter around her waist and tugging at the sleeves so they’d cover her frozen hands.

Pansy breathed thoughtfully for a moment, “I’ve never seen so many people care before, I guess.”

It was a stupid idea and they’d have to be rushed to Madam Pomfrey in the morning to get rid of their head colds, but the bark of an upturned tree lay at the mouth of the lake and somehow they’d found themselves sitting before it, looking out on to the calm black waters, talking like everything was normal again.

“There’s a first time for everything,” Ginny said softly, diverting her gaze from the sloping mountains and sloshing ripples of the lake to Pansy’s face, which was glowing in the moonlight, red lipped, paler than before, neglected by her own harsh feelings.

Pansy didn’t look at her. She was rigid. Like a figure made from glass, a fragile and beautiful work of art. But she brushed a hand over Ginny’s thigh, finding her fingertips and clasping her hand tightly- as if afraid one of them might pull away, as if letting Ginny know that it wouldn't be her doing the pulling away this time.

Blanketing her other hand over the one Pansy had in her lap and lifting their fists to her lips, she kissed her knuckles. Nervous and cautious, completely unlike herself, heart thumping a little louder than the waves when they washed up on the shore, spreading across the riverbed before slipping back again in to the deep.

Then, suddenly, Pansy spoke very quickly. Spoke like it was causing her pain.
“I have flashbacks.”

“I figured,” Ginny replied, trying to keep her tone neutral, afraid to puncture whatever it was that abruptly made Pansy feel so safe.

“Calming draughts, dreamless sleep, they’re the only way I know to block them out.”

Gulping, her throat sounding like sandpaper, she finally looked at Ginny in the eyes. Her expression was unfamiliar. There was something so cold in the icy stillness of her features, but so open and painful at the same time. It was as if she had got down on her knees and wrenched her heart out of her chest, showing Ginny the missing bolts and the split wires with an attitude of morbid acceptance, acceptance that this could not be changed. But she couldn’t not talk about the dagger beneath her breast for any longer, because it was uncomfortable, poking up between her ribs, pressing against the thin sheet of her skin, raring to rupture.

Ginny shook her head, “Not the only way.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Pansy asked her incredulously, an unconscious tear sloping down the hollow of her cheekbone.

With her thumb, Ginny soaked it up against Pansy’s lips, letting her fingers stay there, rubbing the saltiness of her sadness against her stained mouth, getting her own hands covered in lipstick no doubt.

In a reply, which could not be communicated through speech- which Ginny didn't think Pansy would even want to hear her say aloud anyway, she leaned in to her side, letting her hands cup Pansy’s face with a degree of delicacy so abnormal to them both.

She kissed her; slow and soft, trying to fit everything she wanted to say into the touch of their lips.

*I have feelings for you, I want this, let me in, let us all in, put the damn vials down and let us distract you instead. Play chess with me, flip through one of those abhorrently dull magazines and let me lie against your chest. Be angry with me, be sad with me, laugh with that lopsided smirk, say witty things to me at breakfast, say dirty things to me after dark. Give yourself a chance to live. Give yourself happiness. Let me share in it too.*
And when they broke apart and Pansy dropped her head in to the hollow of Ginny’s shoulder, wrapping her arms around her middle and breathing out long and heavy like a sigh of great relief, Ginny knew that things might be okay. They would be hard, there was no doubt in that. There would be fighting and crying and anger and sorrow and all the intricacies of human emotion would fill them up and drain them again and again. But maybe they would still walk through this life as battle hardened warriors, reliant on each others strength, reliant on hope.
“McGonagall says I need to focus on History of Magic so I can prove I’m knowledgable about legislation.”

Hermione dipped her quill in the ink, letting it splatter dots of liquid black against a pale sheet of paper before going back to her essay.

“You’re knowledgable about legislation anyway, what with that whole Rita Skeeter tirade,” said Ginny, head bent over a yellowing tome, dust particles swirling around the lightness of her hair, swearing under her breath every time she had to flip back and double check a chapter for whatever it was she was trying to find.

“Which is still on going.”

“You know cursing her is a lot less work?” Pansy added.

“But then the wrong one of us ends up in Azkaban.”

“Well I just need A’s in everything so I don’t look like an idiot,” Ginny sighed, leaning back from her book, clearly exhausted, slamming it shut and pushing it in Pansy’s direction.

Hermione looked up from her essay, accidentally blearing her neat handwritten conclusion with the drag of her elbow.

“You’re aiming higher than that though? I mean you have so much potential, your spell work is more than enough to get you an O in charms.”

“The only thing I’m aiming for is not to have an academic breakdown by June, right Hannah?”

“Right,” Hannah nodded, staring somewhere in to the distance, the tall white window and the swirling winds outside, “I just need A’s too.”
Ginny frowned, “What, you’re going in to quidditch?”

“No, course not. Muggle university.”

“Muggle uni-? Why?”

“I want to be a human rights lawyer.”

“You can do that in the wizarding world, you know that don’t you?”

“Yeah. But this way I can change it up.”

Pansy laughed, “Sounds like a lot of work I wouldn’t care enough to do.”

Her fingernails were tapping along the table in a mindless rhythm, her other hand stretched left out of view and looking very much as if it was clasped in Ginny’s. Hermione suppressed a smile, tipping her head down to her parchment with sweeping wand work that made the ugly smear of ink disappear into nothingness.

“Well it’s obvious why Hannah’s doing it, isn’t it?”

Everyone turned to Luna. She was standing on her chair reaching for the higher shelves of leather backed books, running a finger along the spines of gold lettering, hair spilling down her back. That serene smile was on her face, the one that made her look as if she was in the middle of some sort of drug trip.

“Because she doesn’t want to be homeless?” Pansy retorted like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Luna shook her head, “Because of Ernie.”

“Luna,” Hermione whispered, looking over at Hannah cautiously, waiting for something terrible to occur.
“No, no it’s okay. Luna’s right,” Hannah admitted, unable to look at them as she spoke, distracting herself by unravelling the plaits in her hair and folding them over again and again, “I’m doing it to protect people .... people like me.”

“Hannah, that’s incredible,” Hermione breathed.

It was sometimes difficult to comprehend that the girl sitting before her, building a future on the foundations of her tumultuous not-so-long-ago-past, was once a ghost to them. Floating between rooms under the iron hold of a boy with anger like a storm.

“What about you Pansy?” Hannah was desperate to divert the attention far away from her, “After Hogwarts.”

Pansy shrugged, making it obvious to everyone she’d never thought too hard about it before, “Um, a lot of shopping?”

“You could get a job you know,” Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Not really my thing, working.”

“Of course it isn’t.”

Grabbing Luna unexpectedly by the arm as she made her way to sit back down, Ginny threw hers around Luna’s shoulders, beaming like a fool, “And Luna’s gonna be the best Quibbler editor there ever was.”

“She’ll be so good Hermione will start reading it,” Pansy added, feigned delight smothering her features.

Hermione cringed, “No offence, Luna.”

“It’s okay,” She sounded satisfied, unravelling herself from the maze of Ginny’s arms and sitting
back down next to Hannah, “We can’t all be open minded Hermione.”

Colour flushed Hermione’s face and it was obvious to all of them she was trying her hardest not to retaliate with some stupid philosophy, facts or figures that none of them would care about.

Suddenly, Ginny was laughing deliriously at her, pouring her head down on the desk as to not give Pince a reason to provide her with a lifelong library ban. Hermione wondered if Luna hadn’t been the only one taking illegal substances that day and bit her lip, trying to god to be serious and level headed as one by one, the rest of them began to grin, caught up in the insanity of Ginny’s laughing fit. The twisting branches of leafless trees were creeping in to the window view above her head, bright sun splashing in to their eyes as they tried their best not to get snagged by the contagiousness of mindless, meaningless laughter, wondering if those hot rays of white light were meant solely for them.
The Duality Of Family

Hermione leaned against the closed door, ear pressed to the wooden surface, listening. Everything seemed quiet apart from the crackle stemming from the common room fire, glowing like a lightbulb that could be seen at the end of the corridor. So she grasped the handle and pushed down, stepping silently in to the dormitory.

Draco’s head raised immediately and Hermione felt relief flood through her, gesturing for him to close the curtains around his bed as she passed Theo, snoring softly in the blue light.

Slipping behind the now drawn curtains she tugged her wand out of the waistband of her pyjama shorts, whispering a quick *silencio*.

He didn’t say anything to her until she’d wrapped herself around him and pulled the duvet up to their shoulders, settling between the softness of feathered pillows and Draco’s bare skin.

“Can’t sleep?”

It wasn’t an accusation but Hermione still lifted her eyebrows, “You can’t either.”

“Mmm,” He murmured, thick and low with the weight of drowsiness in his throat, “It’s kind of our thing. Do you want to go and read?”

All she did was dig herself deeper between the mattress and his chest, sighing out softly between the gentle gap of her lips, “S’nice here.”

And she could’ve sworn she heard in the little hum he made, a sleepy and almost infatuated smirk as if he was looking down at her peaceful face and admiring the calmness of her features.

They soaked in the silence for what felt like an hour, Hermione hearing the slow, steady thud of his heart against her ear, letting it lull her in to some sort of purgatory between wakefulness and sleep where her thoughts blurred at the edges.

“I got a letter today,” Draco said suddenly, breaking her out of her trance.
“From who?”

Hermione didn’t know what to think. Everyone he cared about was here. She was imagining Ron stamping his sodden boots back to Grimmauld Place after the funeral, writing some venomous letter and withholding it until he could wait no longer, until he was fit to burst with rage.

“Andromeda.”

“Oh, oh,” Hermione murmured, her heart clenching in a tight and grateful way, “What did she want?”

“For us to stay with her at Easter.”

Now her eyes were open. Lashes blinking against the paleness of his chest, seeing only a dark, bodiless void where the hangings were supposed to be lined up around them.

“And you said?” She prompted, unable to detect if the flatness in his voice was anger or indifference.

“What did you say to her, Hermione?”

It wasn’t anger, not indifference, it was hopelessness. A cocktail of regret and sadness and pure heaviness thrumming against his vocal chords.

“She asked about you, I said she shouldn’t hesitate in reaching out.”

He didn’t reply for a short while, mulling over it all slowly in his head, but she didn’t miss it when he pulled his arm away from her and tucked it behind his back and out of view.

“I can’t. I. I don’t even know her.”

“You could get to know her,” She told him softly, “Teddy would have a cousin around, he’d love
that."

I’ll be there.

Draco snorted, “Like he hasn’t got enough family with all of those gingers.”

“You and Teddy are really related though, if he grows up with you and Andromeda around he’ll know he’s loved.”

He seemed to understand where she was going with this long and looping line of thought.

“Blood doesn’t mean family, Granger,” he said darkly.

“No, I know, we had totally different childhood experiences, I’m sorry. It’s just, it’s a different kind of love, not better or worse, just different, Teddy deserves that authenticity.”

And if she closed her eyes she was asleep on the sofa, threadbare blanket draped over her body, television switched off. Two soft voices were echoing from the door of the kitchen which was adorned with her crayon heavy scribbles. Her eyes blurred.

When he didn’t reply Hermione tried again, “Think about it?”

Draco shifted uncomfortably, flipping them around and getting twisted in the duvet until he was satisfied, half on top of Hermione, head resting against her breasts, the tendrils of his hair against the tip of her nose. She kissed his head, rubbing a hand down the expanse of his back, feeling him loosen under her touch.

And then, just as dawn was beginning to break and the ashy white of a new day breached their awareness, Draco murmured softly, almost unintelligibly, in to the dip of her hip where he had found himself closest to after minutes of twisting and turning, “Thank you.”

And Hermione smiled slightly, eyes tight shut, pretending she hadn’t heard.
I HAD A REALLY LOVELY COMMENT IN MY INBOX BUT I DELETED MY PSA AND LOST IT BEFORE I COULD READ IT. WHOEVER YOU ARE, THANK YOU. THERE WAS A HEART EMOTICON SO I'M GUESSING YOU WERE REALLY NICE TO ME. (I'm an idiot)

“I can’t stay and chat for long, quidditch practice,” Ginny said the minute their thighs brushed the bench.

It was just past seven and the wintry daylight was breaking, soft peaches melting in to ice blue. Sleet and hail falling midway from the ceiling, dissolving slowly in to dust.

Blaise was nearing Gryffindor table - a very rare occurrence in itself - his expression even more resentful than usual. When he gave a second year a dirty look and stood over him until he got the message that his seat was wanted, Hermione couldn’t help but smirk.

“Morning,” She smiled brightly, “Got over yourself yet?”

Hermione followed the tiny bewildered second year with her eyes, watching him place himself right at the opposite end of the table with a group of first year girls, seeming thankfully unscarred.

Avoiding all eye contact, he poured himself a bitter mug of black coffee.

“I’d be sitting with the Slytherins if anyone I actually liked was there.”

Ginny frowned, “What’s this about?”

“I stayed with Draco last night and may or may not have made Blaise jump out of his skin sneaking out this morning.”
But Blaise quickly interrupted, “I did not jump out of my skin.”

“Please,” Hermione was straining his temper like a very snobbish, uptight elastic band, “you screamed.”

At this point Draco seemed to be biting his lip instead of his cereal, infinitely amused as he thought about it, how Blaise had rolled over at just the wrong time and almost thrown himself out of bed like a mentally deranged kneazle, screaming at the top of his lungs.

“Sorry Granger but for some reason I didn’t expect a random stranger watching me sleep at six in the morning.”

“Oh shut up, I wasn’t watching you sleep, you just happened to wake up when I was looking in your direction.”

“It’s because you’re a girl, Hermione,” Draco grinned, “quite a rarity in our dorm.”

“Do you want me to mention what you did with Roger Davies in fifth year?” Blaise pointed at him threateningly with the silver edge of his knife, “Or was that a secret?”

Draco’s face fell.

Ginny froze, cheeks flushing feverishly, “You did what with Roger Davies?”

Amongst the laughter and dispute enveloping them, owls began to soar through the wide windows and down in to the hall, dropping letters and brown papered parcels down like streams of rain.

Hermione, trying hard not to collapse as Blaise mentioned something vague about spiked drinks at the Yule Ball and bi-curiosity, dug in to her robes for spare change. Ginny had already snatched the Prophet the muddy owl had left and was scanning the front page slowly like it was written in a vague foreign tongue.

“Anything good?” Hermione asked, knotting the change bag and releasing the owl in to the open air again.
“What?” Ginny was startled, “No, it’s shit.”

Impulsively, she threw the paper behind her so it came apart on the floor underneath the benches, a mess of black and white sheets.

Hermione’s eyes widened, “What was that for?”

“I just don’t think it’s worth reading today. All boring. Something about Goblins. Who even likes Goblins?” Her pink mouth was in an unalterable straight line, “I know I don’t.”

“Accio Prophet.”

A distorted jumble of news, it flew in to Draco’s hands.

Ginny leaned over the pots of jam with alarming speed, “Draco, don’t-

But it was too late, he had it far out of her reach.

‘Merlin,’” Blaise breathed, arm resting on Draco’s shoulder so he could skim the page, “She doesn’t stop does she?”

“What?” Hermione asked again, a cold weight settling like a heavy stone at the base of her ribs, “Who? Is this Skeeter again? Draco, give it to me. Now-

Prying it from his hands - he was putting up a ridiculous fight - Hermione came face to face with herself and Draco, black, white and faded figures, slipping in to the prefects bathroom. She was laughing and rolling her eyes, pretending to be tired of whatever bitter comment he’d made. Draco’s hand was disappearing behind the heavy oak door, the only recognisable aspect of him being the tender tattoo of his past.

She remembered it in blazing colour, it had only happened days ago. Neville and Theo were passed out in front of the fire, chess board between them, so Hermione had suggested reading in the bath
instead. They’d stayed there, tender, soapy and warm until the water stiffened and the pages were
damp at the edges and they could read no more. It had been one of her better memories since, the
softened edges of the windows bathed in candle light like a flushed golden backdrop brushed
delicately between the grooves and ridges. In a discreet and soft way she thought of it as an almost
romantic event.

The title read War Hero Under the Influence of Death Eater and amongst the ridiculously expansive
article comments such as love potion and dark wizard flickered in to sight. Hermione felt sick.

“Who took it?”

“That’s what we’d all like to know,” Ginny scowled, grabbing her things and climbing quite literally
over the table so she was at Hermione’s side, unaffected by the groans and complaints voiced around
her and the cheerio that hit her in the back of the head. If any of the teachers had thrown her horrified
looks she’d definitely ignored them.

“Fuck Rita Skeeter,” Ginny hugged her hard, “If Draco really was unhinged and evil he wouldn't
have been able to get this close to you, believe me.”

Draco laughed bitterly in acknowledgement, uninterested in retorting with any of the twisted
sarcastic comments tucked away in his repertoire.

Ginny smiled at him warmly - unusually - for a second as if she was considering something
important, then lunged at him with a hug, grinning at the sour look that singed his features.

“Never do that again,” He mumbled, brushing off his sleeves as if she’d left residue against his shirt.

“You’re one of us now, Malfoy, tough luck.”

Whipping her head around to Blaise and making an obscenely exaggerated gesture of arms
widening, she inched towards him.

“Don’t you fucking dare, Weasley.”
He brandished a cold sausage in her direction. Ginny snorted.
“Is the Minister free?”

It had been furiously cold outside and the wide marble walls of the Ministry made it no warmer. Not even with the flares of green fire and the sheer capacity of people inside of it, filling up the corridors and office blocks and lifts like an effervescent liquid.

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No,” Hermione was watching her slowly, feeling her way through the dark, “but...he’s a friend, I’d just like a quick word. I’m assuming he has a moment?”

The old lady shook her head and it reminded Hermione so vibrantly of Umbridge that she could almost hear the clacking of hooves and a hollow whining scream.

“Alright. Thank you. No problem,” she said tightly, turning around as if about to disappear down the corridor before whipping out her wand faster than the old bitch could handle and letting the door open with an *alohamora*, swinging through before she could be stopped.

“Hermione!”

Hermione cringed. Kingsley *was* there, at his desk, a cup of tea with a flickering DMLE logo at his side. But so was Arthur Weasley. When he saw her he jumped out of his seat and gathered the paperwork that had been strewn over the oak desk.

“I’m so sorry, Arthur. Don’t leave, I’ll just wait outside. If your *damn secretary* would’ve told me—

Kingsley ducked his head, hiding something of a smile.

“It’s okay, Hermione,” Arthur told her, shoving his glasses back on to his nose lopsidedly, arms full
of violet sheets, “I have to get this stuff to the Auror’s anyway. The Death Eaters that are on the run have been cursing muggle stuff left right and centre.”

“Ah. Sorry again.”

Once the door had closed silence swallowed them up. She’d never been in the Minister’s office before and the size of it floored her. All dark expensive wood and gold framed portraits, a huge blazing fireplace like the open mouth of a dragon, the leather of the nearby chairs glistening with its orange light. It had the grandeur of a pureblood mansion but unlike Theo’s, without the undertone of decay. Where the black polish had dulled and faded in to ashy sorrow, Kingsley’s office shined with prestige and hope. Something about being between the walls, overlooking the wide charmed window and the hot white sun as it melted over the London skyline made Hermione feel powerful. Strong. Because within the hands of the Minister lay the capability to empower, the capability to enrich the lives of all the people Hermione had seen shunned in her short years in this baffling and indescribable alternate world that she now called her home. And now, like a silent prayer, she made some far away commitment in the core of her mind, some sort of vague promise to bring back what those dark years had turned to smoke.

Kingsley stretched a hand towards the vacant seat.

“Please, I know you have a lot to say to me.”

“Yes, I do.”

And like that, her thoughts were beyond Arthur and the Death Eaters ruling the muggle streets and that awful secretary and she was fishing a newspaper out of her bag and slamming it down in front of him.

“This has to stop.” She said firmly.

Kingsley looked at her for a long moment as if pondering how to formulate a phrase that wouldn’t make her even more mad at him. Then he slashed his wand in the air and two glasses and a jug of water slid towards them, scraping against the table like the drag of broken glass through concrete.

He passed her the glass. A peace offering. And Hermione stared at it. Then back at him. Was he being serious?
“If you’re not bothered I’ll find a way to do it myself. I’ve been working on it for a while now. There are loopholes everywhere,” she told him steadily, reaching out for the glass and swilling the water around, watching it slosh up against the sides like chaotic waves in a stormy sea.

“We can’t do that, it would be no use. Do you honestly think three months in Azkaban because of one little slip up would stop her from prying in to everyones lives for good?”

Hermione felt her fuse sparking, stinging her skin as it shortened and blazed and filled her up with so much heat it was almost gleaming in the whites of her eyes.

“She’s blackmailing kids at Hogwarts now.”

“I gathered. No doubt the child of a friend, bribing them with extra pocket money.”

She hated how steadily he spoke. How collected he was, how unnerved it all seemed to make him.

“And that doesn’t bother you?” Hermione retorted, “That we’ve just saved the country from corruption and you’re letting some of it slither back in?”

“Hermione, calm down-

“I won’t calm down! How can anyone with a conscience be calm about this? It’s exploitation, it’s unethical!”

His voice filled every corner of the room and the surface of her water glass rippled with his presence, “I’m not saying I wont do anything! Will you just listen to me?”

She’d never heard him shout like that. Nodding, breathless and dry mouthed, she sunk back in to the seat of her chair.

“Thank you,” he breathed, steadying himself like a child stumbling off a turbulent fairground ride, disoriented and trying so desperately to control and suppress every little emotion bubbling up inside of him, “Loopholes wont work. But new laws will-
“That’s impossible, though,” Hermione interjected, leaning forwards in her chair again, unable to settle down, “There’s never been any proper human rights legislation about privacy before. The Wizengamot would never accept it. It’d be turned down out of fear of the unknown.”

“Not if we’re careful about it.”

Hermione was lost, “Come again?”

“We need to build up a strong bill. One that will get us exactly what we want without risking Skeeter and anyone else from going back to their old ways again. We need to be specific in a way that will get us what we need without upsetting the Court.”

“I’m sorry,” Hermione interrupted, baffled, “We?”

“I want you to work on it with me, Hermione, you’re more than capable.”

Her eyes widened, “I’m not qualified for that.”

“Think of it as work experience.”

“…Really?”

Kingsley nodded. Hermione blanched.

“I- I don’t know what to say.”

“Thank you, maybe?” He had that warm welcoming smile on his face again, the one that had made them all comfortable around him when they were kids, not the harsh swilling glass eye of Mad Eye’s that made their stomachs turn and forced them to look away whenever he passed by, feeling guilty and uneasy all at once, “And when you’re free.”
“Monday afternoons, I don’t have any lessons then.”

“Perfect. I’ll owl McGonagall and see if she’d be kind enough to set up the floo for you. No point making it difficult for you to get here.”

“Thank you, Minister. Thanks.”

Hermione couldn’t really bring herself to articulate any kind of real sentence. She stood up, mind reeling, thinking of all the possibilities, of the justice, the change, how her hand would be forever melded in to Wizarding history for something other than being a Boy who Lived’s best friend. She was smiling a little too wide.

“Don’t forget your paper,” Kingsley held it out to her and she took it shakily, “Oh and Hermione? Try not to terrorise my Secretary next time. I know you meant no harm but she’s a seventy five year old squib with a heart condition.”

Chapter End Notes

Still alive my friends, just a little busy. I'm free from all responsibilities in July though, can't wait to write all the things.
He’s acting like everything’s normal again. I stopped by this morning to pick up some clothes I’d left at Christmas and he was just like Hermione! Great surprise, want some porridge?"

She was unpacking sandwiches on to his desk and slipping open the lids of paper cup coffees to figure out which one was which. The office was empty, all cubicles left barren and uncomfortably silent like the corridors of Hogwarts at three in the morning. Even in broad daylight there was something haunting about it.

“It must get confusing holding so many grudges,” Harry said, catching a sandwich she’d thrown to him in mid air and propping his legs up on his incredibly small desk, “he was bound to forget one eventually.”

“I’m not saying anything, I love the peace. How’s things with the two of you?”

Harry’s fingertips brushed his scar, the soft pinkness of two decades of terror tingling sharply against his thoughts.

“Alright since Alice’s funeral. I think it reminded him that life’s too short you know? I mean,” He cocked his head to one side, grinning, “Only Chosen people get two chances.”

Hermione lowered her steaming cup from her lips, battling the laugh filling her throat, “Do you want me to hit you again?”

“I have a scar because of that.”

“It was a piece of parchment!”

“Heavy parchment. With a metal clip,’ Harry leaned towards her, brushing up the messy hair of his fringe so she could see the very scar he’d touched only seconds ago, “Here, see.”

“Looks strikingly similar to the one you’ve had for 18 years.”
“Uncanny isn’t it?” He smirked.

“I’m dragging Ron to a film later. Want to come?”

“As much as I’d love to see him try to navigate his way through another muggle situation, I’m actually going out.”

“With who?” Hermione frowned, “Everyone else is at Hogwarts?”

“I do have other friends, Hermione.”

“Really? Work colleagues? Hot girls? Guys?”

He’d never said it outright, not when Dean and Seamus started spending too much time in each others beds, not when Neville almost spilled cereal down his front at the sight of a shiny Beauxbatons’ boy. But it was undeniable how his cheeks flushed like rose petals and his green eyes could never settle when Cedric Diggory was around. Or Oliver Wood. Or even one of those nameless entities that passed through bars at midnight, soft edged with liquor and forgettable come morning.

Harry coughed a little too loudly for it to be real, “It’s not a date. Just an auror thing. Our last exam of the module was yesterday so we’re celebrating by drinking too much firewhisky and crashing on someone’s apartment floor.”

“You’ll be fully qualified in two and a half years,” She told him. And she was sure there was a glisten in her eye that boasted some sickening degree of pride.

Harry stared at her for a second, shoving grapes in to his mouth and bitterly assessing her grin, “Stop looking so fucking happy about it, you’re not the one taking the exams.”
I’m sooooooo happy to be back writing for u guys!! Exams are done and I officially have all the time in the world.

“It’s stupid,” Pansy said, thumping a heavy book down on the oak table and returning to her seat next to Draco, looking careless and bored, tired of these restless nights in the library with NEWTs textbooks and a clearly diminishing will to live.

Draco sighed, “To you.”

“To you too! Don’t let Hermione turn you in to a hypocrite.”

“I’m not letting her do anything, I’m doing something, its a,” he hesitated, unsure of how to phrase it without sounding like a dopey second year, “gesture. That’s what you do when you-

But the words were lifted off his tongue like mist and he was paralysed by his own disbelief.

Even Theo had stopped scribbling on some tea stained parchment and Blaise stared at him, drilling holes through his pupils, in to the mush that was his brain.

“When you what?” Pansy said, sounding slightly breathless, as if one wrong move would shatter the moment.

“- are in a healthy relationship.”

Draco could feel the heat rising from his chest, enveloping him whole, turning his pale skin in to open book of secrets in which his quietest thoughts could be revealed by a fingertip dragging across his textured skin, like invisible ink that turned bright red at the sense of human connection.

Theo laughed, “It’s alright Draco, it’s not a fucking sin to say that you-
“Don’t say it!” He blurted out, he didn’t want to hear it, somehow that made it too real, something he’d have to face up to.

“Sometimes I think you’ve really grown up in the last two years,” Blaise marvelled, “but its times like these that make it feel like sixth year again.”

“Oh yeah, as if you could ever say how you feel about Theo right in front of us.”

Draco looked over at Pansy, her fascination with the discussion in hand not blanketed at all, instead she was sitting there with her chin in her palm and watching them like they were throwing a quaffle back and forth in a messy triangle of unsaid intentions.

“Don’t be a prick, Draco, of course I can say that I love Theo.”

Pansy beamed at them, revealing a slight smudge of lipstick against her teeth, “How far the mighty have fallen.”

“Shut up,” Blaise scoffed, “And Draco, take Granger to Cornwall, have a great Valentine’s weekend. And for the love of Merlin, stop torturing us with your angst.”

“Says our mutual friend who made us attend all of your stepfather’s funerals from the age of six.”

Blaise and Pansy laughed. Draco’s head was swirling. Theo had left the table.
Dirty

Sun melted over the chairs, sending glittering rainbow streaks over the carpets, kindling with the light of the fire. It was a cool, bright Sunday afternoon and the common room was full. Neville, Luna and Hannah were playing exploding snap, drinking bottles of butterbeer contentedly. Pansy was writing a last minute History of Magic essay, so caught up in the swirl of her quill that the charmed paper airplanes flying past her, courtesy of Blaise and Theo went unnoticed. And by a round table closest to the windows oozing with sunlight, were Draco and Hermione, inundated with leather backed books and parchment. As Ginny got closer she saw the flare of Hermione’s hair, more erratic than usual, she could tell she’d spent the last few hours since lunch with her fingers at her roots, tugging and twisting with frustration.

“You look lovely today, Hermione,” Ginny beamed, propping herself on the edge of the table between her and Draco, swinging her legs like a five year old.

Hermione narrowed her eyes, “What do you want?”

“I need someone to do some quaffle practice with me, it’s more authentic when I don’t use charms.”

“Don’t you have an entire quidditch team?”

“It’s not for Hogwarts, it’s for my Harpies try out, it’s only a few months away now.”

Ginny looked at her with the same pleading eyes she flashed at Pansy when she tried to unwrap herself from scarlet sheets an hour before sunrise, sleep tainted and woozy enough not to care how desperate she looked.

Hermione sighed, ink stained hands helplessly dithering over the piles of literature before her, “I’ve got to get through this paperwork before I see Kingsley tomorrow. I won’t have as much time next weekend with it being Valentine’s Day and I think were working at a really good pace right now.’

‘No, you’re right, I get it, fucking over Rita Skeeter does come before my future career.”

It sounded sarcastic, cold; but she meant it and Hermione’s soft, sorrowful smile translated warm apologies which she was too busy to utter.
“Wait!”

Ginny frowned, “What?”

“Draco’s good at quidditch; you can help her, I’m fine on my own here.”

“I never beat Potter,” He murmured.

It made Ginny laugh, “You’re good enough at chucking a quaffle around though.”

He tilted his head back to look at her, arms knotted tightly, “I thought you were the one who needed help here? Backhanded compliments aren’t the way to get it.”

“And, curiously, they did. It was a rocky start, Ginny strong and quick in ways Draco couldn’t make up for. It had been years since he’d played and it showed. But by the time the sun was arched at the dip of the lake and the sky above it turned purple, they were exhausted. Limbs lose with exertion, chests aching from laughter. They’d done laps across the pitch and swirled through the silver hoops, setting off the snitch now and then just for old times sake. Ginny cheered ridiculously when he caught it before her. Malfoy had looked back at her, incredulous, inquiring why she was so happy to be a loser, but he looked alive again, there was a colour in his cheeks and a spark behind his eyes that seemed so unnatural after years of her not bothering to know him, for the first time she saw him as an ordinary man. Not wanting to shatter the moment, she bit back at him, shouting across the strip of lawn that she was so proud he’d made his first catch in eighteen years, wondering whether they should take a photograph and frame it.

By the time Ginny had got back to Gyffindor tower, calves splashed with mud and back soaked in sweat, Pansy was there, waiting languidly, stretched out over her bed in a nightdress that gleamed emerald where the lamplight shone.

Before she could ask, Pansy told her, “Disillusionment charm. You were a while.”
“Was I?”

“Not cheating on me are you?”

Pausing where her robes were lifted from one arm and not the other, Ginny turned her head, eyes meeting Pansy’s, “I didn’t know I could.”

Within those silent moments, it was said. Like a silent, fearful spell, one no one said aloud for fear of fracturing the world as they knew it. Ginny nodded her head, breathing out a soft okay like it carried the value of a rare stone, always underneath their feet but never explicitly proven to be real. And in that moment it felt like a sacred rarity, like a privilege.

Pansy wrapped her ankle around one of Ginny’s legs, tugging her close enough so she could toy at the waist of her uniform.

“Shall we have a bath darling?” Her lashes fluttered in the candlelight, red nails gliding against hot skin, “You’re fucking filthy.”
“It’s open for you.”

“Thanks, Professor.”

It had been raining hard all morning and McGonagall’s desk mirrored the water slashed windows, ink pot overflowing with the reflection of sliding raindrops. Everything seemed smaller, lampless and grey, the only white light flaring from the fireplace.

Hermione dipped her hand in to the cauldron, the slope of glittering green powder filling her palm.

“You’re doing a great thing, Hermione.”

She turned her head. McGonagall was still marking her papers, the rain beating at her back like a solemn soundtrack, the glasses on the edge of her straight nose distorting the emotion in her eyes.

Hermione watched her for a moment, somehow on the verge of tears. It seemed foolish to take so much stock in the words of others, but Hogwarts had been Hermione’s anchor when she was eleven and lonely, away from her over flowing bookshelves and her parents’ company. In academic success she fulfilled that cavity in her chest, sowed seeds and let them grow in to the shape of two naive little boys who saved her life and then refused to let go.

“That means a lot, Professor,” is what she decided on, not waiting for a reaction and instead spilling the powder slipping through her fingers in to the grate of the fire and watching it rise in an emerald wave.

And then she was walking the marble halls of the Ministry, forging footsteps towards the future.
Hermione hadn’t expected it to be so…muggle. She thought she’d be coming to some ornate mansion, solitary and intimidating, teetering near the edge of a cliff. But they were in the heart of St. Ives, brushing shoulders with ordinary people to the anthem of crashing waves.

‘It’s smaller than I expected.” She said, toying with the silver edge of a dusty photo frame she’d taken from a windowsill.

In it were four kids, heads pressed together and grinning. Hermione recognised them immediately, Theo’s wholesome smile, Pansy with her arms around the three of them like an older sister pretending to despise the very task of spending time with them. Draco and Blaise fell in to the edge of the frame now and again, wind gusting through their hair.

“What? Getting too used to mansions?”

“It’s just more modest than I expected.” She flipped the frame around to show Draco, “You were cute.”

“I was a brat.”

“They’re not mutually exclusive.”

They’d fallen in to some sort of routine. Making fresh coffee after Hermione had discreetly poured all the spirits lurking in the back of cupboards down the sink, opening the french bedroom windows and letting the white sky seep in to the staunch, dusty air, twisting in to the stitches of the bedsheets. They read a lot, Hermione sometimes choosing to read aloud, feet propped against Draco’s thighs, head lolling over the edge of the mattress. There was an old muggle tv too, they played the news and Draco mocked the ludicrous stories that rolled by after all the important stuff had been said. They showered at midday and soaked their sweaty skin in the steam, brushing their lips along the dips of collarbones, Hermione’s hair tangling in his hands.

“So how’s the Skeeter stuff going?”

He wrapped his hand around the shape of her fingers. They were traipsing slowly up the cobbled streets, indefinably calmed by the sea spray, barely clutching the wands slipped in to their pockets.
‘We’re looking at privacy legislation that could appeal to the general public. Like trespassing fines, things that appeal to the average individual but can also be developed on a larger scale too.’

“So that the Prophet can’t breach personal boundaries…like bribing students to take elicit photographs without the victims consent?”

‘Exactly’, Hermione grinned, and he looked at her like she’d hung the moon, “It’s flawed, but it’s a start.”

A single drop of water splashed in to her lashes, caught in the thickness and sliding down the contour of her nose.

‘Shit,’ Draco breathed.

‘What?’

‘This coat is cashmere, Hermione.’

She burst out laughing, digging her hands in to the pockets of her yellow raincoat and twisting on the spot, treading backwards up the slope of the hill before turning again, her hair swishing behind her as she broke in to a run.

‘Race you!’

Draco startled, standing there for a moment inadequately, watching her slip further away from him in a streak of sunshine before setting off at a sprint, ‘I hate you!’

And they were rushing through the narrow streets so carelessly that they didn’t even notice the couple leaving the coffee shop just in front of them.
It was a unique sensation being tugged in to the universe by a portkey. A sharp magnetic pull, twisting, turning; vibrating with all the energy of all the places in all the world. All those stories and paths, like seeing a flash of every life ever lived in a stormy trance, holding on to the edge of everything but comprehending nothing at all.

That’s what this felt like, Hermione knew. It was no longer a memory, no bout of painful nostalgia; it was real and she couldn't handle it. For once, she stood as the portkey-ing bystander in her own story.

“Sorry! I didn’t see you th-

The man hastily moved the umbrella that he had thrust up like a yellow sun out of Hermione’s way, stuttering over his words, eyes blinking behind his glasses.

But Hermione didn’t say anything. She was staring at them with an uncommunicable expression, like she was watching their actions through the glass screen of a television, experiencing some sort of vague emotional connection.

“Are you alright?” The woman was confused but her features were soft, she lifted a thumb to Hermione’s cheek, “You’re crying, sweetheart.”

But Draco grabbed her arm, “Sorry, excuse us, we’ve got somewhere to be.’

He dragged her swiftly around the corner of the cobbled street where rainwater was starting to pool between the stones and splash at their heels. Their hair and faces damp with the vigour of the falling rain. Pulling his wand out and taking a softer hold on her hand, they spun until they were back in the cottage, in that bedroom that bled with light earlier that day and now looked grey and sad. Draco shut the windows, clipping the soaked curtains back and walking around with his back in a hunch, fists clenched.

“I’m making us some tea,’ He muttered, leaving the door wide so his white head could be seen drifting down the stairs.

Hermione sat down on the side of the bed facing the window. She watched the vicious rain, the
daring surfers who had braved the February chill running along the sand, searching for cover, for their car to carry themselves home. She knew she was crying but she couldn’t feel the tears, her eyes felt alien, like someone else’s flesh. And slowly, just like that, in the soft greyness of Theo’s cottage, closed off from the chaos of the growing storm; her back gave in, her eyes slid shut.
“That was your-” Draco gulped down his tea with both hands, “Wasn’t it?”

They were sitting across from each other, cross legged upon the duvet, knees touching, the heat of the tea cups warm between them, the rain billowing outside. Hours had passed and the sky was coloured in dark blue, painted with the pain of coming face to face with a past that was irreversibly gone.

Hermione nodded soberly.

“You don’t have to say anything,” He continued, hating the silence that was slicing between them, “You don’t have to feel any kind of way yet. Or ever, really.”

Bitterly, Hermione smiled, eyes still in her lap as she spoke, “I should’ve expected it, I’m the one who left a flaw in the spell.”

“What?”

“I should’ve found some kind of charm, something to stop them coming back to England. I made it so they wouldn’t come back to the house, It’s my own fault.”

“You weren’t to know, that’s bullshit-”

“But I should have!” She was looking straight at him now with wide and watery eyes, shaking all over like some earthquake had hit directly beneath where she was sitting, “I did the research, I performed it, I walked away. It wasn’t Dumbledore or any of the Order, it was me.”

Draco stared at her for a moment before wrenching the cup out of her hand and placing it on the floor next to his, pulling her in to a strong embrace. The kind where her mouth fell in to the crook of his neck and his shoulder dampened with her silent sobs.

He gulped and it was dry, “We’re going home.”

Cornwall: Part Three
“Right, Hogwarts, yeah,” but Hermione hadn’t moved, her fingers were still clutching at the back of his jumper, no doubt unravelling the threads, her voice painfully quiet.

It made Draco think of all the times they’d argued, all the times she’d fought and tousled and put him in his place with her chin tipped back and a grin. All the times they’d spouted meanness with soft eyes and laughed until the pure sound of it travelled down the halls, in to the very material of what had made the castle itself stand tall, a small contribution to a history of eclectic, tender memories tracing back a thousand years. In this moment, he thought of no one else but her, the girl trembling in his arms. He paid no thought to the stone walls in which his own family lay, rotting with the plague of their decisions, sickening still in death, nor those pacing their dark cells in Azkaban. Because it had become something like easy to pretend none of them had ever existed - excluding his mother, of course. Instead he thought of Hermione and how it could never be as easy for her. Because her parents hadn't been evil, they weren't six feet under the soaked ground, they were mere miles from her, living their lives innocently, entirely unaware they'd crossed paths with their daughter, their own flesh and blood.

“No, Theo’s. Or Grimmauld Place if you want. See Harry, watch one of those film things.”

She made a noise between a choke of laughter and a sob and clutched him all the tighter.
“I want you to do something for me.”

“That sounds like a job for a house elf.”

“No,” Ginny was fumbling through Hermione’s bedside drawer, “Here.”

She placed a pair of silver scissors in Pansy’s palm.

“I want you to cut my hair.”

Pansy looked at her open mouthed and entirely confused, eyeing the silver scissors in her palm like Ginny might stab her in the neck with them, plunge the blades in to an artery and leave her to bleed out over her bed sheets, dark and red.

“Why? I lo- It’s fine long.”

“It’s for quidditch really, it’ll make everything more practical.”

“Why me? Surely you know I’ve never fucking done this before right?”

She was holding back a laugh behind a wide smile, the edges of her lips dotted with faded freckles, “I trust you.”

Why was it always the words carrying the most weight that were the shortest? The easiest to say? Why was it that this was happening as if nothing was out of the ordinary? Why were they sitting here on Pansy’s bed in an empty dorm on the eve of Valentines Day, acting as if it was where they belonged?

Her fingers trembled a little, craving the bitter sensation of a purple potion souring her throat and softening her heart from all the veritable blows. It was times like these in which she most wanted to escape. Not the flashbacks, not the way she resigned herself to carrying a knife in the breast of her
pocket even though she had a wand at times, not the way she wanted to stop the echoing screams in her ears. But the soft words, the innocent confessions, the deep and meandering things that stayed in your head for years after they’d been said, tattooed cruelly on the interior of your skull.

It had taken her sanity and almost her life to admit this to herself. And it was still a new truth. Still something she wished she could forget without knowing that for every moment she quietened her brain she risked leaving her boys behind, maybe now she realised she risked leaving behind other people too. Maybe she was starting to fucking fear the possibility, even.

“It’s…shit.”

Ginny glared at her from the flat lens of the mirror, shifting her hands through the jagged edges of hair which barely fell to her jaw, how out of place it looked to see her back exposed between the straps of her pyjama top, freckled and soft and almost obscene when Pansy thought about how she usually had to swipe all that hair out of the way to drag kisses down the column of her spine.

She rolled her eyes, vanishing the masses of hair suffocating her blankets, “What did you expect?”

“I don’t know,” Ginny said soberly, grabbing handfuls of scarlet and giving it all one last disgruntled tug before turning around and returning to bed.

“People are going to think we’re sisters.”

But she was laughing now. Grasping for Pansy’s hands until they slipped around her waist and tugged her in to her chest. Ginny squeezed her thighs against the sides of her legs, letting her palms rest over Pansy’s shoulders, hot against her skin.

“You’re a fucking idiot, Ginny Weasley.” She slipped her hands in to the chopped tendrils at the nape of her neck, sliding her fingers through each jagged strand, aware that she was smiling in a way that definitely wasn’t sarcastic although she knew she was wholly unwilling to stop.

“I hate you too,” Ginny replied, declaring it like a sacred prayer and pressing herself in to the perfect slope of Pansy’s mouth, “I am going to have to get this fixed though.”
Liquid Luck

“Morning.”

Ignoring him profusely, Blaise was stirring sugar in to his coffee cup and Theo’s heart dropped.

“You don’t usually take sugar;” He smiled halfheartedly, flushed, knowing everyone else was watching them.

It was quiet today, just Pansy, Draco and Hermione, the other tag alongs had grouped themselves around Gryffindor table making a stupid amount of noise with their conversation.

He looked to Hermione, a foolish silent appeal for aid, knowing she was the only one who’d dare to interfere, but all he got was a red eyed smile. She seemed sad ever since she’d got back from the cottage. Empty. As if all the life had been sucked out of her and replaced with the mechanical ticking of a clock, counting down her heartbeats until her death.

“Thanks,” Theo muttered under his breath, taking his glasses off and polishing them on the edge of his robe sleeve for something to do that didn’t make him look like a complete fool.

He could see the back of Neville’s head from where he was sitting but he wished he could see his face. It was always open and unabashed, wearing the lines of a permanent smile at the edges of his mouth. Sometimes he thought it was even better than liquid luck.

But the post owls swooped past in a storm of feathers and blurred him from view, spanning their wings so that he could no longer glimpse at the crown of his head as he rifled through his bag for what was no doubt a Herbology textbook.

A Gringotts envelope spilled in to his empty plate. He cringed at the title, how Theodore looked on paper, all archaic, rigid as steel.

“Anyone want to pay the bills this month?” He asked tiresomely, waving his statement in the air with the hand that wasn’t clutching his glasses.
Blaise sipped his coffee and barely cringed at the sweetness. Hermione ate dry toast and stared in to another dimension. But Pansy snatched it from his hand and ripped open the gold embossed paper.

She snorted, “Yeah, you’re really struggling, almost don’t have enough galleons to buy a castle.”

Theo snatched it back, eyeing the numbers inked across the page, “Depends on the size of it. Are we talking Hogwarts or some old muggle thing? Because I could buy at least two of those…

He hesitated. But wasn’t this year all about doing stupid, careless things? Hadn’t he deserved it?

“Couldn’t I, Blaise?”

Nothing. So he stole a crumpet from Draco’s plate before he could smack his hand away and say something snarky, shoved it in his mouth and pushed his glasses back up his noise.

“Nice to know I’m appreciated.” He added before walking off in to the distance, mapping out all the quiet crevices where he’d used to fool around with seventh year boys in his head, wondering how long he could hide away in one before anyone got concerned about his disappearance.

He didn’t even twist his head back to look at Neville as he swung around the oak door. Something in him knew it would make no difference.
“When Harry was killed in the forest, he told me he saw his parents,” Hermione took a brisk sip of bottled butterbeer, rested her chin on the tops of her knees.

“He said he wanted to go with them. His mum, dad. Sirius and Lupin. He said seeing them go again was one of the hardest things he’s ever had to do even if it was all just a dream.”

Hagrid’s cabin was lit in a warm glow, smoke puffing from the chimney up in to the cool air, rising until it fell to ashes on the ledges of the Astronomy tower. Trees rustled. Fangs barked. Hermione was sure she could hear the distant rhythm of hooves beating their way through the forest.

“Dumbledore told him if we dwell on dreams we forget to live, that we can’t waste our lives wishing we had what we did before. I think I’ve got to let them go.”

The words left her like poison gas, cleansing her insides from what had been haunting her for so long. She inhaled again; and this time it felt clean.

A cold palm covered the back of her hand and squeezed gently at her fingers. She spun her wrist around to capture it and intertwine their hands together, tied tightly between the twilight and their pain.

“I never thought I’d say this,” Draco sighed, “But Potter’s right.”

Hermione chuckled, breath fanning the back of his hand where she had her lips pressed, “I know. It’s just, they’re not dead. They’re on holiday, they’re happy, they have no idea who I am.”

“But they’re happy, Hermione, they’re happy because of you.”

It had taken her days of silence, mulling things over in her loud head, to talk about it. She’d been thinking about the past, the memories, the looks on their faces when she’d walked straight in to them. All confused smiles and warm eyes. Her dad had grown out his hair, his wild curls looking more like hers did. Her mother was wearing the diamond necklace she had received as an engagement present. It was sitting perfectly against her chest.
It was in her dreams, in her mind's eye. Their voices filled her ears in the quiet of the evening. She could hardly believe she'd been brave enough to confess the truth, drinking alcohol free butterbeer and holding Draco's hand, trembling before it.

It was a mystery how Harry was still standing. With all those years of pain piling up around him like quicksand, tugging him underneath. Turns out time really does heal all. And Dumbledore if she wanted to be specific. So it was time she took the advice of two troubled heroes and moved forwards, stopped living in the past, saw memories as what they were, memories; not portals back to her life before the war.

“I know it’s not the same. Hell, he blackmailed me, begged me not to leave him to rot; but when I miss my dad I go to mother’s grave. Talk to her. I try to contain it all in there. Grieve, I suppose.”

Struck with the significance of the moment, Hermione didn't entirely know what to say. She always had to force these things out of him, these shameful things he hated to talk about, his sordid past, all the blood on his parents' hands, all the blood in his name. Yet here he was, clutching her hand and speaking gentle words of loss and melancholy. No anger, no tightness in his voice. She was nervous to do anything, to break this moment in which he could breathe clean air alongside her. He was beautiful and broken, cold but melting. Melting in to something admirable.

“You can miss them, they raised you, Draco.”

He sniffed slightly, breathing in to the silvery sky, “I hate that I miss him. It makes me wonder if I'd had been different if he'd died in the first war, if it was just me and mum. If we'd have kept to ourselves and joined your stupid lot.”

Hermione smiled a little, lifting the pad of her thumb to the corner of his eye, soaking up the wetness that was brimming around the edge of his lashes, building up as if there was no more room for his vulnerability to be contained any longer.

“We should have a Plaque. Put it next to mother. That way you've got a place to leave your thoughts too.”

Draco must have seen the look on her face, stunned silence, lips parted and cheeks a slight red; because he started stuttering, neck bent so his eyes drilled through the floor, tousling his hair like a nervous child.
“Or not. Stupid fucking idea. Sorry- just forget it, I-

Hermione shook her head, “I don’t want to forget it. I think its a sweet idea. Moving on, right? Together?”

He stared at her open expression, blurred out at the edges and softened by the glow of the nights sky. A million words went through his head but only one of them forced its way through his lips.

“Together,” He repeated.

It felt like making a vow.
“Just in time.”

Hannah threw a copy of the Prophet across the room and in to Hermione’s hands. She’d just got back from the library. It was peaceful in the mornings when most of the castle was still asleep. Sliding her fingers across the dull leather spines, listening to Pince stamp and sort textbooks, passing the anxious OWL students who pretended not to stare at her, fascinated by her history, conflicted by her present.

Unravelling the paper and sitting by Luna on the floor, Hermione sighed, “I really need to stop caring so much about these, it’s going to send me mad.”

“I think it’s quite funny,” Luna smiled, bending to point to a particular paragraph with a pale finger, “Harry Potter’s spokesman comments that he is very disturbed at this moment in time and is pursuing leads in order to get to the bottom of Malfoy’s curse- one clearly powerful enough to hoodwink Granger- who since the war has been nicknamed The Brightest Witch Of Her Age.”

“The only thing Harry’s concerned about right now is being able to fit his drunken nights out and auror training around his Godson and infantile best friend,” Hermione mused, tearing out the page without paying too much attention to the photograph flickering before the text of Harry leaving the Ministry, coat collar shielding his face.

It burned and twisted on the grate until the embers were chased up the chimney in a flush of grey smoke.

Hannah laughed, “You’ll get her, Hermione.”

“Be careful though, both of you,” Hermione was still watching the fire, feeling the heat of it press against her skin, “If she finds out what Kingsley and I are doing she’ll be trying to sabotage us even more than usual. Don’t mention it outside the common room.”

“Course,” Hannah nodded, dragging her bag over her shoulder and wrapping her long ashy blonde hair over the other to untangle it from the strap, “I have a meeting with McGonagall about the whole wizard to muggle school transition thing; see you later, Hermione. Bye Luna.”
Only turning away from the fire when she felt herself begin to sting with the heat, Hermione climbed up next to Luna on the sofa, picking up one of her sketches from the coffee table.

“You seem close.”

Luna blurred the edges of a curved nose with her fingertip, hands streaked with charcoal, “Oh, we are.”

“That’s good, it’s nice to see her comfortable again. Are you two-’

“No. It is funny though, I used to wonder if I’d ever have a proper best friend. It looks like I’ve found one.”

Hermione watched her work for a moment, looking back at the portrait in her hands. It had been outlined by the lake, Hannah standing at its mouth, looking out towards the stony mountains and rippling waters. It reminded her of those pinned to her bedroom walls when she, Harry and Ron had visited Xenophilius, searching for new answers to ancient questions. Back when her perceptions of Luna had crumbled at her feet and rebuilt themselves so differently before her very eyes.

Hermione traced the grey dappled tree branch with her thumb, smoky residue collecting on her fingers, “I’m really happy for you, Luna.”
Gryffindor had won their match. There had been significant apprehension amongst its older students, fears that without Potter headlining the team all of Gryffindor’s success would fade away, be swallowed whole by the strategy of the other houses. But it turned out Weasley was just as good. Maybe it was a lucky fever, passed between touch and smiles. Whatever it was, it set the stands alight with joy, a sea of cheering red and gold. Standing in the middle of the Slytherin crowd Pansy was smiling, clapping her hands so hard her gold rings clashed together, uncaring of the glares that she knew were drilling in to the back of her head.

It happened instinctively. Pansy shuffling through the crowd of slow moving Slytherins, Ginny tumbling off her broom, all sweat and mud and the satisfaction that comes alongside success. It was Ginny who picked up the pace, jogging across to the bottom of the staircase to where Pansy was, arms crossed at her chest, eyes decidedly everywhere other than Ginny. She was trying far too hard to look like she didn’t care.

Dropping her broom at their feet and grabbing Pansy’s wrists and manoeuvring them until they draped around her neck, Ginny kissed her hard. The passing students were gaping, staring at them silently, unsure of what to say, afraid of speaking up. But Pansy didn't care. She held on to the delicate shape of Ginny’s head and felt her against her own skin, alive and warm, her mouth quivering in to a smile, clashing teeth against teeth. It was silent but it was a promise nonetheless.

There was a there’s no turning back now and an I think I might even love you in it, there was a when have we ever cared about the opinions of other people? and a god, I want this forever. And when they parted Pansy looked at Ginny, something swimming in her irises, and dragged her in to an alcove between the wooden bars and green and silver coverings. And she hugged her tightly. Wrapped her arms around her waist and dug herself in to her shoulder. Breathed her in and tried to make her understand the depths of her feelings. Because perhaps she couldn’t say them just yet, but Merlin could she feel them.
Sitting in the Gryffindor common room was a rarity on its own, it became even more surreal when Pansy was sitting next to Blaise on a sofa that they sunk in to, all wear, tear and softness, and all around them were screaming students, high on the thrill of their win.

Sinking her elbows to rest on her kneecaps and leaning her cupped face closer to Blaise, she tried to get him to look at her, “Blaise, darling, go and talk to him.”

“No.”

She sighed, frustrated at his games, hot and suffocated by the chaos they were in the middle of, thinking only of later when Ginny would toe her way in to Pansy’s bed and they’d look head on at this silent contract they’d signed with sweat slick kisses and a crushing hug.

“Even if he’s not your boyfriend anymore he still houses you, you’ve been friends since birth for Gods sake.”

Blaise glared at her balefully, jaw tense, “I don’t appreciate disloyalty.”

“Where’s the damn evidence?” Pansy asked exasperatedly, looking around to where Neville was sitting, between Luna and Hannah by the portrait hole, shot glasses and firewhisky surrounding them, “I don’t see him groping Longbottom over there! He’s not even here! Probably because you made him feel like shit.”

“Shut up, Pans.”

He said it in that dark tone that swept up his voice when he was close to a rage, ready to hammer his fists in to a wall and hold his wand at the pulsing veins in her neck. He wouldn’t hurt her, she knew that, but he might hurt himself.

“You’re being pathetic,” She said slowly. Softly, the kind of tone she used when they were hiding beneath the sheets with only a pale lumos charm illuminating their faces, listening to the wretched screams one floor beneath them, “Theo’s the best of all of us, he wouldn't fuck you over and you know it.”
“I don’t know anything anymore.”

Pansy rolled her eyes, holding her face in her hands for a moment, eyelids pressed in to her palms, seeing stars and pretending she was alone.

“God, you’re so dramatic. I can’t even cope with how stupid you-

But then it happened. It was like an explosion.

It sounded like smoky curses that resulted in harrowing pleas, the fires that crackled and spurted outside the west wing windows, the blood that stained the floorboards, how they were marked with the prints of white feet.

Pansy stopped breathing. Blaise was looking at her curiously. But her legs were moving without her knowledge and she was running for the portrait hole, hands over her head to shield herself from the orange sparks, so shaken and sick that she didn’t even hear Ginny screaming her name two steps behind her.
Another Match: Part Three

Ginny was running so carelessly she almost didn’t notice the stairs begin to shift and swing, leaving her stranded between the sharp drop and slow moving stone.

“Pansy! Pansy! Wait, the staircase is-

“Go back Ginny.”

Ginny inwardly cursed the stupidity of third years who were too young to have battled that night. Who had been in hiding, who had been evacuated. Who never heard bodies clatter to the floor, never saw the smoke, never saw metallic sparks fly like the fireworks they’d just carelessly set off. The ones she and Pansy had known flew straight to the heart and stopped it cold. Did anyone have any fucking tact anymore?

“I know what you’re doing,” Ginny breathed, trying to calm the pumping of her heart after she’d ran all the way to the eighth year common room, watching Pansy rifle through Hannah’s drawers with a sad, shaking desperation.

But she didn’t stop, “I don’t give a fuck, Weasley.”

“Think about what you’re doing,” Ginny sounded calm but her chest was knotted, “that’s Hannah’s medication you’re going through.”

“Leave. Me. Alone.”

“No. Merlin I wish you could disapparate in this damn castle.”

Slashing her wand through the air, a protego charm sliced its way between Hannah’s open cupboards and Pansy, blasting her so that she crashed on to her back at Ginny’s feet.

Neither of them really knew who started it, but in seconds they were duelling. Sending back and forth jinxes until Pansy dropped her wand, breathlessly crumpling to the floor, sobbing so wretchedly Ginny almost didn’t believe it was the same person. In the uncharacteristic warmth and celebration
filling the castle, they were sandwiched between it all, forced in to the grey space that a quidditch victory wasn’t powerful enough to suppress.

Left between the palms of this bittersweetness, Ginny sighed, “Come here.”

Opening her arms wide, she let her chin rest on the crown of Pansy’s head; they would sit like this for what seemed like hours. Silently tearful. The dormitory full of smoke and ashy chaos.
“I always feel awkward coming back in here,’ Ron whispered, eyeing the Goblins as they strode past, “After…you know.”

George bit the inside of his cheek, clutching his briefcase in one hand, the other in his coat pocket, “No idea what you’re talking about.”

“Sod off, George. Do they keep staring at you too?”

“Not at all. Maybe you shouldn’t have come.”

George was joking but the colour drained from Ron’s face.

“My head’s going to end up on a stick isn’t it?”

“I bloody hope not,” George murmured, clocking in with the swipe of his wand for their appointment, “How are we going to get the deal with you bleeding everywhere like you’ve been splinched?”

“I’m glad you’ve got your priorities straight.”

Gringotts still looked like it had done before he, Hermione and Harry had shattered its insides to pieces with the wings of a thrashing dragon. Where he saw the ghosts of glass flecks glittering against the floor like teardrops, smooth stone had been restored. If this was any other place, he would’ve expected it, wouldn’t have thought twice about a building being pieced back together by magic. But he knew he’d been living in his past for months now. It didn’t surprise him anymore how much time he spent thinking about the way things had looked, smelled, felt. The tragedy of it all remained in the forefront of his brain.

He’d picked up a newspaper that morning in passing through the Ministry to drop off one of Harry’s essays he’d forgotten, and pinned beneath his thumb was her deep gaze, staring at him, judging almost. He tried not to look to her left because he knew he wouldn’t like who was standing next to her in an inky mirage of his true form. It was the smile in her entire disposition that threw him the most, she looked soft, like she had when they’d sit in the common room late in to the night and her deep creamy skin would reflect the orange of the fire so that in his sleepy stupor, Ron could pretend
that she was something of an angel on Earth, especially when she laughed at his jokes, too tired to
care how inappropriate they were.

“Hogsmeade then?”

He was a dry, old business man, not bothering to look at either of them, reading over the paperwork
instead with his dark hair almost in his eyes, dirty fingernails grazing the pages, his office choking
with the stench of firewhisky and tobacco.

George nodded his head, brimming with enthusiasm, “It’s the perfect location, full of Hogwarts
students, a constant stream of our target consumers.”

Ron felt a prick in his shoulder and his attention jerked from Hermione’s paper eyes. For that it was
difficult to restrain from punching George straight in the nose. But he looked so eager, so unwilling
to let Ron’s wavering mind spoil their chances at expanding their company that he couldn’t bring
himself to act up for some foolish momentary revenge. So he made a mental note to covertly break in
to the new stock when the shop would be brimming with customers in the next few hours to find
something with an underdeveloped antidote and repulsive scent to liven up his day.
Draco wrenched open the lid of his trunk, “What do you mean you’re not coming home?”

“That I’m not coming home.”

“So you’re going to spend all Easter at Hogwarts?”

“I never said I was staying at school.”

“Where are you going then?” Draco asked, dropping a pile of tousled laundry on to the floor and staring at Blaise who lay stiffly on top of his bed sheets like a corpse.

Not opening his eyes, he mumbled through his teeth, fists clenching unnaturally against his flat chest, “Away.”

“You’re being-

But before Draco could say anything Pansy burst through the door, a lively smirk on her lips.

Draco glared at her, “What happened to knocking?”

“What happened to not leaving half your things in my room?”

“It’s not just your room,” He caught the books and dregs of forgotten clothing in his arms and watched her climb on to Blaise’s bed, poking him hard in the cheek.

“Merlin,” Draco sighed. Even with Pansy infringing on his personal space Blaise hadn’t moved, remaining like marble, all finely cut stillness, an unnerving sculpture, “Pansy have you heard this?”

“Yeah I have, let him go Draco.”
“But _why_?”

She rolled her eyes, settling herself on Theo’s empty bed instead, feet propped up on his shiny leather trunk, “Because he’s a man-child.”

Draco wove the threads together in his mind, “You’re leaving because Theo has friends outside of Slytherin? Really? What is this, fourth year?”

“Can both of you just shut up?” Blaise thundered.

“No!”

Clenching his jaw, he pinned his deep dark eyes on Draco who was standing over his trunk with a creased white shirt in his hand, bitterness in his disposition.

“This is fucking ridiculous.” Draco said bluntly, turning his back on Blaise and noisily sorting through the books Pansy had dumped on him just seconds ago.

The skies were tearing now and rain began to slash the air, drowning the tower in a grey blanket, clouds suffocating the landscape.

It was Pansy who replied, still leaning against Theo’s headboard and staring out on to the hills choking with rising water, “When are things ever not?”
Hogwarts was in chaos and Theo couldn’t stand it. The first years running through the Great Hall looking for their cats, the teachers piling up their desks with holiday homework. It seemed juvenile to him and if another Third Year walked past him and asked him if he’d remembered to pack his Death Eater mask Theo was pretty sure his fuse was going to crackle into flame.

“McGonagall’s going to notice all the cigarette butts behind greenhouse three soon you know?”

Theo grimaced at Neville, tight-lipped and smoky, “She probably already has. No point hiding them now.”

“You’re full of excuses,” Neville shook his head, twisting the sole of his shoe into the paper mush sticking to the stone of the pathway.

“Are you packed yet?”

“About that-

Suddenly Theo wasn’t frustrated anymore, there was no anger bubbling in his chest. Instead, his insides knotted together. He was holding the grey smoke in his mouth.

“I don’t think I should come,” Neville finished.

He reached for an empty plant pot and flipped it upside down so he could sit on it. Theo looked at the glass of the greenhouse windows behind Neville and saw his own reflection. Obstructed by the greenery and the smoke he was finally blowing out of his mouth, he saw exactly what he was expecting to. A blurred out image, a featureless face.

So he stared at the ground instead, “What do you mean?”

“I’ll just stay with Gran, I don’t want to cause tensions.”
Theo looked at their feet. One of Neville’s worn, greying white converse was in between the two of his oxfords, shifting at the toes like an open invitation.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Didn’t he tell you? Blaise? He’s not going home anymore.”

Theo was frowning, “He isn’t?”

“I thought it was because of me,” Neville said.

It might have been because he was sitting down against Theo’s tall frame but he’d never looked smaller than at that moment, staring up at him with wide anxious anxious eyes, slicing the skin on his thumb with a nail like he didn’t even know he was inflicting his own pain.

“Don’t be a twat, Neville. You’re coming. I’ll talk to him, figure out why he’s so deluded.”

“Okay,” Neville smiled weakly.

There was no reassurance in it. No glint of his teeth, slightly crooked and close together, framed by those thick lips that looked almost painted, a dusty pink as soft as his skin. Theo would believe him. But deep down in his heart of hearts, he felt a deep-seated kind of ache that told him he was losing control of his fate more and more by the second.
“I thought you were staying at your Aunts’?”

Pansy was standing in the middle of the hall with a hot cup of coffee and her heels in her hands when they came through the door.

“Change of plan,” Draco said, “she’s coming here.”

“With the fucking kid?”

He rolled his eyes, “Yes with Teddy, have a problem with that, Pans?”

“It’s a child, it screams.”

“He’s almost one, he’s not that bad, he can’t even talk properly yet.”

“And thank Merlin for that.”

“If you want to set up a million silencing charms we won’t be offended, but you should come and meet him.” Hermione grinned, unwrapping her scarf from around her neck and throwing it on to a nearby hook.

Pansy glared at her, “I don’t do children, Hermione.”

“It’s up to you,” She shrugged, “just a thought.”

“A terrible thought,” Pansy murmured under her breath.

“What was that?”
“Nothing. I’ll just go and check the Floo’s open for Ginny.”

And she slid through the door to the sitting room where she’d set the fire flaming only moments ago.

Hermione turned to Draco in the silence, smiling with her teeth bared between her lips, “Are you ready for this?”

“Yeah. I think so. I’m looking forward to it.”

There was nothing in his voice. No excitement, no fear. If he wasn’t grasping at the waist of her shirt fabric with strong fists Hermione wasn’t sure she would’ve been able to sense his nervousness, how he was missing her eyes and staring at the slim space between their bodies instead.

She combed her fingers through the white fringe of his hair, exposing his forehead and the faded frown lines, almost not thinking of anything at all.

“Good,” She tilted her head up to kiss him, palms sloping over the crown of his head, delicately twining together to cup the nape of his neck, “Me too.”

The hall was dark around them, any sun leaking in was suffocated by heavy curtains and darkly varnished wood panels.

They kissed in the centre of it all, and for once, it felt like the light had finally forced its way inside.
The sun was hiding behind heavy grey clouds, letting the sky empty with warm rain and making the paving stones slick beneath Hermione’s feet. It was cleansing the frost that had crept over the houses in a sharp white sheen, spreading through the streets in veins of ice and freezing her bones in the midst of what had been brutal winter.

“It’s perfect.”

“You think so? Are you sure the silver’s fine? It looks a little cheap doesn’t it?”

“Shut up a minute Draco, I’m trying to make a good memory here.”

She reached out a hand, tracing her fingers along the cool ridges of the engraving, letting the rain dampen her skin like teardrops.

_In tribute to the Granger Family, victims of the Second Wizarding War, may their legacy stretch far beyond their lives._

As rain was streaming down the contours of the umbrella Draco had cast above their heads, their silhouettes were circled in a pale ring against the stone floor. Wisps of grass that brushed a nearby headstone were doused in wetness, shining a bright green against the white marble of Narcissa’s name.

Hermione pulled her hand away from the plaque, rubbing the moisture from the weather into her skin and slipping it, cold and soft, into Draco’s pocket, clutching his clasped fingers, “You have no idea how much this means to me.”

“I know.”

“I think I can move forward now.”

“Yeah?”
“Yeah. I know they’re safe and happy. I can’t take that away from them.”

They stood there until their feet were damp in their shoes and the sun had battled its way through the clouds, painting watery rays of light against the land, the Granger name glittering warmly before them.

Hermione barely heard him when he spoke.

“I wanted to-

But he cut himself off and Hermione looked up at him.

“What is it?”

She squeezed his fingers with hers. He smiled sardonically, his touch fluttery as if he was trying to avoid her hand, afraid she would take hold of his completely.

“Never mind.”

Maybe she was being incredibly stupid. Maybe her cynical old grandmother had had a point all those years ago when she had said that Hermione understood books better than she did people. It seemed as if Draco was opening up in front of her, blossoming like a flower, baring every marking and shade, but she couldn’t make out the details from where she was standing just yet.

“Okay,” Hermione said, slowly, softly, but with undeniable frustration, “Let me know if you change your mind.”
She had been standing in the doorway for a while, watching him tape up boxes and tick things off his clipboard. Hermione tried to kid herself that it wasn’t because she was testing him, seeing if he was really okay. There had always been something about him that made her feel like his sister. She was the one who had quarreled over his inventions at school, shook her head and tried not to laugh when he and Fred had come out of the age circle in fourth year old and angry. Maybe it was because she loved Ron and Ginny so much that the lines had blurred. Maybe the Weasley’s weren’t just Harry’s family but hers too.

“Hey, you.”

George’s eyes widened in surprise, “Where did you come from?”

“The front door.”

She dropped down to sit next to him on the floor, picking up an order of darkness powder and cutting open the spellotape that was holding the cardboard together.

“Obviously,” He rolled his eyes, passing her a sheet from his clipboard so she’d know what she was supposed to be doing, “Who let you in?”

“Ron. He tells me you’re expanding.”

“Yeah, we are. Congratulations, by the way.”

“What for?”

“Getting him to talk to you.”

Hermione grinned, “He can’t get rid of me that easy, should’ve thought about that before he fought a damn troll for me.”
“We’re starting small, Hogsmeade, more stores nationally. But we want to go international too.”

“That’s amazing.”

Hermione meant it too. She thought of the shiny silver plaque she’d stared at for so long the day previously, thought about everything it meant, thought about how if she was the kind of gullible witch to believe in Divination she might see it as some kind of sign, some hopeful symbol.

“Thanks. It’s not just for me or Ron, I’m doing it for him too. Living out our dreams.”

Hermione just smiled. He’d ducked his head down so she couldn’t see his eyes past his red hair, the awkward scratching of his nose.

But then a shout sounded from the shop floor beyond them, “Can someone get me some more of those pastilles?”

With something like grateful desperation, George picked up a box and dropped it into Hermione’s lap, looking at her expectantly.

“Right,” She scrambled to her feet, “see you later then.”
“I still don’t get why that dick has to be here.”

Harry tightened his hands around the glass he was holding, not for the first time that day imagining it was Ron’s head, “He’s Teddy’s cousin.”

“So? Technically he’s mine but you don’t see me approving of his presence.”

Harry looked over at him. Ron was lazily flipping through paperwork he wasn’t even reading anymore, sipping profusely at a hot cup of tea as if he was actively trying to burn his tongue with the heat of it.

“Are you finished yet?” Harry asked halfheartedly, sweeping clutter off the countertops just to ensure Hermione had nothing to mother him over when she got there.

“What?”

“You’ve been going on like this for an hour now.”

“It’s pissing me off!” Ron said defensively.

“I’d never have guessed,” Harry drew the blinds shut halfway with his wand, the pastels of the sunset spilling in through the base of the window ledge, dousing the kitchen in a warm, sleepy light, “Look, you need to talk to Hermione.”

“I did! I talked to her yesterday! I talk to her all the time.”

Harry sighed, “I mean properly talk. Work things out. Because it doesn’t look like he’s going anywhere and you know how stubborn Hermione is.”

Ron finally acknowledged him from behind his scolding cup of tea and pile of old contracts with a deep imploring stare that needled into Harry’s conscience and gave him something of a headache.
Hermione and Malfoy would be here soon, Teddy and Andromeda too- in a bizarre case of family bonding. Harry wondered what his younger self would have thought of it, playing house with a Malfoy and a child he was legally responsible for. He would’ve scoffed, been dumbfounded as he had been with all the vague murky wisdom Dumbledore had thrown at him over the years.

Ron grunted, tossing a handful of powder into the Floo, “Well I’m having a drink first.”

“Good idea,” Harry conceded, they wouldn’t be coming for an hour after all.

Crumpling a dishtowel at the edge of the sink and squeezing his feet back into his laced up converse, he followed Ron through the flames to the Leaky.
Draco stared at him over the breakfast table. Not unkindly. Watching his small hands grasping at strips of buttered toast, his tuft of hair dwindling between a watery turquoise and vibrant blue, Andromeda’s long tendrils curling around the slope of his flushed cheeks as he sat in her lap.

Her hair was golden. Warmer than Bella’s, brighter than Narcissa’s. Even the hoods of her lids shaded sparkling eyes instead of deep soulless voids, the fine smile lines at the edges of her lips more graceful than Bella’s heavily lined forehead, carved out of the haunting walls of Azkaban prison.

Although he tried, Draco couldn’t stop staring. For someone he had never met she felt like an old friend, a distant memory, like a ghost of some past that he had missed out on entirely. She’d caught his lingering glance when she looked up from spreading her toast with marmalade and smiled at him nervously, afraid of puncturing the peace that seemed so volatile to them. They were so used to pain and rage. He’d tried to smile back but it felt unnatural to him and he stirred sugar into his coffee, staring at his reflection in the dark liquid, searching for Hermione’s hand beneath the tablecloth.

They’d had a few conversations. Along the lines of good morning and this place reminds me a lot of your father and mothers’ house, before I was cut off of course. He’d made mumbling agreements and watched as Teddy gaped up at him like he was something beautifully ordinary. It was Hermione who had been gluing everyone together when things seemed too difficult and dark to save. He watched her smiling and waving at Teddy from across the table, making ridiculous noises. Pansy was smirking gleefully into her teacup and Neville and Ginny were watching her with great fascination, she had never been so unrestrained before. Draco, though, he simply thought it was sweet.
“Hey.”

“Hi.”

“How’s school?”

“You asked that yesterday, Ron.”

“Did I? Yeah, sorry.”

They blurted it out at the same time, “Do you think we should-

“Sorry,” Hermione interrupted, “you go.”

“I was saying, do you think we should talk about…things.”

“Things,” She repeated thoughtfully, “Yeah.”

Hermione let the silence melt over their heads before she spoke again.

“I love you, Ron. Nothing can change that you’re my best friend. But I love him too.”

She’d been thinking about that four lettered word for weeks, maybe subconsciously it had even been months. She’d toyed with it when she was pretending to sleep against his chest in the boys’ dormitory. When she was drinking steaming coffee and watching him and Ginny whip through laps on their broomsticks in the crisp morning air. Even when they had had an argument the night previously over which chapter of Hogwarts, A History they should read. It had ended in a ludicrously childish shouting match where Hermione locked herself in the bathroom and refused to come out until he stopped being immature; listening to his hands slide over the heavy oak doors, groaning to himself, contemplating whether he could swallow his pride and apologise. They ended up fully clothed in the empty bathtub, trying not to laugh at the futility of it all and failing miserably.
Kissing in the harsh bathroom light, the leather-bound book left discarded on the bed, listening to the voices of Theo, Neville, Pansy and Ginny talking loudly beneath them. It had felt to her like she had found a place for her heart in him, in all of them. And those four letters she was sure he’d almost blurted out in the Cemetery swam to the surface of her thoughts. Pushing out all the others, it made her flustered. Catching a flutter of his cool grey eyes against those pale lashes. While he traced the path of her cheekbones down to her neck. When he was sucking sweetly at her skin; she was thinking of them.

Now, Ron stared at her with his cheeks flushed pink as they’d used to in school with the coldness of the air as they trekked to Hogsmeade in third year, sweeping their palms through snow-topped walls and tossing the bundles of soft ice at one another.

“You could be being cursed,” He tried, quietly, still so desperate, “All the stuff in the papers about him, it’s dodgy.”

“I’m working with Kingsley to sort that out. We’re trying to pass a legislation that means Skeeter can’t pry into our lives anymore. Everything she’s said is bullshit. And I live with Ginny and Hannah, I see Neville and Luna all the time, they’d notice if something was off with me. Ginny plays Quidditch with Draco sometimes you know?”

“Does she?”

“She said it’s good to have someone moderately talented to practice with.”

“I bet she floors him every time,” Ron snorted, “Git.”

“She’s a force to be reckoned with, don’t worry.”

They sat down on the sofa, still silent, looking across the room at the old family tree, Sirius’ burned out mark, Andromeda’s scratched out eyes. She knew he was grappling with himself. Trying to contain all the feelings that were spilling out of him. But this time they weren’t angry, just tender, vulnerable- exhausted.

“I’ll never understand it.”

“I know.”
“You’re sure he’s not-

“He isn’t. You should come around to the house one day, Neville’s staying over, Gin too.”

“What the fuck’s Neville doing there?”

“He’s really close to Theo at the moment, I think it’s sweet.”

“That makes one of us.”

He screwed his face up like thinking about it caused a dull sting of pain.

Hermione smiled, “Pansy’s there too.”

“Ah yeah, I remember when she tried to give Harry over to Noseless, we all had a good laugh.”

“Ron-

“I know. Sorry.”

The silence was beginning to choke them.

“Come here.”

“Why?”

“I want a hug.”
“Really?”

“Always the tone of surprise,” She murmured.

They folded into each other, holding tight, unbeknownst to Harry, Andromeda and Teddy, who were talking in the kitchen happily singing muggle nursery rhymes. But beyond the kitchen, down the hall, past the staircase and the rotting House Elf heads, Draco stood on the other side of the door, unable to help himself from listening in on their words.
“Your coffee, Minister.”

“Thank you, Kathryn, Hermione will take it.”

Hermione slipped her wand behind her ear and grabbed for the cardboard holdall, unaware of the ink she’d managed to splash across the back of her hand earlier that morning.

Hermione smiled halfheartedly, “Thanks.”

Her mind was still wavering. It was somewhere between the ache she had felt at leaving Draco in bed that morning when they finally had what seemed like all the time in the world to themselves, and then spun around to the ancient Wizengamot case papers that she was meant to be working through, trying so urgently to revolutionise magical politics.

She was hoping the answer would be buried deep inside of these cases, glinting like a diamond when it finally reared its head. So focused on the paperwork that she was, she had no time to steady the paper cups when she felt Kathryn’s hand flip them up in the air. And then suddenly, steaming black coffee was soaking into Hermione’s jeans and turning her skin red and raw. She hissed, grappling for her wand and doing her best to prevent the burns from tearing apart the skin of her thighs.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

Kathryn opened her mouth then clamped it shut again. It was the disconcerting, harsh way that Kingsley was staring at her which had made her hesitate. Hermione tried to turn it all over in her head but her skin still stung with a burning intensity and it made her instincts cloudy, her eyes watery with the pain.

When Kathryn had slammed the door behind her, Kingsley had sighed, dropping his head to his hands, “I’m so sorry about that, Hermione.”

She had never seen him look so weak before. He had always been so strong to her. At fifteen, he seemed to her the kind of man who could solve every problem, an indescribable energy washed over
the room when he was nearby, similar to that she knew Harry had felt around Dumbledore. The kind of aura that was generous and warm, indestructibly secure.

“No, it’s fine.” She smiled a little, trying her best to pour her focus into the task at hand, to not let her mind lead her in to its dark corners where her fears and regrets overpowered her like a thick fog, choking her with the weight of her memories, “It’s just- have you looked in to her? Done a background check?”

“Of course,” Kingsley was sitting upright again, muttering cleaning charms to vanish the pool of hot coffee at their feet before it began to seep between the fibers of the carpet and into their shoes, “She’s clean. Just angry, her grandparents were murdered by Yaxley.”

“If you’re sure,” Hermione nodded.

She said nothing more about it that day. Whether it was sheer paranoia or something more sinister, Hermione wasn’t confident Kathryn Greenwood was clean at all.
Easter: Part Eight

Pansy woke up sweating. She pushed the sheets away from her neck and shot up, leaving the bedroom door slightly ajar as she crept down the hall in the thick darkness of the night, unaware of the eyes of the portraits that were following her footsteps.

Her nightdress was too thin and her bare feet slid against the shining floorboards as she twisted through the heart of the manor and into the kitchen. She was searching through the cupboards, her heart jumping in her chest- trying to free itself from the cage of her ribs.

A single candle was still burning, about to snuff out in a melted pool of wax, a half-empty mug of cold coffee was sitting next to it. She looked around the vague half lit dullness, hands clutching the counter behind her. No one was there.

In retrospect, she wished she’d brought her wand. But she’d only been thinking about making sure Ginny wouldn’t wake up as she left. Now she cried angry silent tears, letting them burn her skin as she paced around the kitchen trying not to think.

Then she tumbled into the living room, intending on sitting on the edge of the sofa, watching the fire burn out into the early hours of the morning, wondering what was sitting in cupboards around the house, unattended and unmissed. But when she opened the door, the dim light from the hall flooded in to the room and along with the light of the fire her face lit up in the mirror, tear-streaked, mascara smudged across her cheeks, and before she knew it she was picking up some ridiculous ornament she distantly remembered Theo’s dad buying from Borgin and Burkes and bringing home when they were all kids, playing in the garden with dirt on their knees. She tossed it, heavy-handed, barely registering how the mirror shattered, how it fell to pieces in front of her in shards of disconnected silver, like a morose jigsaw.

“Pans, here.”

She turned around. It was Ginny. The darkness drowned out the shape of her face, the soft curve at the end of her nose, her strong jaw and flickering eyes- but Pansy was imagining it well enough. She had her wand up, a silencing charm smoothing over the doorway in a wash of white light. Then she took Pansy’s out of her pocket and relit the lamps before tossing it gently to her.

“Duel me.”
Pansy stared, holding her wand at an unusual distance like she was trying to give it up, surrender to the bleeding soles of her feet, punctured with old silvery glass.

“Duel you?”

“Duel me, come on.”

But Pansy stood still, watching with a hazy sensation as Ginny raised her wand arm. Everything felt slow and aching, every inch of her was creaking and groaning. Shutting down as her mind swelled with memories and thoughts.

“Stupefy!”

Then without even realising it, she was slashing a *protego* through the air, stumbling backwards into the crunching glass with the force of Ginny’s spell. It startled her. Like she had just been resurrected from a deep sleep. From her own living death. And she wasn’t thinking of the smashed mirror anymore, or the calming draughts that were no doubt sitting in the guest bathrooms, waiting for her to steal. Instead, she was thinking about Ginny who was standing in front of her, wand pointing at her chest, arm steadily set on her target.

In some unimaginable way, it was working. It felt like what had forced her awake in a cold sweat was slipping away, her burning muscles taking over instead. It was a hot raging consciousness she didn’t even know she’d been waiting her whole life to feel.
“Two weeks gone already,” Theo said.

He had been staring at the same spot for so long that his eyes were beginning to burn. But he couldn’t stop looking at the smooth, cold glass, the fresh untouched bottles inside it - partially for Draco’s sake and partially because Blaise hadn’t been there to open them. The way the cupboard had smashed and showered the room in delicate, glittering shards was playing over and over in his mind’s eye. He saw Blaise’s damp skin and taut forehead and sickeningly imagined what his mothers’ small hands had looked like in her coffin, stony and bare, stripped of all the jewels she’d dedicated her life to stealing when she should have been caring for her son. Blaise himself rose like puffs of smoke from the golden clasps, fire smoking around him as he sat in some extravagant hotel in a country he cared nothing for. Theo imagined he was unhappy, drowning in his self-induced solitary confinement, missing the warmth of their bodies as they pressed together. Even the warmth in their eyes as they watched each other move around the manor and school, besotted with how each of their movements seemed so graceful to one another, so incomparably beautiful. Theo’s heart was plummeting beyond his stomach and into a dark and guilty void so deep he did not even mind when he realised his Gringott’s vault had been compromised earlier in the week, that Blaise had taken enough galleons as to not need to stay in the manor where he so clearly felt unwanted. So unwanted he hadn’t even told Theo he had gone to get the money.

“It’s been quick hasn’t it?” Neville agreed.

Finally tearing his eyes away from that ridiculous piece of furniture, Theo looked over at Neville, watched him scrawling out his holiday homework with a hasty and almost unintelligible hand, “It’s been busy with Andromeda here, the house hasn’t been this full since before the first war, probably.”

“Must’ve been lonely growing up.”

‘Yeah it was,” Theo admitted, watching carefully as Neville’s hand seized up a little, how he stopped writing and left his quill to bleed on to some scrap parchment on the floor besides him; now he was listening closely, “When I came home from seeing Blaise and Pansy and Draco it was just me. A kid in a big dark house.”

“I felt like that sometimes. It was just me and gran and no one thought I’d ever amount to anything magically, even when I got to Hogwarts, I had my dad’s wand. I would’ve liked my own.”

Leaning forwards, Theo picked up the wand that had almost rolled underneath the sofa, holding it tenderly between the tips of his fingers, “when did you get this one?”
“After I broke dads in fifth year. I’m unicorn hair and-

“Chestnut.”

Theo smiled. Neville was twisting towards him now, spluttering, his cheeks splattered with warm patches against his light hair.

‘How-

“He explained, thinking of his own wand upstairs, more roughly carved and curved than Neville’s, ‘Mine’s a little longer though.”

Neville choked on a brief spirt of laughter, cupping his palm around Theo’s knee as if he’d been touching him this gently his whole life.

“It would be,” Neville said.

They were both staring at his hand. Stubbed, masculine fingers, worn down by hard work in the greenhouse; but still so light. This was how Neville was to Theo these days, passion and kindness bundled up into his soft frame, incapable of harm, innocent where he himself was not.

But then Blaise was rising to the forefront of his mind again, an ashy, sorrowful mirage.

Theo jerked to stand up, Neville's hand slipping from its place on his knee, “We should get some sleep anyway, back to Hogwarts tomorrow.”

He caught the glow of the glass case on his way out of the room, a bold and relentless reminder of his quiet, secret sins.
the longest easter break anyone has ever had ever lmao.

thanks to everyone for sticking by and waiting for updates, I do have an explanation. I've had to go back to school for another year because of things completely out of my control - trust me I'm mad about it - so I've been horribly busy again. It sucks because I was hoping to finish this fic before it hit the 2 year mark and start a new project I've been developing but idk how much longer it'll take to reach the end without me butchering my education. I need to study and I hope you guys understand that.

anyways, I still love writing this story and we're getting nearer and nearer the end with every new chapter and this has been a great experience for me. I love reading all of your kind messages even if I don't reply as much as I used to. I see you and you're what keep me going.

there should never really be a break longer than a month in the future but this is just a heads up as to why it's all silent again.

happy reading, guys.

lucy X

"Hermione, Draco; that’s my constellation, right there."

They were sitting out on the patio, bundled up in knit blankets with hot cups of tea. It still seemed strange to Draco. These dysfunctional people who had stumbled amongst one another for the last few weeks, learning all the things they were already supposed to know.

"My mother never pointed it out to me,” He said, looking up to the glittering sky, imagining the galaxies swirling above him like in the pages of his astronomy textbooks, “I always wondered, though.”

Hermione tugged the blanket up over her shoulders. Her hair was swept back, held together with a red scrunchie, unkempt and beautiful in how it revealed to Draco the soft contours of her jaw.

“What was it about stars with the Black’s? I’m fascinated.”
Andromeda reached over and clasped her hand, blue veins papering under her aged skin, “It’s not as
grand as you think. The Black’s always considered themselves something of a royal family, it was a
status symbol, nothing else.”

“It’s beautiful though. And it doesn’t have to mean that anymore, you can give it a new definition.”

“We’re not the greatest stars in the universe, Hermione, we’re the rubble floating on the outskirts of a
black hole.”

“You’re still on the outside of it- both of you.”

Draco’s eyes shot up at Andromeda and they smiled at each other. Gently, timidly. It was one of the
first times he’d looked into her eyes for longer than a split second and the dark warmth of them
touched him, bursting with meaning, like his mother's palm against his cheek had when he was a
child.

“Teddy started shifting his hair colour this evening,” She said, eyes still on him, “he usually likes to
stay blue but it was a white blond when I put him to bed.”

“And what does that say about me?” Draco scoffed, immediately feeling some unnatural warmth
rising up his cheeks.

“He likes you, Draco. Why do you think he spent the whole day sharing his toys with you?”

“I assumed he was incredibly bored. You know, babies…” he coughed, “they don’t do much.”

Hermione snorted. Draco glared at her. She was pretending there was something incredibly
interesting in the bottom of her mug.

It had only been a few hours before when he had been on the floor in the sitting room at Grimmauld
Place, Andromeda at his side as they watched Teddy stack building blocks on top of each other with
childish satisfaction.

He could hear Hermione talking to Weasley two rooms down. It sounded quiet, friendly. And he
remembered the words they exchanged when he had his ear pressed against the door, listening to them only a week or so ago. There was a very large part of him that hated it, secretly wanting to tear her away from him. Whether it was for jealousy or something deeper, more ingrained in him, he did not know. But the other part of him pulsated with a feeling as incapacitating as love. The one word he still couldn’t quite imagine saying freely. In that side of his heart that thumped warmth through his veins whenever he was with her, he could live with Weasley loitering around the kitchen, watching him whenever they were in close proximity with an obvious scowl on his lips and tightness in his long, thin body. And as he had been doing for the best part of a year now, he tried his best to push the malicious thoughts away, the ones that reminded him of his fathers' harshness, of the Dark Lord.

It was Teddy who drew his mind away from the dark abyss of his own thoughts that threatened to force him back into his dangerous ways. He was looking up at him eagerly, holding out a blue block in his fat little hand.

“Andromeda had clapped her hands and nodded at him, beckoning Draco to take the toy from his small palm, which he did, with a quiet thank you that made him feel slightly ridiculous but slightly full of that particular warmth he’d discovered inside of him too.

It had gone on like this for what seemed like hours and Draco, despite himself, found himself loosening up, smiling, clapping with Andromeda and helping Teddy build as many towers of blocks as they could before Hermione had come back and lifted the child up into the air, telling them all they should really get back to Theo’s for dinner. But Teddy stretched out his hands uncharacteristically, reaching for Draco. Hermione looked over at him with surprise, passing Teddy over into his arms softly as Ron poked his head through the door and made a biting comment, something along the lines of don’t bloody drop him.

“Shut up you,” Hermione admonished him, though not unkindly, “He loves him. Draco’s the best cousin ever isn’t he Teddy?”

Now, as midnight ticked closer, Andromeda was rising from her seat, collecting her wand and an empty cup, “We’ll come and see you off in the morning, are you taking the train?”

“Knight Bus.”

“Alright. Sleep well, kids.”
She wrapped an arm around each of their shoulders and kissed their cheeks like it was something she’d been doing their entire lives. Draco couldn’t control the curling of his lips, even when Hermione shuffled until she had her head laid in his lap and her eyes tilted towards the bathed blue light of the nights' sky and she prodded his cheek, tenderly, teasingly.

“Don’t.” He murmured, gruffly, forcing her to stare at the cut of his jaw so he could hide his face.

But he didn’t mind, not really. Because he knew Hermione was feeling some powerful wave of emotion too. It made him think of her parents, now only kind words amongst bodies to her. It made him think of Andromeda, how she had lain her daughter and husband to rest together, under where the lilies would bloom each spring.

“Want another tea?” Hermione asked him.

His mind was vaguely transfixed by the possibility of firewhisky, but he combed his long fingers through her hair and kissed her forehead instead, “Okay.”
“I just wasn’t thinking about it,” Hannah groaned, “Stupid, I know. It was such a nice break though. Now I’m reading through this syllabus and it’s like a ton of bricks have landed on my head.”

“We’ve still got a month until the exams start, you’ve got loads of time,” Luna said, drawing something questionable and inky on to her Care of Magical Creatures essay with a colour changing quill. Rainbow dots painted the edges of her concluding paragraph.

The Great Hall was quiet at this time in the afternoon. With the days getting warmer and the sun getting brighter the grounds were dotted with students, shading the sun from their eyes and breathing in the late spring air. But the NEWT students remained in the castle, pouring over books and estimating whether or not they could afford a nap between subjects.

“It took me three months to memorise all of Jupiter’s moons in fifth year and I’ve forgotten them all,” Hanna frowned, “*again*.”

She thought of Hermione. How she stayed up past midnight with a book in her lap and then tiptoed down the stairs into the common room, disappearing until dawn. Hannah could barely comprehend how her essays all came back with O’s printed in green ink when she stretched her nights out like they were merely extensions of her days. Sometimes when the sun went down, Hermione danced through her dreams like vague fantasies she wanted so badly for herself. Especially on those days, those when she thought almost constantly about *him*, when his phantom white hand gripped her arm and she shocked herself out of her daydreams, doors shaking and slamming all around her.

“Do you want a paper bag? I’ve heard people find them useful when they’re panicking.”

Luna reached into her satchel and pulled out a crumpled brown bag. An apothecary logo was faded on the front of it and purple glitter seemed to shake itself out of the ripped edges and lift into the air.

Hannah couldn’t help smiling, “Do you have enough in that bag of yours to last the rest of the year?”
“Damn, Weasley, you’re on fire today.”

“It’s not hard to play better than you, Draco.”

He looked as if he was going to say something biting but choked back his words and dismounted from his broomstick.

“Well, that took a lot of self-restraint. What's got into you? I’m waiting for you to launch a broom at my skull.”

Ginny threw the Quaffle at him, hoping to spark some response, but he summoned the leather box that housed it and buckled it away instead, an unexpected grin on his face.

“I’m the better person,” he said pompously.

“Nah,” Ginny shook her head, “You’re just-

It was at this moment that she tripped over a branch which had been rudely strewn into her pathway by the winds the night before and Draco laughed loudly as she dusted the dried, ashy mud off her gym shorts. The sound of it echoed around the empty field. The only sign of life coming from the figures that glided past the stained glass windows of the castle and the far off flickering of lamp lights as twilight set in.

“I’m going to study with your mummy, want me to pass on a message?”

“Here’s one,” He said bitingly, looking at her choppy hair as she sped on ahead of him, how it grazed her shoulders and was clearly a little uneven. Ginny was a bright, dishevelled flower in the greenery that crept all the way from the pitch and to the edges of the castle walls, “stop fucking call her that.”

Ginny rolled her eyes, “Alright, you man child. It’s not her fault you can’t function without her.”
They’d reached the entrance hall and were bounding up the marble staircase. Perched on the top step there was a Ravenclaw reading a book. Barely twelve and so small that the castle swallowed her up, she flinched and shifted uncomfortably as Draco passed her, trying very hard to appear consumed by the words stretched in sentences beneath her fingers.

Draco huffed, trying not to let any of it consume him. Secretly, he had hoped the hallways would be empty. Monday evenings were usually dimmed with the gloom of responsibility, the library always at its fullest, OWL and NEWT students writing until their arms ached and their essays were finished.

He called to Ginny just before she disappeared on to a swaying staircase, heading in the opposite direction to him, saying, not unkindly, ‘For the record, I can function fine without Pansy Parkinson. You can tell her to go fuck herself.’

Her reply sounded like one of those amused smiles she always wore when something had gone her way, “noted.”

“And good luck tomorrow!” He shouted hastily. She was slipping through the cracks of the conversation with startling expertise, “If the Harpies don’t want you I’ll deal with them myself!”

Ginny didn’t reply, but as she raced up the stairs and plunged herself into a hot shower, thinking of all the things she and Pansy needed to study before the sun finally escaped their clutches after another day, she was grinning. Draco Malfoy was her training partner. He was also her friend.
“How did you find me?”

“I was asleep on the sofa, heard you trip over the coffee table.”

“So you just followed me?”

“Sorry for making sure you didn’t dive off the top of the tower,” Pansy bit at him, stepping back a little as a flush of wind blew the smell of his breath in her direction, “you stink of it.”

“Like Dumbledore dived?” He laughed coldly, ignoring the bitter taste of his tongue, “I’m surprised his head didn’t explode on the way down.”

Pansy squirmed, “Merlin, Draco.”

He smiled at her with wild eyes.

“Give me that before I fight you.”

“Fuck off, Pans. Contrary to popular belief, you’re not my damn mother. My mother’s dead. And Hermione doesn’t have parents anymore. Go to Paris instead of trying to wrestle fucking firewhisky off me.”

“You’re making no sense right now, how much of this stuff have you had?”

“Not enough. I’m going to see my girlfriend now.”

She snatched the back of his robes with haste, choking him so he couldn’t take a step closer to the winding staircase, “No you’re not. She’s asleep for once and you’re not barging in there and upsetting her with your bloody ineptitude at controlling your alcohol addiction.”
At that moment she could have sworn she saw him jerk, convulse a little at her brutal choice of words.

“Did you ever do pills?” He asked, his voice lazy and malicious, filled with sick fascination, “Or was it just the potions?”

She shrugged him off, clamping her hands down on his shoulders and shaking him down to earth, “Listen to me, you idiot. We’re going to go and get under some blankets on the sofa and you’re going to either sleep this off or talk to me like a sane human being.”

It was hell guiding him through the castle. Pansy had to throw up multiple silencing charms so that his infuriated shouting didn’t follow the stone pathways and seep under the Professor’s doors. The last thing they needed was McGonagall finding them storming through the castle, arguing and smelling like hard liquor. When they finally closed the door to the common room and came upon the vague rumbling snores issuing from the boys' dormitory, Draco gave up. He threw himself onto the couch like a rag doll and watched Pansy with piercing eyes as she tossed cushions and throws at him that still carried that musty scent of having been abandoned in old empty classrooms for twenty years too long.

“You mentioned Paris earlier, I didn’t tell you,” She handed him a glass of water and folded herself next to him, ‘She’s not replied to any of my letters since she left. The woman sticks to her word”

It wasn’t entirely true. She’d received a steady thread of Gringotts cheques and the odd cold note about how the French were far more civilised. But nothing came of Pansy’s own letters, those where she told her how the boys were doing, including vague, detached mentions of her own life as they’d done over the years when she was at school. It seemed stupid to still write to her mother but it seemed even worse not to do it somehow. Like if she let go of this feud she’d lose a part of herself that was bigger than the bigoted woman who dragged her through childhood.

Shakily, Draco took a sip of water, “That’s shit.”

Pansy laughed, “Yeah…,” and then, like an afterthought, “What made you do it?”

“Nothing. I just missed it.”

She wondered how long he’d been torturing himself that night, what kind of images were dappling his under-eyes in purple and why he had Dumbledore so readily on at his minds surface, lying
lifeless at the edge of the castle, surrounded by mourners and mutilated by dark magic. The gruesome sight he never got to see. Because he had fled into the blackness after the Death Eaters as chaos shook the school awake.

“I won’t say anything but she’s going to notice when you throw up for the fifth time later.”

“Yeah. Whatever. I will.”

His head rolled, chin falling to his chest as he rubbed his eyes wearily.

“Here,” Pansy held out her hand and he took it, his palm damp with sweat and anxiety.

He looked at their hands, “And what the fuck is this supposed to do?”

“Maybe I just wanted to hold my best friends hand in his tragic time of need but alright.”

She dropped his fingers scathingly, refusing to laugh at his wit like she usually would have, there was no sarcastic eye-rolling tonight.

He let out a long sigh, the kind that told her he was internally battling with his desire to push down any kind of warm feeling his insides were filling with, then begrudgingly, he snatched her hand back in his.

She rested her head on his shoulder, full of sorrow, and closed her eyes as they rang in three o clock, heavy with exhaustion.
“Confringo!”

“Stupefy!”

Ginny collapsed to the floor, limp. Pansy smiled, pushing the dusty blackboard out of the way, letting it slide into the bay of the window and clatter against the sill. She rennervated her with the swift slash of her wand.

Ginny’s blue eyes fluttered open and slowly came to focus, “That was sneaky.”

“Didn’t see it coming?”

Ginny grasped at the hand Pansy was offering her and rose up from the sea of pillows on the floor, “Didn’t think you had it in you.”

“Bullshit.”

The dust of the old, unused classroom shifted as they moved, readying their wands to duel again.

“I’ll do the chopping,” Hermione said.

She could barely see Draco over the steam of their cauldron. Slughorn had fallen asleep at his desk, folded in on himself, newspaper laying carelessly in his lap. She could see the slight moving pictures of a Quidditch match that had been played over the weekend flashing against his knees.

“No, I’m doing fine, I need you to stir,” he murmured.

But all she could notice was how sickly he looked. And she knew why. But she couldn’t seem to understand why he couldn’t tell her. It broke her heart a little to watch him slicing those earthy roots with the accuracy of a terrified child.
“Draco, you’re shaking.”

She was afraid to touch him, worried that she might break something inside of him that would take him too long to recover from.

“No, I’m not.”

But now she was losing her patience. The steam of the cauldron surged higher, the contents flushing an angry pink.

“They’re uneven. They’ll spoil the potion. Let me-

Thrusting out her hand to clutch at his wrist, she gasped. The back of her hand was split open, more blood than she would have anticipated seeing was pouring from the slit.

Pansy had the upper hand and she knew it. The adrenaline coursed through her veins and it felt like the high of a cheering charm. She was in love with it, this feeling. With every inch of herself she thrust into her spell work, the less and less she craved the draughts and how hollow they made her. She was feeling an exhilarating energy now and she wanted to bottle it, to keep it forever.

“Incarcerous! Levicorpus!”

Ginny was snatched into the air like a rag doll, her wand flying from her grasp.

“Alright,” She panted, her robes swimming around her face in thick black waves, “you win. Let me down, gently.”

Pocketing both of their wands, Pansy sauntered after her, “If you apologise.”

“What for?”
Reaching her, she combed through her suspended hair with soft fingers, so close to they were that Ginny’s breath fanned hotly across her lips, “Underestimating my abilities.”

“I’m deeply sorry for mistaking your skills as equivalent to those of Lockhart. They are far superior. I’d even go as far as to say they are a match for Ron’s when he snapped his wand in half after crashing into that ridiculous tree.”

Lips almost against hers, Pansy pretended to consider what she had said. Then, like a knut clanking abruptly to the floor, she shrugged and walked away.

“Let me down! You’ve got my bloody wand!”

“What’s in it for me?”

“A proper apology.”

“promise?”

“promise.”

She didn’t need convincing. Pansy hastened forwards and kissed her. Shooting her down with her wand so that they ended up crumpled on the floor, laughing.

Pansy felt malleable with it all, her legs and arms a warm thrumming jelly.

He dropped the knife like a scalding lump of coal. It lay against the table, glistening with the bright clean red of Hermione’s blood. Draco’s stomach turned.

“Fuck. Shit. Are you okay?”

Hermione shoved her hand underneath her cardigan sleeve, soaking in the blood and squashing her tongue between her teeth against the pain, “I’m fine, now give me the damn gurdy roots.”
He relinquished, “I didn’t-

“Leave it. We’ll talk later. Three more clockwise in a minute and then two more anticlockwise immediately after.”

She had no time to let herself get lost in the thick guilt of his face. She was feeling a million and one things, one of the forerunners being the distinct sensation of betrayal.

He tried again, “Hermione-

“Later.” She told him shortly.

From the corner of her eye, she saw him leave the table and head for the storeroom.
Clean It All Away

Group therapy had been forgotten over the last month with the chaos of school life and the emotional withering and blossoming of those of them who chose to sit around the old classroom and talk about their feelings in the first place.

Ironically, this was now when Theo chose to attend. He had taken to sitting in the classroom alone recently in the evenings. Smoking with a protection charm around the door so no one could smell the stench of tobacco filling the walls around him. Thinking. Or, really, not doing any thinking at all.

He watched the sun drop to the earth in slow motion that evening and let his mind drift through the castle. Neville was in the library, struggling through a Charms essay with Hermione patiently at his side. If he knew Draco at all he knew he’d still be lying flat on his bed, sulking at the ceiling for some dark reason or another in the way he’d found him early that afternoon. Pansy and Ginny were rare entities these days, showing up in the hall at confusing hours for food and then disappearing into thin air in the mornings or late at night. And Blaise? He was replaying the conversation they’d had earlier over and over in his head now. Watching how his thick lips moved and curled, his strong beautiful jaw clenching at the tension of it all.

Blaise was hunched over one of the basins, washing his hands in the sink, when Theo strode into the second floor bathroom. Seventh year Hufflepuff’s edged nervously around them and an unnaturally small third year boy smiled shyly at Theo’s torso region when he passed him. That surprised Theo. And he watched the boy pace out of the door quickly and turn the corner into the packed hallway.

He didn’t know what led him there but Theo found himself in front of the basin next to Blaise. He twisted the cold tap on and lathered a bar of soap between his palms, looking at himself in the mirror, trying to catch Blaise’s expression out of the corner of his eye.

“Have a good break?” He asked, even though it had been over a week since they’d returned to school.

“Yes,” Blaise said deeply, and Theo let his gaze flicker over to the next mirror, his eyes meeting his boyfriend’s - or whatever the hell they were supposed to be now, “You?”

“Not really,” Theo admitted.

He waited for him to inquire why. But Blaise said nothing.
In desperation, Theo added, “I missed you.”

“I see.”

He almost laughed at it all. How typically Blaise it was. How he loved to let the whole universe pour its heart out to him and remain impenetrable in the meantime, not letting on that he even had a soul, a palpable sense of being, whilst everyone stripped themselves bare for his pleasure.

“Why did you leave?”

The soap in Theo’s hands was becoming soft and warm, slipping from his palms so that he had to dig his nails into the paste of it to keep it in his grasp.

“Felt like a change,” Blaise told him evasively.

“I’d have come with you,” Theo protested, thinking I’d always go with you, anywhere.

“You were busy.”

This made him frown, “Doing what? It was Easter break. I mostly just sat around the house and argued with the portraits for a few weeks.”

Blaise said nothing. At this point he had stopped pretending to wash his hands and was rubbing a dry paper towel between them until it became soiled and stringy, taking all of the pressure of his discomfort and letting it shred the towel into damp flakes.

Dropping the soap from his hands, Theo turned to look at him, “What are we? What do you want us to be?”

Blaise copied him, abandoning the dregs of the tissue on the edge of the sink and turning his whole body to face Theo’s. Theo imagined him grasping his jaw and kissing him, feeling that strong and relentless affection that Blaise never really gave to anyone but him. He wanted to wrap his arms around his shoulders and sink into him until there was no space left to breathe.
But Blaise did not move to do any of this.

“That’s your decision,” Blaise said, “Make it soon.”

And he walked out of the bathroom, leaving Theo dazed and confused and more than a little sad.

Banishing the ashes that had built up into a grey pile on the arm of the sofa, Theo folded himself into a ball, covering his face with his hands and letting his glasses push into his skin uncomfortably. He’d walked out of the bathroom moments after Blaise and found Neville walking in the direction of Transfiguration. And it all felt like some big game, like he was the butt of Blaise’s joke. Because surely, surely Blaise couldn’t believe Theo was fooling around with Neville. How could he when Theo didn’t even want to imagine what it would be like himself?
Hermione wouldn’t let him come into the Infirmary with her. She knew it was childish but she felt some satisfaction in watching him fold his arms to restrain himself from whatever he was going to say, how he was despondently leaning against the wall of the hospital wing entrance.

He was in the same position when she returned from Pomfrey’s office, her skin sealed and clean, looking perfectly untouched and feeling tingly beneath the surface.

This was when she took pity on him. Marching over and grabbing his hand so their warm palms kissed, she began leading him in the direction of the common room, briefly gesturing to her healed hand to prove to him that he hadn’t in any way broken her.

“I didn’t mean to do it, I’m just on edge,” He told her quietly.

She felt the dampness of his hand in hers and squeezed it, “I know. I forgive you. We still need to talk though- well, you need to talk at least.”

Draco said nothing, watching his feet as they padded through the castle, paying attention to the slap of his soles against the stone as to not think about his spasming heart and pounding brain.

It was only when they found the boys' dorm completely desolate, Hermione pushing his old Quidditch jersey beneath a stack of pillows and sitting them down on the edge of his bed, that he began to say something.

“It just happened, I’m sorry. It was stupid, alright?”

“Why are you apologising to me?”

“You’re mad at me, I thought that was pretty fucking obvious”

“I’m mad because you didn’t tell me, not because you had a rough night.”
“Oh.”

Hermione wanted to cut out the part of her heart that contained the love she had for him and let him hold it. Prove to him the things he was too scared to believe were true.

“I’m not some higher fucking authority, Draco,” she said quietly, “I just thought you knew you could come to me when you needed help.”

“Of course I knew that,” He snapped.

She watched him fall into some deep cavity. His quaking hand tugged at the sleeve which hid his fading scar.

“Come here,” She told him.

With those two simple words she saw him climb out beyond the darkness he had surrounded himself with. He wrapped his arms around her and buried his head into her shoulder so heavily they fell back against the mattress, the lumpiness of it moulding to the curve of Hermione’s spine. She squeezed him tight, refusing to let go.

“You smell good,” She mentioned offhandedly. He had showered that morning with the shampoo she liked, that clean cottony smell that reminded her of cool air and sunshine.

He snorted, “Thanks.”

“We’re going to miss dinner if we carry on like this.”

“Who cares?” He burrowed deeper into Hermione’s shoulder. Like all he wanted was for her to let him dissolve into her skin until they were one, “Let me starve.”
Demons

It had been a slow morning. An Auror had found an unidentified Death Eater dead on a beach in Wales and Kingsley had been wrapped up in preparing a team to take on the case. Half of the whole force was dedicated to tracking down the Death Eaters that had fled all those months ago and now the Ministry found itself stretched for staff. Hermione thought of Harry, in the midst of his training two floors beneath her, frustrated like he always was at being refused participation in something that was so important to him.

She saw the body in her head, a phantom of cold, blue stiffness, decaying slowly amongst the sand and feathers of stray birds, and felt guilty when steady pangs of sympathy slammed into her stomach like a pendulum. The regret forced her to remind herself of Lavender, lying in a pool of her own warm blood, her ravaged exposed neck, choking on the thick liquid as it filled her throat. Hermione knew she would not sleep that night.

Kingsley was staring at the door, quill slipping from his hand, in the middle of some challenging and extensive report when Hermione had her breakthrough. She loved this rush, the flood of excitement when she realised she was on the cusp of something great.

“Hey, Kingsley?”

He replied quickly, evidently unfocused, his quill now floating mid-air, awaiting instruction, “Yes?”

“Did you look at the 1788 Witches Revolution?”

“I glanced over it, why?”

“Did you look at their grievances? The ones the Ministry agreed to?”

He reeled them off mechanically, “To have legal status over house elves, the right to inheritance of property and the gag on-

“Defamatory propaganda which supported the image that unmarried witches were consorts of dark magic.”
“Censorship that had support,” Kingsley smiled, undeterred by her interruption, “Very good, Hermione.”

Hermione beamed, a familiar warmth rising in her cheeks, “Thank you.”

“We’ve been looking at it the wrong way this whole time, it’s not the Ministry we need to please, it’s everyone else.”

Hermione nodded.

“And how are we going to do that?”

His quill was hovering above him now, vibrating as if impatient.

“That’s the thing, I don't know.”

“Kathryn!” Kingsley shouted suddenly. He waved his hand and his quill dropped to the desk, lifeless again, “Can we have copies of all the convictions for crimes separate from the War since June 1998? And perhaps as many copies of old Prophets as you can find?”

“Anything else, Sir?”

Hermione watched her closely. There was something incomprehensible beneath the lazy drag of her feet, how she leaned her head against the door frame as if she’d rather be somewhere else but her sharp eyes seemed to flame. She’d seen that look before. But she couldn’t think of where.

“That’s all. Maybe some coffee? It’s going to be a long day.”

Kingsley looked back at Hermione and grinned.
“I’m never going on a date ever again.”

“Don’t be like that, it wasn’t that bad.”

“For you maybe.”

“If you think I enjoyed-

“It’s just a bit fucking annoying when your date is asking your best friend where your glasses are from because they make your eyes look sparkly,” Ron said tightly, jamming his key into their front door.

Harry shook his head, “It shut her up when I told her my abusive muggle family bought them for me when I was five.”

“No more double dates, okay?”

“Got it. I should’ve realised it was a bad idea when she called you Ray. How does she not know who you are? Seriously?”

Walking into the living room they noticed three owls perched on the edge of a windowsill, feathers flitting in the wind as they tapped their beaks against the thin glass.

Ron sighed tiredly, unlatching the window with the flick of his wand and then going off into the kitchen to fill the kettle with water and rifle through the cupboards for tea bags.
“Where’s the damn tea?” He shouted at Harry, pulling open various tins and jars and finding that none were filled with what he was looking for.

“Hmm?”

Ron, on his hands and knees, reared his head from deep in the cereal cupboard, “The tea.”

But Harry was barely paying attention, his focus on an open letter in his hands which was still slightly damp and cold from the wet skies, “Oh, did I not buy any? I meant to, we ran out, sorry.”

“I don’t even like coffee,” Ron grumbled, spooning the grains into his cup despondently, trying to ignore the dark lurking feeling in the back of his head.

“Ginny wrote,” Harry said.

“Anything new?”

“She sent off for her Harpies uniform a few days ago. Hermione’s got her head stuck in her NEWT revision and Luna keeps leaving damp seaweed in the Ravenclaw common room to attract Trumpetsnouts and the first years keep slipping on it.”

“To attract what?”

Apparently their call sounds like various musical instruments and the songs on the wireless haven’t been good enough recently.”

“Oh right, because that’s what you do when you want to listen to something other than the Weird Sisters,” said Ron calmly, feigning extreme seriousness, “summon mythical musical creatures.”

Harry still wasn’t listening, “There’s a Hogsmeade weekend in a couple of weeks, you in?”

“Yeah, okay.”
“Sure? Thought you might want to see Melodie again instead.”

“I’d rather spend a whole day in the Broomstick’s with Malfoy’s lot than go out with her again.”

“Good,” Harry nodded, “you might just have to.”

He grabbed a mug of coffee from behind Ron, who was leaning against the counter, his back to the bubbling kettle where the steam climbed up his shoulders like a vine. He watched as Harry took a deep sip, burning his tongue on the edge of his cup and spilling coffee down his front in the process, glasses foggy with the heat of it.

Harry groaned, trying to find his wand to remove the coffee from his shirt before it began to stain, “I think I’ve blistered my tongue.”

Ron laughed, feeling feathery light again, “Nice one.”

Harry couldn’t help but grin too.
“It’s useless,” Neville moaned, “I’m dropping out. I’ll just go and work on the Knight bus or something, I’ll be a terrible teacher anyway.”

“Don’t be silly, come here. What’s not sticking?”

“I don’t get any of it. It’s all weird measurements and numbers.”

It had seemed like a good idea to take up potions again last summer when he knew Snape would no longer be towering over his shoulder. Was it bad to admit to himself that since returning to Hogwarts he had been much more comfortable in lessons? He could breathe freely there, it was pure relief.

But now he was staring down at another stupid theory in another stupid advanced potions book and the clock was nearing midnight and his brain was on fire.

Hermione balanced her quill in its almost empty inkwell and shoved aside her loose leaves of paper, tilting Neville’s workbook towards her so she could read all the vague notes and inky scribblings out.

“You know in Herbology when you have to measure the right amounts of fertilisers to go into the plant water and stuff like that? Think of it that way. So instead of working with Living Death and the antidote think of it as how many of each of these ingredients need to go into the solution to help the potion thrive again- or in this case reverse its effects.”

He was nodding mildly, trying to remember everything she’d said so he could organise it into his head in a way that it looked like English and not Gobbledygook.

“So we need half the mass of the potio-plant to be moonwater to…to…”

Hermione smiled encouragingly, “To counteract the sun exposure that activated the paralysing properties, yeah.”

“Right,” He jotted it down hastily, “I think I get that a bit more now.”
He must’ve looked incredibly nervous because Hermione grabbed at his hand and squeezed, “There’s a whole month before the exam, Neville, you’ll be fine.”

“All thanks to you.”

“Don’t underestimate yourself, you’re brilliant.”

“Not as brilliant as you.”

He watched her shake her head, trying to hold back what was clearly a glowing smile. He hadn’t understood the impact of a compliment until the war ended and his grandmother widened her arms to him. Just thinking about it made him ache a little inside.

“Be quiet. How have you been anyway? I feel like we’ve barely talked since I started working with Kingsley.”

“It gets easier,” He paused for a moment, anxious to admit to it, to reveal what he really wanted to tell her. It swirled behind his ribs, caged in his heart. It wasn’t a belief or a thought as much as a sensation. One that woke him at three in the morning feeling as if he was being watched over, one that made him certain his footsteps did not go a day unfollowed, his happy moments never overlooked, “Is it weird to say I feel like she knows who I am now? I just feel her energy sometimes and it’s warmer than it used to be. I don’t know, I’m being ridiculous-

“You’re not. I’m not going to pretend I didn’t believe in things like that for a long time but after everything with Harry dying and coming back to life and the archway in the Ministry…there’s some things that don’t seem to make sense, but they do and they’re real. And they’re logical, we just haven’t put the pieces together yet.”

“I like that.”

“Me too.”

He wanted to keep talking. About his mother. About how he’d been to see his father a few days ago and how a sickly feeling settled in him when he realised his dad had no idea the bed next to him was
usually not empty. About Theo. How he’d held his hand through all of this pain. How it had been
discrete and unsaid but honest. How he felt like he was living amongst the fractured pieces of a
puzzle nothing as simple as logic would be able to bind together. It wasn’t a game of chance and
intellect, it didn’t haunt him from behind a silky veil in the heart of Ministry. Instead, Neville knew
this small phenomenon had no place in their universe.
Milestones

Harry lifted his glass and its contents spilled over the edge of it, hitting the table in a teardrop smack, 'To Hermione.”

“And Kingsley.” Hermione clinked her glass to his and took a long drink, “He’s the one presenting it this afternoon.”

They had pushed two round tables together in the Three Broomsticks that afternoon. All of them, apart from Blaise who was always mysteriously absent these days, were celebrating Hermione and Kingsley’s hard work which had been reduced to a single scroll of parchment and a one o clock slot for presentation.

They’d found their loophole. The proposition was one which masqueraded as public freedom to access all legislation and speak on those convicted of crimes, serving their time in Azkaban. They hoped that with the war fresh in everyone’s minds they would overlook the parts of the Bill catered towards journalistic censorship and instead encourage a healthy fascination with crime prevention. It wasn’t perfect by any means. But it was worth a try.

Hannah was sitting between Neville and Luna whilst all of this was going on, head low over a stack of parchment, her ink pot placed precariously amongst bottles of butterbeer and lemonade. Hermione caught her eye for a brief moment when she reached for a drink and they grinned at each other.

The papers were due back at the Ministry next week. She had told Hermione this that morning over a cup of too hot coffee and the butter she’d got in her hair when she’d opened the letter and realised what was inside; her muggle university application papers. In three months she would know where she would be studying Law, and in two short months, she and the others would finally be leaving Hogwarts for the last time.

It felt strange, for it all to be coming to an end almost as quickly as it started, and for them to be leaving together, so surprisingly different to how they had been in September when the wind and autumn leaves had whipped them back into the thrum of mundane life.

They were so busy listening to Ron talk about the latest Chuddley Canons scandal - something ridiculous about two players leaving their wives for one another - that none of them saw Blaise until he was standing at the hilt of their table.
“What are we drinking to?” He asked, standing with his hands stuffed in his robes, a mismatch to his lazy drawl, “Did someone die?”

“We thought you had, honestly” Pansy butted in before he’d taken another breath, “Where the hell have you been hiding yourself these last few weeks?”

Blaise ignored half of what she said, pulling up a chair between Ron and Hermione, clearly avoiding the side of the table Theo was on, “I’ve been spending a lot of time in London. It's a nice post lesson stress reliever”

Ron winced, taking a deep gulp of butterbeer and trying not to look as uncomfortable as he felt.

“I’m sure that’s why,” Pansy said.

“Sorry?”

“I said would you like some wine?”

He looked around, analysing the countertops and the stacked up glasses from behind a barrier of cashmere, “From this dingy place?”

Draco scoffed, he knew what Blaise was doing.

“I’ll get you a glass of red,” Pansy told him. Unwinding Ginny’s arm from around her and dragging her up too, both of them rocked tipsily into each other and up to the bar.

Hermione slipped the hand that wasn’t directly next to Blaise’s thigh beneath the table, finding Draco’s and leaning into his side, “You okay?”

He looked at her deeply, it was like she could feel his discomfort, what was going on in his head, “Not really.”

“Want to go back to bed? Yeah?”
She combed her fingers through his hair, close enough to him that his hands brushed her hip. It didn’t matter that it was coming up to two in the afternoon. She saw how he was fighting himself, trying not to pay attention to the amber whisky bottles stacked behind them.

Hermione spoke to him softly and he melted into her like warm candle wax, perfectly in view of the friends they did not even realise were watching them.

Ron tried to resurrect his anecdote about the Canons. Harry, sympathetic but uncomfortable, had begun cleaning the lenses of his glasses with unnatural precision. Even the others, sardined together around the opposite side of the table didn’t seem used to such outward displays of affection and diverted their conversation back to Hannah’s application. But Blaise? He was looking at Theo. Observing him with an unforgivably obvious stare. Almost as if he was hungry for the sight of him.

“We can get some more sleep,” Hermione continued, “how does that sound?”

She felt him ease under her touch and relished in it.

“No ones at Theo’s right now,” Draco said.

“Ask him.”

He tried not to roll his eyes at her.

“Ask him. I’m not breaking and entering.”

“It’s not breaking and entering if you have a key.”

“A key that he never actually gave you-

“Fine,” He huffed, not feeling like giving the Prophet something else to talk about when he was inevitably spotted having a shouting match with Hermione Granger. Instead, he turned to Theo and pulled his robes around his shoulders, “Theo, do you want me to pick anything up? I’m stopping by
the house. Left something last week.”

“Mm? No, I’m good,” he replied, clearly distracted by Neville’s obvious amusement at his efforts to seem interested in whatever nonsense Luna was telling him, “Just make sure you put the bloody charms up if you don’t want to be disturbed this time.”

A glare passed between them. Hermione tightened her scarf around her neck, wondering how quickly it would take for her to suffocate herself.

“Thanks for that,” Draco hit him as he walked past, “bastard.”

Pansy and Ginny appeared suddenly behind them, “Where are you two going?”

“Errands,” Hermione offered.

“Errands,” Draco agreed.

They said their hasty goodbyes and Blaise finished his drink without taking a breath.

“That was a nice three second catch up,” Ron said as the door swung shut behind the two of them.

“I especially enjoyed the part where she talked to us,” Harry said bitterly, but there was no real distaste in his tone.

“Do you think Rosmerta keeps the bleach in the bathroom?”

“What,” Harry asked, “why?”

“I think I need to burn my eyes out after seeing Malfoy like that, I prefer it when he’s talking shit.”

“Me too, Weasley,” Blaise agreed.
Ron tried his best to smile. To pretend he didn’t think it was bizarre and unnerving that Blaise Zabini was practically making small talk with him. Ginny glanced at Ron and found herself struggling to bite back a laugh.
Does Time Truly Heal?

The owls soared just beneath the ceiling, fluttering their wings in the charmed late spring sunlight which coated the wooden beams. If it wasn’t for the tangible tension at the breakfast table no one would ever have guessed something momentous was about to occur.

Hermione dug the crescents of her nails into her palms, “Let’s hope it’s good news.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Ginny battled to say, a piece of toast stuffed between her teeth, “A revision? It’ll be fine Hermione.”

Luna caught the paper as it fell from the air.

“Or not,” She said uncertainly, frowning at the paper which she held in her pale hands, “Did you have any idea this was going on, Hermione?”

Hermione chilled. It was an old photograph from before the war, the one they’d taken at Azkaban the day after Voldemort broke out the Death Eaters from their cages and back into the world. Above, just beneath the small print of Skeeter’s name, was a sickening title, Our Past Or Our Future?

“No,” Hermione snatched the Prophet from Luna, “Why the hell would Kingsley be trying to get rid of Azkaban? It makes no sense.”

“And they’ve decided Draco’s behind it,” Pansy added. She was reading it as best as she could from the other side of the table, twisting her head so the words flipped right side up, “That’s surprising.”

Draco smiled bitterly. Beneath the table, his fingernails were scraping the surface of his skin with just enough pressure for it to sting.

“But everyone knew I was working with Kingsley. He wasn’t exactly sneaking me into the office. Why would Skeeter wait until now to spin up some twisted narrative that’s probably going to cause a national crisis? No one at the Ministry thought Draco had me under Imperius to figure out some stupid plan to get the dark side back in power.”
“This is pathetic,” Ginny said.

No one else seemed to be able to find the ability to talk. Neville was in some disconnected other-world where it was not only his mother who was alive nor only him who was vengeful, but the dark figures who stalked his dreams were thriving again, palpitating with muscle and blood and life.

“How did they even get these documents anyway?” Hermione seethed, “No one who doesn’t work for the DMLE has access to them.”

“It’s probably non-existent bullshit, Hermione.”

She nodded halfheartedly at Ginny, stirring unusual amounts of sugar into her coffee and monitoring the top table from the corner of her eye. Waiting for someone to start talking. Waiting for something to happen. Restraining her limbs from jumping up themselves.

And eventually, something did. Hermione found herself in McGonagall’s office by mid-morning in a tattered leather armchair, next to Kingsley, trying not to stare too long at Dumbledore’s portrait. Some childlike part of her feared he would open his sleeping eyes and glare right back at her and that she would feel the weight of all her self judgements within them.

“The thing is,” Kingsley said quietly, deep in his own murky thoughts, “it was a note, a note I made just after the war. I want to get rid of the Dementors.”

“Dumbledore had mentioned doing that over the years.” McGonagall conceded.

Hermione couldn’t help herself, “But what’s wrong with that? It’s a fantastic idea.”

“Nothing in principle,” Kingsley pulled himself out of his chair and began to pace the length of the study, desperate to do something, anything, “But how many people would allow it to pass? Everyone’s scared to death of all the prisoners as it is. We need Azkaban to be secure now more than ever and the Dementors make people feel safe.”

“Which is insanity in itself,” Hermione huffed.
“Skeeter’s just twisted it to make it seem like we’re abolishing prison altogether and going back to house arrest. Which would never make any logical sense. But she has the evidence. Somehow, somewhere, she found the evidence.”

“And used it to sabotage the law that was supposed to gag her. Ironic isn’t it?”

"More like malicious,” McGonagall added, her cheeks a violent red, lips sewn even more so tightly together than usual.

There were no momentary, gleaming smiles from her today. Instead, the folds of skin that wrinkled her features remained tucked in tight lines. She seemed the same stern and frightening woman they had all thought her to be on their first day at Hogwarts before they were used to her strict softness.

Hermione couldn’t make sense of what was buzzing around in her head anymore. Everything felt too hot and heavy. Helplessly, she looked up at the empty portrait of Mr Black and tried to understand how almost a whole year later, they were all still in such a mess.
Mourning

The Great Hall had never looked so lonely. The Hogwarts banners were swinging instead of the house colours and everything felt far too cold for the cusp of summer.

This day had fallen upon them out of nothingness. They’d all been running farther and farther from it, feeling their lungs burn with enticing fresh air. And instead of never returning to it, they’d tripped right over it, tumbled on to the gravel and scuffed their knees, bleeding the same blood that darkened their clothes on that fateful night. The night of the biggest victory in wizarding history. But also the biggest losses.

Ginny felt like she was walking through a ghost town. Every corner she turned she saw a vague image of Fred. His lifeless body against the grey stone. In tongues of smoke, her mother took a deathly form, sobbing over his glassy stare and splayed arms. Fred had been sleeping for three hundred and sixty-five days now, he was finally one with the earth.

Pansy grasped Ginny’s hand. Students stared at the Slytherin and the Dumbledore’s Army fighter as they held on to each other, so far from the strangers they had been before. But Pansy didn’t care. She didn’t fucking care. Because every breath seemed to hurt more today. Her lungs ached and her hands shook and not even the duel they’d had in the courtyard at dawn could shake her tremors. She desired one thing but stuck like spellotape to something else, holding on for all she could.

Hannah hadn’t spoken a single word in almost twenty-four hours. She was too busy thinking of her parents. Of Ernie. Of all the horrible secrets she’d kept. These were the things that tied her tongue and left her stranded in her head. For the first time in months, she could feel nothing but pain again.

Luna watched the sunrise that morning. She rested her head against the glass as dull blues morphed into greys and greys burst into fantastic yellow. She listened to the birds singing and the girls in her dorm breathing slow and steady in slumber. She heard her mothers voice in her head. It told her what she needed to hear. When she got dressed half an hour later, she wore one maroon and one yellow sock and clipped in a pair of dangling emerald earrings. For her friends.

Neville almost did not go to the assembly. He considered feigning ill and staying in bed with his darkest memories. Torturing himself with the things he did not do and the things he did not say. There was no place for Augusta’s pride in his heart today. Nor time to acknowledge the fierce bravery he’d finally allowed himself to be proud of. All was black. He could see nothing. Hear nothing. He was nothing. Just meaningless particles that floated through the heavy doors and stopped at Gryffindor table. He listened to McGonagall read out the names of the fallen and tried his very hardest not to crumple up his face when he began to cry.
Theo had fucked Blaise. It had all happened in a rush. They had caught each other in the empty common room when for once, everyone else was in bed. There had been few words. He couldn’t even remember what they were. But he’d kissed Blaise’s soft skin and melted into him like cream in front of the empty fire grate. When it was over he didn’t move his head from Blaise’s chest. He wished he could stay there forever. But Blaise moved instead, sliding his trousers back up his thighs and buttoning his shirt. Theo did not move from the carpet until an hour had passed and his sweat had soaked into its fibres.

Blaise had made a beautiful mistake. He’d felt the sad pleasure of fucking someone you loved but could no longer love anymore. He listened to Theo’s voice like it was some hymn of devotion. He watched Theo’s eyes roll back and his cheeks flush with colour. He groaned when he came and when Theo collapsed into him, he wished he could wrap his arms around his fragile body, cradle him like a child. But nothing had changed. And a new day was dawning. It was cruel to live in ones past.

Hermione hadn’t slept at all. Not really. But she’d wrapped herself and Draco under both of the blankets Mrs Weasley had bought her two Christmases ago. Until they were sweltering and steaming because it felt safer than exposure. She thought of her parents’ vacant happiness. She could feel the cold wood of the Malfoy’s drawing room floorboards beneath her shoulder blades, she could hear Bellatrix cackling in her ears. It made her shake. But Draco held her there and she was suddenly very hot, comforted by the burning sensation of his palms pressed to her spine in the stifling heat. If she focused deeply enough she could swear she could feel Harry, his delirium, the stale coffee cup he held in his hands by oil lamp at that very same moment. And deep in her heart, she heard Ron’s voice repeating her name like a prayer.

Draco tried not to listen to the service. He knew that emotion gave way to pain and he feared how deeply his face would betray him to the hundreds of kids who were sitting around them. Instead, he tried to think about good things. Hermione, how he was finding it easier to sleep at night, the lack of nausea and the rush of something so strong he was sure it was love. But he’d cry later when he held her in his arms and she dampened his robes with her tears, hysterically repeating why why why and whispering about how much she missed them all.

The second of May would never be the same again. Time heals, for sure, but this day would remain an open gash of a wound, infected and incurable. A haunting reminder of their reality.
Harry apparated right into the storeroom of the joke shop. The atrium was stuffed with Press pushing cameras into the faces of anyone who attempted to leave the Ministry for their lunch break, asking urgent questions and chasing after hasty walkers as they tried to ignore the onslaught of scrutiny.

Hell had truly broken loose in the last week. It seemed to be a culmination of Skeeter, the anniversary of the battle and an unnaturally early heatwave that was sending the media insane. When he’d walked into the DMLE that morning there had been Aurors working through a number of letters that had been addressed to Kingsley, full of dark and disturbing curses and threats. Harry felt like he’d regressed into fifth year again, when everyone despised him and no one believed a word he said.

“It’s me,” He announced himself to Ron and whoever else was working that day, climbing over a box of skiving snack boxes and unlocking the door into the shop floor with a wave of his wand.

“Just go home, Harry,” Ron shouted to him, “You don’t want to know what’s going on here.”

“What are you talking about?”

But then Harry turned the corner and saw Ron and George in front of the wide shop window, wands smoothing charms and shields over the glass. Because Diagon Alley was teeming with protestors. Angry witches and wizards with signs scrawled in messy ink, shouting and swinging their wands threateningly.

Harry gaped.

“What the fuck is happening right now?”

“A revolt,” George said matter of factly, sounding more amused than anything.

He broke off some chocolate from a Honeydukes bar which was on a nearby display table, offering a chunk to Harry.
Harry took it, sniffing it when George wasn’t looking, *just to be sure*, before stuffing it into his mouth.

“See that bastard over there?” Ron asked him, “The one standing near Flourish and Blotts. He’s been screaming all morning about how we’ve betrayed everyone and we need to go to Azkaban. All because Hermione decided to shack up with Malfoy. Now they’re all convinced he’s the one influencing Kingsley. That he’s the new You Know Who or something.”

Harry stared at the crowd on the other side of the glass, the chocolate melting thickly on his tongue and coating his teeth.

“You can’t be serious.”

“They can’t see us, by the way,” Ron said, “Remembered those wards Hermione did last year. They still work.”

“We can’t just sit locked up in here all day watching them trying to break in,” Harry said.

“Why not? It’s funny. That old witch over there hit herself with her handbag trying to smash the door in twenty minutes ago,” George grinned.

*At least George seemed to be doing better these days,* Harry thought.

“I’ll be two seconds,” Harry said, turning on the spot and disappearing into nothingness.

“Where’s he gone now?” Ron said, tossing open a tapestry and sticking his head behind it like he was expecting Harry to be hiding behind it, playing a game of hide and seek.

“I don’t know. You don’t think he’s going to try to take them on do you?”

And at that moment Ron knew.

“It’s Harry, George. Of course he is.”
Ron took a final exhausted look around the shop, picked up his wand and headed to the back entrance, forcing his way outside into the crowd.

Soon Diagon Alley was full of trainee Aurors pushing out the protestors into separate streets, opening the hiding doorways into muggle London for them and making sure the fire grates that were scattered amongst the shops and pubs were being used. Some of them put up a fight and Ron ended up with a swollen thumb and a singed hairline. But that was the least of their worries.

_Harmless protestors were one thing, Harry thought darkly, but what was coming next would be another._
Feathers and the Future

“I’ve never seen Kingsley that mad at Harry before,” Hermione admitted.

She was lying flat on her back in the Ravenclaw common room, watching the light from the windows swirl in patterns over the starry ceiling. It felt like you could breathe in here, amongst the airy open windows and sky blue walls.

“Well I’d be mad too if I had a fleet of Hit Wizards ready to go and Harry Potter and his idiot friends took over,” Ginny grinned, her left ear pressed to the carpet, eyes closed like she was about to fall asleep.

“He said Harry can stop interfering now the war’s over. Something tells me that’s not going to happen, ever.”

“I can’t believe everyone wants you in Azkaban,” Luna added, sounding echoey from where she was precariously standing on the arm of the sofa.

She was trying to catch the feathers that were floating in the atmosphere like hanging clouds. They had been suspended in the air, smoky and white, all morning. An infuriated seventh year had informed them of their origins. According to him, it was some fifth years poor attempt at creating his own spell, which had resulted in the common room looking like something of a slumber party and being entirely unfit for studying for the Astrology NEWT.

“I’m surprised no one wants you hanged,” Hannah said quietly, “You know how people get. It’s a sensitive subject isn’t it?”

Hermione squirmed a little, thinking of Ernie and all of the violence that for all they knew, could still be pent up inside of him.

But she pushed it away like it was one of those derogatory comments from the Prophet, reaching over to squeeze Hannah’s shoulder and smiling bravely, “You’ll be my first choice of representation in the case that I end up wrongfully imprisoned, Hannah.”

“Mine too,” Ginny was on her feet now, joining Luna in her attempts to catch as many fire singed feathers as she could.
Hannah laughed, “Something tells me it’s Luna who’s going to need legal advice before the end of summer.”

“Daddy and I are liberating captive creatures,” Luna called from above them. You could practically hear the rolling of her eyes. Ginny was trying to levitate her high enough to catch a particularly fluffy one now, “not torturing them.”

“And I’m sure the Belgian Ministry will look at two British wizards breaking out Thestrals from their national zoo as ethical, too.”

“Yes,” Luna replied, absent and feather focused, “I’m glad you agree.”

“Look, Luna, that might not be a problem. Don’t get yourself arrested okay,” Hermione took a deep breath, “Kingsley offered me a job yesterday.”

“He offered you a job? Like a real one?” Ginny demanded, sitting up on her elbows.

“He wants me to join the DMLE, work with him full time on creating legislation, that kind of thing. He wants me to run for the Wizengamot.”

“You’re taking it right?” Ginny urged, “You have to take it!”

“I’m not actually. I said I much preferred the Creatures Department. Asked if I got the grades if I could be considered for a place there. He said the grades weren’t important but I insisted. Eventually, he agreed.”

Ginny let out a violent shriek and attacked Hermione in a hug.

“That’s insane! That’s amazing! Oh my god, you’re going to be the next Minister for Magic.”

“Slow down, Gin.”
Hermione turned back to Luna, giddy laughter still at the tip of her tongue “What this means is if I get the job, I will most definitely be looking into the unethical practices at magical zoos.”

“That’s so cool, Hermione,” Hannah said, transfixed with something quite like awe.

“I have to get the grades first though. I need all O’s. And there’s the interview process…” She let herself get carried away with all the pressures that were piling up on her, so much so that she barely registered the way the girls were sniggering, “what? why are you laughing?”

“You’re going to kill it,” Ginny said, “we don’t need convincing.”

Hermione gulped.

“Well, I do,” She replied.
Keep Me at Arms Length

Blaise couldn’t even see the surface of the coffee table anymore. It was appalling, the way they all piled it up high with books and parchment and ink pots. Because the elves never moved schoolwork. He would have to glare at that lump of NEWTs notes all evening, until he felt sick with guilt over the fact that he had barely scraped the surface of his transfiguration syllabus.

So he pulled out his wand and moved it all on to the floor in an untidy heap, sinking into the sofa and tossing his feet up against the clear table, staring into the grate that it was too hot to light a fire in.

He had taken to doing this lately. Nursing his discomfort in these drawn-out, lonely evenings, flipping through magazines and staring at the ceiling as people swept in and out of the common room. Staying there until Draco and Granger made him uncomfortable with their abnormally affectionate reading sessions or when the sun was beginning to rise and he was afraid Theo might stroll out of the dorm at any minute.

Just as he was considering this distasteful possibility, the exact thing he’d dreaded happening occurred. Theo had come out of the dormitory and was now standing in front of the coffee table, glaring between Blaise and the pile of books he’d clearly shoved off its surface.

He was in his pyjamas, glasses slipping down his nose and a quill pushed behind his ear. Blaise’s heart skipped an unintentional beat. Fuck. Now he was thinking about what they’d done a week ago. How they’d rode out those bitter waves of pleasure as they heralded in remembrance of one of the most harrowing nights of their lives.

“Was that necessary?” Theo bent down, rifling through the heap to find whatever it was he was looking for.

“’Yes, Blaise replied shortly. Resolutely not looking Theo’s way for fears that he would melt into a mushy pool of butter if he glanced at those warm green eyes for longer than a second.

“Fuck you, Blaise,” Theo said gruffly.

“Is that an offer?”

He knew he was infuriating. He knew Theo could read him like a book.
“No, no it’s not.”

Two seconds passed in angry silence. Theo stared at Blaise and Blaise stared anywhere else. The air teemed with tension, humming and vibrating.

“What the fuck happened to you?” Theo shouted.

Yes, shouted. He was shouting now. It was strange, watching someone so soft and quiet explode like a volcanic eruption, oozing their lava all around them until you too began to burn, your insides incinerating with rage.

Blaise trembled, “I don't know what you’re talking about.”

“What is it?” Theo snapped, “jealousy? Because I’m allowed to have friends other than you and Pans and Draco. I’m allowed to live the life I want to live.”

He was standing over him now, almost straddling his hips. Arms closing Blaise in on the sofa, breath hitting his skin. It was impossible to look away anymore.

He raised his eyes with an unnerving degree of control. Seeing his reflection in Theo’s glasses, he was almost surprised that his skin wasn’t actually on fire.

“Well get out and live it then.”

Blaise knew that Theo had not expected that answer. He wasn’t sure exactly what it was Theo had expected, but he knew it was always something far more tender and romantic than Blaise had ever been capable of. Because Theo saw Blaise in a light that wasn’t even real. He saw what he wanted to see. Blaise saw himself in darkness, the way it had and would always be.

But Theo was closer now, his nose brushing Blaise’s, head tilting and Blaise let himself sink into it, he wanted to pretend again, live in this unfathomably happy fantasy pretending that everything was okay.
“No,” Theo said thickly. He jerked his head back, shaking it profusely, “Not anymore”

And as he marched back to his dormitory, Blaise was sure he watched fresh tears spill from Theo’s eyes.
“They want me to resign.”

“Well, you can’t do that. Who’d take over?”

“Relax, Hermione, I won’t be resigning any time soon.”

They went back to their tasks. Kingsley approving paperwork, Hermione, reading some Ministry book from 1741, occasionally looking back at her Transfiguration notes. She yawned, reaching for her coffee cup only to find it empty. Unsatisfied and dithery, she watched Kingsley a little longer, then made what she knew would be an unwarranted suggestion.

“You should put your statement out.”

“I don’t want to put anything out there until I know who the mole is. Someone is working against us on the inside. I have a few ideas, some Aurors who wanted my job when I left could be behind it. They hated that I didn’t offer it to any of them.”

She was only half-listening. Part of her was considering calling Kathryn in so she could fill up her cup but the thought of seeing her bitter face was still quite repulsive. Even now, Hermione walked directly into the office to avoid her, she hated the thought of having to stop and talk to her. It felt like being in first year all over again, listening to people talk behind her back and spending long afternoons in the toilets crying while Myrtle burst water pipes open and swirled out of toilet bowls.

But there was still a part of her that rejected the idea of demanding coffee from another human being. It made her think of Kreacher and Sirius, how he’d been tortured into the darkest of places and forced into service.

Suddenly, she was alert.

“We’ll figure out,” Hermione told him, her mind going at a hundred miles per hour now, “I’m helping whether you want me to or not.”
“Just be careful, Hermione. Make sure Malfoy doesn’t leave the castle alone, there are some vicious people out there.”

“I know,” She nodded. She was putting together the signs now, connecting them with bright red pins on the map in her mind, “We’re looking after each other.”

An hour passed and Kingsley had looked at the clock wearily, excusing her. Telling her to go back to the castle and focus on her exams. That they would resume this whole Skeeter mess once NEWTs were over. It took mere seconds for Hermione to clamp her books shut. She found herself rushing out of the office and into the lift, sinking further into the Ministry to find the training department.

“Got a minute?”

To Harry, she looked like a floating head, excitedly hovering over the wall of his cubicle.

“Yeah, course,” He said, making a show of looking like he was actually doing something, shuffling some papers around and putting his quill back in the inkpot.

But Hermione wasn’t stupid, “You haven’t, have you. When was that due?”

He eyed the essay mournfully, “Three hours ago.”

“Merlin, Harry. I’ll make it quick. I need you to do something for me. I’ve got a whole plan about it, I’ll owl you a time and we’ll meet up in the Leaky or something.”

The words were coming out of her so fast they barely made sense. Then she hugged him quickly, kissed his forehead, and disappeared again, leaving him there to wonder what exactly had just happened.

“Thanks for not being vague,” He muttered to himself, “really appreciate it.”
The Beginning of an End

“You feel that? It’s a breeze,” Ginny cheered, swirling around with her arms in the air, teetering dangerously close to the edge of the lake.

Hermione spread her cloak out on the grass and got down on her knees. The sun was dancing over the lake in a sparkly wash of colour. Birds fluttered between trees and bowtruckles scaled the tall trunks.

There was an air of relief all around her. Pansy was lying on her front, watching Ginny spin carelessly. Ginny’s hair was getting longer now, it tangled around her neck as she swayed. But she didn’t seem to mind it so much anymore.

Draco rolled up his right sleeve and when Hermione looked at him he smiled, eyes squinting before the sun and hair flailing in the wind, his white roots bare. She took his left hand and held the cuff of his sleeve with her fingertips, waiting for some severe rebuttal that never came. So she slid the material up until it met the dip in his forearm and held her breath. The scar was even greyer now, like an intricate web of veins.

Pansy continued to watch Ginny. Ginny continued to swirl around. Hermione continued to look at Draco with a smile that rivalled the sun with its brightness.

The students surrounding them cared little. Too focused on their own conversations, they passed by the four of them as if they were invisible. Like nothing significant was happening. Draco Malfoy let himself breathe. And the world did not collapse around him.

Obviously, there was still talk. There was no hiding the tensions that were rising in London. The protests. The articles. The outrage. The fear of a country run in Voldemort’s vision. But this time the whisperers made sure they weren’t heard. They saw the Slytherins and Hermione and everyone else who was friends with them in a distinctly human light. Something that, a few months back, hadn’t been a future Hermione was able to comprehend. These students carried deep dislike, but they did not fear harm like their parents.

Draco dipped down onto his back and hid his head in the shade of the tree branches above them, opening his palms face up and closing his eyes so he didn’t have to think about what he was doing. So it didn’t show on his face that he was perhaps a little scared.
“One down,” Ginny panted, finally diving down to the ground. The Giant Squid surfaced momentarily, making humongous waves quiver over the lake, “Just nineteen to go.”

“Just nineteen,” Hermione repeated, “Not like there’s a lot of work left or anything.”

Pansy groaned, “Hermione, you already knew this stuff a year ago, you can stop bitching now. Just forget about exams and enjoy whatever the fuck you heathens find so great about this damn weather.”

“We’re finally not ten times hotter than the ovens in the kitchens and you’re still complaining,” Ginny jabbed at her, brushing a strand of dark hair behind her ear.

The gesture made Pansy stare at her hands where they lay flat in the thick grass, hoping that if she stared hard enough at her black nails all of the feelings bubbling up inside of her would dissipate. Go unnoticed, like the spiders amongst the tall blades of grass.

“I preferred it hot,” She protested, gaze still clamped on the earth, “Made me feel closer to hell.”

Ginny laughed like Pansy was telling a flippant joke and not her deepest truth. Draco grinned. But Hermione had her fingernails between her teeth.

She pulled Draco’s arm away from over his eyes, demanding his attention, “What did you put for 34?”

“Which one was that?”

“The one about Jupiter’s moon cycles.”

“I don’t remember,” He yawned, grey eyes tucking beneath his eyelids once more.

Hermione sat up taller, “How the fuck don’t you remember? It was five minutes ago.”

“Hermione,” He sighed, sitting up and holding both of her hands so they stopped their sudden
shaking, “It’s done. You can’t change anything, don’t torture yourself over it.”

She gripped his wrists hard, speaking in a disproportionately calm tone, “I’ve failed, haven’t I? I’m never going to work for the Creatures Department.”

“You’re spiralling again,” Ginny interrupted, “Do I need to get Ron here to distract you with a bad joke or can he carry on defending his shop from deranged, bloodthirsty wizards?”

“I’m just nervous,” She murmured, inhaling so deeply her lungs felt like balloons about to burst.

“We know. And we’re telling you not to be,” Ginny said firmly, “You did your best. You destroyed a Horcrux, for fuck's sake, you can handle a few exams.”

Hermione smiled a little. Although she hadn’t meant to.

Ginny beamed regardless, clearly satisfied, “There we go.”

They lay there a few minutes longer, listening to nearby seventh years talk about their summer plans, hearing the steam train rumbling as it trundled by in the distance. Then-

Hermione shot up, “I need to get to the library.”

Tugging her cloak from underneath Draco, she swung her bag over her shoulder. Ginny and Pansy eyed each other.

“Take the day off,” Draco said, “celebrate with me?”

“Study with me?” She countered.

Hermione pretended not to notice the pause he took before he replied.
“I’ll sit with you and read.”

Only Pansy recognised the tremor in his voice.

But Hermione took his hand and pulled him up to standing, hasty to disappear, “Deal. Come on then.”

As they walked back to the castle, Ginny and Pansy watched them. Watching until they became specks as small as pinpricks, until Hogwarts swallowed them whole.

Pansy was the one to break the silence, “She’s working herself into the ground. She fell asleep on top of her bed with her astronomy textbook on her face last night.”

“Yeah she does that,” Ginny grimaced, “it’s kind of a personality trait.”

She thought of the years gone by. Hermione falling asleep at the Gryffindor table. Running around with that stupid time turner. Crying because Ron said something cruel at the wrong time. Almost making herself sick with fear over failure. The memory of her boggart haunting her dreams.

“She needs some forced study leave or something,” Pansy told her firmly, “girl’s going crazy.”

“She’s always been crazy.”

“I’m being serious.”

And Pansy was. There was no malice, no amusement in her tone. Just her straight red lips and honest eyes, looking deep enough to swim in.

“No, I know,

Ginny shrugged, “It’s just, what can you do?”
Avalanche

Hermione,

We should talk soon, I think I have something.

Harry.

PS. Ron sends his love

The owl had arrived in the golden tinge of the setting sun. Its rays spilled through the windows like warm liquid, painting the walls in magnificent orange.

The Eighth Year Common Room was quiet this evening. Only Hermione, Draco and Neville were present, cramming in as much information as their brains could take before the Defence exam. Only two days away, time seemed to be slipping from Hermione’s grasp. Looking away from the clock made hours pass in minutes. Surrendering to sleep turned weeks into days. For a brief moment, she longed for the shattered remains of the time turners, to fix them up and use them, greedily rake in hour after hour of extra time. Time she otherwise did not have.

Pressing the note to her heart with poorly restrained glee, she strode back over from the window to the table at which Draco was sitting. She placed the parchment directly on top of his textbook and smiled at him silently, waiting for a reaction.

It was not the kind she’d wanted.

“I still think it’s a fucking stupid idea,” Draco told her, folding the parchment into a delicate paper plane and aiming for Hermione’s nose.

She snatched it from the air, “But what if I’m right? What if we catch them?”

“Even if you are right, which I highly doubt you are considering the shit you’ve told me about this person, what are you going to do? Storm into the Ministry and demand an arrest? They hate us right now, Hermione. I’m controlling you so I can take over the country and kill all your friends, remember?”

He said this with the same heights of flamboyant sarcasm he often met Harry with when a story had got around about him fainting or performing poorly in an exam.
Hermione sucked at her teeth, more than slightly irritated, “Well, that’s not-

“I rest my case,” Draco interrupted her, hands slapping the table as if he had won the argument.

“Shut up,” She said tightly, looking back to the report she was drafting for Kingsley, trying to look as if she wasn’t nervously contemplating the things he’d just said, “You’re annoying me.”

“Because I’m right.”

She half expected him to be smirking, all cocky and proud. But when she looked up from her full stop he seemed unnaturally sombre. It unnerved her.

“No,” She protested, refusing to let him have the last laugh, regardless of whether she had shoved her boot so deep into the mud she couldn’t see a feasible way of yanking it out or not, “You’re annoying me because I’m trying to write up these references.”

“Kingsley said that could wait until after exams.”

He was beginning to grate on her temper now, he seemed to have an answer for everything, “And your point is?”

“Stop trying to do everything at once,” He said bluntly.

Hermione huffed out an incredulous laugh, the kind that told him not to underestimate her ability to prove him wrong, “I’m just making sure I-

He leaned forward, “What time did you go to bed last night?”

“Midnight,” She said quickly, “When I left you.”

This felt like an interrogation. Like something she had watched at the courts when she had infiltrated
the Ministry to search for Horcruxes. Her cheeks were glowing red as if covered in rashes and when
she looked past Draco, towards the fireplace, Neville had already vacated the room amidst what at
was turning into an indisputable argument.

“You didn’t though did you? Pansy told me.”

“Fuck,” she muttered under her breath, not thinking about what she was saying.

“What time?”

“That’s not important,” she retorted, going back to her writing and hoping that if she pretended
nothing was wrong he would drop his opposition and leave her be.

But Draco snatched the parchment right from under her quill, making her gasp. Now she had no
choice but to look at him.

“What time, Hermione?”

“I didn’t!” She shouted, slamming her quill against the surface of the table so hard it skidded right off
the edge, “Okay? I went to the library.”

He was holding the report just out of her reach, treating her like a petulant child, “You need to slow
down. you’re making yourself ill.”

“I’m. Fine,” She bit out, leaning over the table and struggling to snatch her paper back, grasping
handfuls of empty air and feeling her blood boil hotly in her veins.

“You’re not sleeping. You’re barely eating. All you do is talk about the stupid skeeter stuff or exams.
You haven’t picked up a book that isn’t a textbook in weeks. You’re going to go fucking insane.”

She saw only the sharpness in his face, like shards of glass making human impressions, misleading
her into a false sense of security just to cut her open once she felt safe.
She was visibly trembling now, “I don’t want to listen to this.”

Without bothering to collect her things she stormed up to the dormitory, making sure to slam the door so hard that everything shook. She cried angry tears in her bed that night and hated herself for it.
“Will you stop being so moody?” Ginny shouted, “It’s throwing off my aim.”

She spun around on her broom, turning her back on him and zooming down the pitch in the opposite direction. If he could see Pansy’s face from this distance, Draco was sure she would be grinning.

Lost for what to do without a chaser to play against, he remained by the hoops, floating in the warm and stagnant air, trying not to look at Gryffindor tower. He was imagining Hermione, alone and overworked, drowning in piles of books and as mad at him as he was at himself. But they had left her sleeping quite peacefully that morning if Pansy was to be trusted. And somehow, after so long as siblings more than friends, he was inclined to believe her.

It was a warm day but dark grey clouds overloaded the sky until no glimmer of sunshine could break through. Scotland spent its morning in gloom and ash, the tops of the mountains obscured by angry puffs of grey. Draco had foregone breakfast that morning but he could picture Hermione sitting beneath the Halls’ ceiling, glancing up at the dull sky, a sense of foreboding swallowing her like it was swallowing him at that moment.

Then, amidst his trancelike staring at the castle, a great pain bloomed in his abdomen. He tipped forward, hurtling into the sand beneath the Quidditch hoops. The quaffle thudded down next to him in a satisfied manner, barely missing his head. Draco grimaced.

“You haven’t broken her,” Ginny called from three metres away, walking towards him with absolutely no desperation nor desire to make sure he was not seriously injured.

You’ve broken me, he thought hazily, seeing stars behind his eyes as he turned on his side and curled his head into the nook of his elbow.

With the throbbing and stinging just above his hip, he could envision the purple swelling that would flare up there. In the meantime, he wondered vaguely if he had enough energy left to murder Ginny for launching the quaffle at him like that before he dragged himself to the corridor outside the Infirmary, where Pomfrey would find him hours later, immediately bursting into tears and assuming him dead.

“Sometimes she needs a firm hand anyway,” Ginny continued on about Hermione, taking his disturbed groaning as humble agreement, “I’m sure she’ll wake up and feel tons better and come and
“talk it out with you.”

“You’re evil.” He murmured, still clutching his stomach as he climbed to his feet.

“You weren’t paying attention! I thought you’d swerve eventually!”

He looked at her incredulously. She tried not to let him see her slight, amused smile.

“Has he broken a rib?” Pansy joined excitedly.

She must have run down from the stands the second he’d hit the floor. She was panting and her hair was tangled in her red lipstick. She brushed it away from her face with a nail.

“All of them,” Draco said.

Ginny snorted, as if unable to control how hilarious she thought the whole thing was. Then, abruptly, she jabbed a finger in Draco’s side. He practically screamed, slapping her hand away and bending over, his own hands braced on his thighs, trying to catch his breath, fill his lungs with air again. Pretending determinedly that he could not hear the two of them trying to hold back laughter so half-heartedly that they may as well have not even tried.

“If anything was broken he wouldn’t be making such a damn fuss,” Ginny said mildly, “he’s fine. I even charmed the pitch this morning, it was a cushioned fall.”

“Why does that not surprise me?” Pansy admitted.

Suddenly, Draco was having flashbacks to when he was four and demanded a week off lessons with his mother because he’d fallen over in the garden and was too ‘dizzy’ to learn his numbers. Then, of how he’d rolled around in the Hospital wing for as long as he could over that Hippogriff scratch, how even by June he was complaining just as often that it ached. He tried not to think about that just then, focusing on the pangs of pain punching him in the stomach instead.

“You’re a twat,” Draco replied, his insides churning like beef being minced.
This was not a dramatic situation. No malicious attempt to have a Hippogriff killed off or skip afternoon study. He was suffering.

Ginny laughed loudly. Uncontrollably. And with a severe attempt at suppressing his own unexpected urge to grin, he swooped down for the Quaffle by his feet and threw it at her, hard.

She shrieked, running to hide behind Pansy as if they were children, lungs burning with the hilarity of it all.

“Penalty!” Pansy gasped, looking for once in her life, truly scandalised and not like she was playing an unfamiliar part in a play about insignificant people.

Draco frowned at her, baffled, “Do you even know what that means?”

“Not really,” Pansy shrugged, “Seemed the right thing to say.”

Ginny composed herself quickly, ducking out from behind Pansy, “I’ve got a numbing potion and some bruise paste in my bag. I am sorry, you know, I didn’t do it on purpose. Come on, 20 more minutes, I’ll keep this time. Hit me as many times as you want.”

He considered leaving and spending the rest of the afternoon in the common room, playing Gobstones with Theo and feeling glum. But Ginny’s eyes glistened. Full of gleeful tears and wide warmth. And he saw her like a springtime flower, opening herself up, petals towards the sun, letting him in, trusting him not to stamp on her. His heart clenched a little. He tried to ignore it.

“He considered leaving and spending the rest of the afternoon in the common room, playing Gobstones with Theo and feeling glum. But Ginny’s eyes glistened. Full of gleeful tears and wide warmth. And he saw her like a springtime flower, opening herself up, petals towards the sun, letting him in, trusting him not to stamp on her. His heart clenched a little. He tried to ignore it."

“Count the scores this time, Pans.” He said stiffly.

Ginny made a triumphant cheering sort of sound and ran for her bag. Draco looked up at the sky. It was clearing.
Hermione opened her eyes. Her lashes felt heavy against her cheeks, pressing down like weights and forcing her eyelids shut every time she tried to pry them open.

“What’s-,” She struggled, her throat raspy and dry.

Hands gently pushed her down and her head spun from the fight against them, trying harder than she’d ever done before to get up.

“Don’t try to sit up, it’s okay. I’m here.”

Her eyes rolled, trying to make out her surroundings. The warm yellow sunlight was dazzling her now, making her eyes ache, and the air smelled of potion making and disinfectant. This was the hospital wing, she realised.

“What happened?” She asked Draco, who she could now make out amongst the bright yellow leaking around the curtains which were drawn around the bed.

He was sitting on the edge of the mattress, hands still on her forearms, his thumbs rubbing over her skin soothingly. The sunlight skimmed his hair and illuminated him in gold. Hermione was sure she was dreaming.

“You collapsed,” He told her steadily.

Hermione’s heart lurched and panic rose in her throat.

“Wh- I don’t have time. What time is it?”

“Eight at night.”

“No, no, no,” She struggled against him to sit up, thrashing around beneath the white sheets as much as her weakness could allow, “the defence exam is in thirteen hours. Where are my notes? I need my
“Hermione,” Draco argued firmly, taking her face in his hands so she had no choice but to listen to him, “you’re seriously dehydrated. You’re exhausted. Pomfrey wants you in here until you’re better and that’s not going to be a three-hour job.”

She let her eyes close against the softness of his palms, surrendering, letting the tiredness consume her.

“But my exams-

He caught her as she tried to get up again but it was more halfhearted this time. He stroked her damp forehead with the back of his hand, listening to her shaking breaths even out into something deeper.

“You can take them in August, there’s a resit period. Get some rest. Please. You’re going to be able to take your exams when you’re better.’

To Hermione, it sounded like he was begging and every inch of her that wanted to despise him for his brutal honesty couldn’t. So she crumpled backwards, down onto the pillow beneath her head, sighing morosely.

“I messed up, didn’t I?”

Draco was pouring her a glass of water now. She listened to it tumble down the chute of the jug like rainfall, trying to ignore how sleepy it made her feel.

“You didn’t.” He shook his head, handing her the cold glass, “you just hit a hurdle.”

“Well, it’s annoying.” She scoffed, pulling herself up on her elbows and drinking deeply, letting the coldness line her throat and the dryness disappear from her tongue. She had not realised just how thirsty she was.

Wiping her mouth with her hand, she handed the glass back to him, a silent demand for more.
“I hate hurdles,” She said quietly.

Draco laughed a little, “Me too.”
Waking Up

It had been three days since she woke up in the hospital ward. Three torturously long days. Her friends filtered in and out for no more than minutes at a time, consumed by their work. Often, Hermione lay there, just listening to the bells that signalled the end of exams, then the footsteps of students and their relieved and excited chatter. Lying here, she couldn’t do anything but ignore her life bit by bit until everything she knew turned to dust.

Madame Pomfrey had refused to allow her the pleasure of perusing textbooks, even though Hermione insisted it was for fun. So Draco had spent yesterday lunchtime in the library, searching for appropriate material to entertain her through the long hours of what felt like solitary confinement. He’d come back with a large stack of children’s books and although Hermione found reading the same story in differing forms about a little witch being an ordinary girl, saved valiantly by a noble wizard, it was better than nothing. Though she missed the thick, demanding tomes from her dormitory cupboards like a piece of her heart.

Every time Draco had come back after lessons he had asked her what she’d read that day and Hermione would give him an amusing and bitter account of these backwards stories whilst the radio hummed in the background.

She watched the sun rise and fall from her narrow bed frame, trying to make out the trees swaying in the wind. Attempting to see beyond the stained glass windows that blocked her from the outside world, wishing deeply that she could fall in and out of sleep without Pomfrey having to provide her with various herbal droughts. When Madame Pomfrey did this, she promised darkly to Hermione that these had no addictive qualities when taken in such small doses. Hermione was so exhausted she did not need much of any of them, it seemed. Because when she did sleep, she slept long and deep, as if her body was trying to make up for the last two years in a single week.

But on Thursday, no matter how hard she tried, no sleep had come. And when Hannah burst through the doors after dinner, dying to speak to her about her trip to London, Hermione couldn’t have been more grateful for the distraction.

“It was amazing,” She gushed, pulling out muggle polaroid pictures from her bag, they were of tall and imposing buildings fringed with greenery, “You’d have loved the library, it almost rivalled Hogwarts. Please come and visit when I start.”

Hermione looked at the photograph in her hand, one Hannah had taken of Luna perched on a wall that was so tall even her long legs were dangling above ground as she observed the clock tower on one of the buildings.
“Of course I’ll visit,” She beamed, “And you like the course? The people?”

“It’s weird not being able to do magic, Luna put her foot in it a few times, I’m surprised we didn’t need to obliterate anybody. But I met one of my Professors and we talked about the subject for ages, it was fascinating.”

Hermione thought longingly of all the muggle universities she’d researched as an over-eager child, always expecting she’d end up at one of them. She would end up studying books or science or anything else that drew in her interest, excelling under the same roofs that once housed the great minds of history.

Hannah collected the photos from the pile at Hermione’s feet, “How’s it going here? Feeling better?”

“Yeah,” She replied honestly, “Draco’s keeping me company. I just can’t believe exams are almost over.”

She was still thinking of Hannah, off to University. Of all of her friends having spent their morning in the Great Hall sitting their Potions exam. She felt useless, lying around all day, doing nothing but reading children’s books and listening to the new Weird Sisters song blare from the radio on repeat.

Hannah looked at her with a sad smile, bending forwards so her elbows rested on the sheets beside Hermione. She looked at her with hundreds of words in her eyes.

“Luna told me something a while ago that I kind of live by now. She says you can either let your suffering define you or define your suffering yourself. Just because you’re struggling doesn’t mean you have to let it control you. When…Ernie left,” She stuttered here, eyes closing as if savouring a memory that hurt her just as much as it warmed her, “I felt like I’d failed myself. But with what Luna said, I tried to look at it differently. I tried to change it into something good. I’m still trying to figure it out but I’m proud of myself, I’m proud of where my life’s going, what I’m doing with it, how I’m defining my suffering.”

Hermione did not say anything for a minute, thinking over what Hannah had said, connecting it to a million of her own memories. She thought of all the times she’d pushed so hard to make everything the same as it had always been. How she’d wanted it so badly to be as if nothing had changed, how ultimately, she still did. Her mind jolted in realisation. Subtly, she began to wonder if her life would be any less difficult if she followed Luna’s advice too, if she nurtured her darkness, if she stopped being afraid of it. It was a dangerous and thrilling thought.
Finally, she spoke.

“That girl has a lot of wisdom for someone who believes in make-believe doesn’t she?”

Hannah grinned, “Yeah, she does.”

Hermione got the sense that Hannah had finally found some of her peace. She and Luna made beautiful friends.
“Hey! Neville! Slow down!”

He had just reached the doors back into the castle from the greenhouses when he realised someone was chasing him.

“Oh, it’s you,” He said when he saw it was Theo running after him, carrying his bag in his arms like a small, immobile child.

Neville hadn’t meant to sound so disappointed at his presence. In all honesty, it was everything he wanted and more just to see Theo bounding up to him like a jubilant puppy.

But he felt like a rock-solid boulder, standing in the way of a relationship that was meant to be because of his own selfishness. The whole thing made him increasingly uneasy these days and he could no longer pretend not to see it.

“Yeah, me,” Theo panted, catching up so he could join Neville in a brisk walk through the foyer, “How did it go for you?”

“Alright, I think,” He conceded, “I repotted the Mimbletonia a little messily though. Burst a few boils by accident.”

Taking a moment to think about the examiners face when she realised she was about to be splattered with thick, yellowish gunk that dripped from her glasses and into her tweed-clad lap, a shiver of embarrassment crept up his spine. He was sure he’d lost points for that, points that he could not afford to loose.

“Well, that confirms it,” Theo said, his voice honeyed with playful sarcasm, “You’ll never be a Herbologist now.”

Despite himself, Neville grinned, nudging Theo with his elbow, “Watch me.”

“Bold. I like that,” Theo said quietly.
His confidence was building again. Climbing back up to the summit of their friendship and basking in the glow of its ease.

“Feeling bold enough to come and raid the kitchen with me? An end of exams celebration?”

About to turn left and tackle the staircase, they stopped to look at each other. Too nervous to take his gaze from the reflective sheen of Theo’s glasses, too nervous to look deeper and find what was truly behind those metal frames, Neville did not let himself stop to think too hard about it.

Impulsively, he nodded, “You're on.”

So they followed the dark passageway, delving into the mouth of the dungeons and through to the end of the corridor that met the entrance of the kitchen. The golden warmth of it swallowed them as they turned their backs to the world once more.
“Finally,” Pansy said, throwing up her arms and falling back on to the sofa.

“What?”

Theo’s hand was still on Neville’s arm, helping him through the door to the common room in a needless but entirely necessary manner. This close to him, he smelled of butterbeer and cinnamon.

Without saying another word to Theo, Pansy poured more wine into overly lavish champagne glasses, handing them around the common room one by one. Everyone was there. Even Blaise was standing by the fireplace, his arms crossed so tightly over his chest it must’ve been hard to breathe.

Pansy raised her glass, “To all of us for getting through this disaster of a year. And to Hermione for refraining from work for an entire week. We had no idea you had it in you.’

Hermione beamed. Theo noticed that she looked brighter since he’d last seen her when Neville had made him stop by the hospital wing for ten minutes between exams. Part of him wished he’d spent more time with her, stretched out a helping hand when she had needed it the most as Neville had done for him. But they had the rest of time to do those things now. There were no locked doors between their lives anymore.

Everyone raised their glasses and the rims glittered in the sunlight, “To us.”

Theo drank, becoming slightly disappointed when he realised that this was no alcohol. Instead, a sugary apple fizz bubbled and swirled behind his closed lips. He looked across at Pansy and she nodded in the smallest of ways, head tilting in the direction of the sofa. He understood.

“Can you believe we leave this place in two weeks?” Hermione said.

“No way,” Ginny scoffed from where she had sandwiched herself between Hermione and Draco on the aforementioned sofa, looking like their abnormally ginger child, “part of me is expecting a letter next month with a book list enclosed.”
“Do you think we’ll ever see it again?” Hannah asked quietly, looking around the room hungrily as if the second they went to bed that night it would all disappear from under their feet.

“Of course we will,” Neville chimed in, “just not as students anymore.”

And Theo let his mind float into the galaxies that were beginning to glow in the sky above them as the sun slowly sunk beneath the lake. He imagined their future in short vignettes. Hannah coming to own the streets of London like she now owned her own mind. Neville teaching excited second years how to safely repot a mandrake, confident and content. Pansy, a wild yet permanent fixture in his house, apart from when Ginny would be playing with the Harpies, of course. Then, she would be watching from the Parkinsons’ box, smirking sweetly every time her girlfriend tossed that quaffle through a hoop. He saw Draco finding his place in this strange world with his closest of friends whilst, at an alarming rate, Hermione ascends through ranks at the Ministry, fearless and good. Luna, disappearing for months at a time to various obscure rainforests, sending back postcards and enclosing photographs of nothing with a note that said in order to see the creature one must close their eyes and believe.

He saw all of their lives brightly before them. He saw the animosity dying down and the peace spreading its pure white wings. He saw everything he hoped the future would be. But he didn’t see himself. Nor did he see Blaise. And his heart sunk like a ship.

“Want to play some chess?” He asked, desperate for something to propel his mind into a different place.

Ginny jumped up, “Go on then.”

She summoned the board and small wooden box of figures with her wand, catching them in the other hand with impressive precision.

“lets team up, two minds are better than one.”

“I’m with Neville,” Pansy said quickly.

They all stared at her. Ginny looked momentarily horrified that she would even consider anyone but her.
“What? He’s better than you two.”

Neville blinked. His cheeks growing redder by the second. But Theo grinned at him.

“Good move, Pans. Guess I’ll just destroy you with Ginny over here.”

"Yes," Ginny nodded, looking at him proudly, “You’re no match for us. We’re an impenetrable field of intelligence.”

They were all so caught up in the calm, relishing as they rebuilt from the papery storm of exams that had thrashed their brains around inside their skulls. The four of them in their game, bickering and bragging at every move. Blaise in his own sad solitude. Hannah, Luna and Draco in the middle of a conversation where at least one of them was slightly baffled at any given time.

Woven up amongst one another, none of them noticed Hermione standing by the window, nor the great brown owl flying away in her stead.

Chapter End Notes

check out my works page for a surprise...
“You should have said something.”

Hermione was watching him pace around McGonagall’s office. His feet thudded against the stone floor in precise thumps of equal depth like the beginning of an ominous song and McGonagall, in her chair, sitting rigidly, looked as if she couldn’t decide whether she was relieved or infuriated.

“Don't be like that Kingsley,” She said apologetically, “I was right.”

He seemed to rise out of his stupor a little, coming to a stop and resting his chin on his fist, “Yes. How did you know?”

Hermione scrambled to the edge of her chair, eager to explain it all.

“Well, you asked her to check the post war crime records. That gave her access to all the confidential vaults. And she hates my guts, so it wasn’t that hard to put two and two together when I stopped looking too far into everything. Sometimes the answer is right in front of you in the form of a secretary at the forefront of an underground revolution who’s trying to save us all from an evil that no longer exists. Harry tailed her for a week tops before he found Skeeter's business card in the rubbish bin when she threw out her coffee cup. Then he questioned the guys who work down in the vaults about how long she was in there for and it seemed ridiculous to spend three hours searching for something when you knew where to find it. And it was plain sailing from the moment he got hold of her bank records. Skeeter's been paying her for months, I wouldn't be surprised if it was her cousin or someone who took that photo of me and Draco at Hogwarts. I mean, you have to feel sorry for her, its not her fault she lost almost everyone to Voldemort. But that's no excuse for fearmongering and exploitation.”

She almost caught him smile.

“It will be a slow healing process, I realise,” McGonagall told them, looking at Hermione hesitantly as though she was a very dangerous thing.

Kingsley nodded, “Very slow. The five hundred galleon fine and a criminal trial doesn’t exactly endear her to us. She was carried away screaming about an uprising to defeat the Malfoy empire, whatever that is supposed to mean. They're all dead or gone but one anyway.”
One of Dumbledore’s silver contraptions whirred softly behind them. Hermione glanced over at it, watching it swirl like a spinning top. The dust seemed to sit in the air just then, heavy like ashes. And when she looked up, Dumbledore was vacant from his portrait, his empty throne lauding over them like a virtuous memory.

“You’ve handled it brilliantly, Miss Granger. Even if you did go behind my back. Potter too, he’s clearing paying attention in his training sessions, even if he did break about fifteen laws in the process.”

Hermione beamed, “Thanks, Minister.”

“I want you here in September, whether you get into the Creatures Department or not. You’re an asset to the Ministry that I don’t want to lose,” He told her seriously, “a friend too.”

“You can rely on me. I’m here until the end.”

“Good. I can’t wait. Have a nice summer, don’t work too hard. You too Minerva, you both deserve a break.”

“I’ll try my hardest.” Hermione said.

“Yes, thank you Kingsley. I’m sure Miss Granger will go on to do wonderful things with her future.”

Green flames ate at Kingsley as he made his way back to the Ministry. McGonagall returned to her writing desk to the sound of Dumbledore’s footsteps traipsing through nearby portraits and back to his own. Hermione strode through the busy halls, her heart light as a feather is in her chest. Everything was beautifully mundane.
It was strange how gently life was treating them that week. The temptation to drink seemed to rise
with the inactivity so Draco spent a lot of his days sitting in the sun until his skin burned redraw,
blistering his pale complexion. Hermione was infuriated about it. She’d cover his skin in creams in
the evenings and lecture him about how dangerous it was. But something told him it was better than
seeing what he could find hidden amongst his friends' things, raiding their trunks and surrendering to
his darkness.

This was where they were right now; Draco, lying flat and horizontal over Hermione’s bed, her toes
brushing his side from where she was sitting, slowly paging through the book he’d bought her for
Christmas, sweeping off every page with a delicate slide of her hand before moving on to the next
section. She was entirely engrossed.

So he watched her from this construed angle. Noting how her hair cloaked her face and sparse
freckles were beginning to dot her nose as a result of these long June days. She scrunched her lips up
in concentration and tapped a finger against her knee. Draco thought it was the most beautiful sight
he’d ever seen.

“Move in with me.” He said.

He’d been planning this for weeks but now it’d come out of his mouth he got nervous, he started
wishing he could eat the words again, bury them deep in his heart.

But Hermione hadn’t noticed.

“Hmmm?” She mumbled, looking up from her book absently.

His heart lurched. Sickness rolled through his stomach. He stumbled over the great question of what
to say next.

“You heard me,” he told her.

“Wait a second,” Hermione said slowly, closing her book and placing it on her bedside table,
shuffling herself closer to him, “Are you serious?”
He couldn’t decide if he was being mocked or if she was in a deep, dangerous shock. Surely, she could hear his heart straining to rip itself from his chest, by now.

“No, it was just a joke. I’ll ask McGonagall instead.”

She stared at him in silence for a moment and he considered doing the unthinkable- explaining a simple concept to her in fear she hadn’t understood his joke. But what she said next stunned him.

“Do you think Theo will let me decorate? I don’t want to live in a dungeon, to be honest.”

“We can…get a place of our own,” He said awkwardly, wishing he could still hide his feeling from her like he used to.

He was trying to ignore how flustered the whole thing was making him. How he felt like he was having a heart attack. How he wanted to disappear.

“Don’t be stupid, you need each other right now. We all do. Maybe in a few years sure, but there’s no rush. I just think it would look so much better if we painted the walls white, maybe got rid of some of those dreadful portraits if they’re not stuck to the walls…we could host dinner parties, I can totally…”

She paused when she saw his dreamy eyes were fading from her grasp, “What?”

“Nothing,” he said, but it sounded very much like something too big to contain inside one single person.

“You haven’t given me an answer though,” He added, smirking at her.

Hermione went at a million miles. The rest of them slow danced through life. It was like an unexpected collision sometimes, a car crash one never sees coming, one that feels, on impact, like it was meant to occur.
“Yes!” She blurted, “Of course it’s yes. Why wouldn’t it be yes?”

But Draco had no time to explain why. She had tackled him into a hard and gleeful hug. *He loved her stupendously.* And with a smile far too embarrassingly large to show, he buried his face in her neck, knowing that home would feel whole with her.
“Hi.”

Theo didn’t stop packing his clothes into his trunk, “Oh? We’re talking today are we?”

“Would you rather I didn’t?” Blaise asked coldly.

Adamant he wouldn’t say anything, Theo continued putting his things back into his leather case, trying not to listen to Blaise’s breathing nor imagine the expression on his face.

Seconds passed. Blaise began to walk away, the door creaking open from the opposite end of the room with his touch.

“Stay,” Theo blurted out, “Please.”

Blaise did not speak. Instead, he stood at the door, wondering what to do, watching the top of Theo’s head. He was no longer packing, just staring at his open case as it lay on top of his bed, hands useless and empty at his sides.

He took the bed next to Theo’s, sitting down with the kind of wariness one does in a house that is not their own, his palms over his knees.

“I’m moving to Amsterdam,” Blaise said.

He spoke as if he was talking about something inconsequential. Like the weather or Transfiguration homework.

Theo’s eyes widened, shooting up to address him, “Excuse me?”

He had always thought Blaise looked like a Greek Sculpture. A precise beauty as if chiselled by his
mother's hand. Today was just the same. His lip never quivered, his brow furrowed not. Instead, he looked at Theo with those deep chocolatey eyes and told him what sounded like an outrageous fairy tale.

“Number six’s brother died a few months ago. He was childless and the last of the De Graffs’. For some reason he never changed his will, I guess he expected he had more time, being thirty-nine. So everything that would’ve gone to six, belongs to my lovely mother. And seeing as she’s dead, it’s been passed on to me.”

But Theo couldn’t bring himself to even try to understand. Why did it all sound like an outrageous scheme to leave him behind for good?

“What does this have to do with you deciding to up and leave?”

Blaise smiled a little. But it fell away as fast as the ends of an untied ribbon when he saw Theo’s face. His tense jaw and hard eyes overwhelmed him. He was used to Theo being soft-edged and gentle, too good to truly bite. Scathing at times but with a relentless capacity to love. Blaise gulped. His throat was dry.

“He was the founder of a Fashion House, the company is mine. I couldn’t say no. After everything, I need this money, I need this opportunity. I know you’ll think it’s messed up that I’m doing what she did to all of them. But this isn’t a game to me, Theo, it’s my life.”

“That’s where you’ve been going this whole time, isn’t it?” Theo slammed the lid of his trunk shut, the noise of it thundering around them, “I was worried sick about you and you were off cavorting around Europe, frequenting their Ministries and signing fat contracts?”

“I’m not apologising for giving a fuck about myself again,” Blaise said sternly. He was beginning to hate himself for not having had this conversation earlier.

“You want money? I’ve got masses of the stuff, Blaise. You know this. You know everything of mine is yours.”

Rummaging through his bedside drawers, he tossed a heavy key at Blaise’s head, who caught it only by chance. It lay heavy in his palm, intricate brass letters judging him from its wide handle.
He closed his fist around the key, “I need to figure out who I am.”

“You can do that in London.”

“Without you.”

Theo breathed heavily.

…I’ll give you the townhouse. I’ll buy a place for you. You don’t have to disappear.”

Blaise shook his head, “I have my portkey scheduled for after Abbot’s going away party.”

“But what about Draco? Pansy?”

“They have you.”

“What about me?” Theo demanded, “Who do I have if you leave?”

Blaise felt his blood rushing to through his body like a fast-moving stream.

“Merlin, do I have to spell it out for you? Or are you just acting stupid? I’m not what you need and whether you want to admit it to me or not, we both know you’ve found it elsewhere.”

“I can’t-

“You won't stop me.”

It was like trying to move mountains barehanded.
“So this is it?”

“We haven’t been close for a long time, Theo,” He said softly.

The words melted him until his brain was molten and the words inside his head were spilling to the floor.

“What’s not a good idea,” Blaise argued.

But Theo did not care.

“But he’s so strong,” he urged.

And Blaise shot out of his seat, filled with heart-wrenching strength, kissing him hard. Theo knew he could feel the tears as they rolled down his cheeks, dampening Blaise’s own skin.

Blaise pulled away, but his eyes did not open, “Alright?”

Theo took Blaise’s arms from around him, giving them back like a gift.
“You should pack,” He smiled. It was weak, but it was true, “The train leaves soon. Wouldn’t want to miss the last trip we’ll ever take home.”

They left Hogwarts that morning knowing something about themselves that they had not realised in the hours before. Tragedy was not always sad. Sometimes the stars had aligned better for them.

As the train chugged out of the station on their final trip home from Hogwarts, all eight of them opened the windows. They spread their palms in the air and let the breeze engulf them, the sunshine turning their eyelids red when they closed their eyes to the brightness.

Hogwarts was grey and old, yet rebuilt and new, crumbling once more with age and not war. Their lives had begun once more when they had arrived at the castle nine long months ago. It had nurtured them. It had nursed them. And now they were leaving, the distance between them growing with every spin of the train's wheels. They were leaving for something new and grand. Something hopeful.
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Again, I'm sorry. I'm so grateful to my readers for cheering me on with CD for the last two and a half years. This story has been a pleasure to write. See you all soon,

Lucy x

update: it appears to have been removed however my point still stands. I give no one permission and will wait until I've completed the story and post the rest of the chapters at once. see you in a week or two guys

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