

WHY NO ONE WILL MISS ME

bed, legs folded beneath her, her eyes fixed on the infirmary doors with that transparent hope, just like during her birthday. Every time someone steps inside, her face lights up, shoulders tightening with anticipation.

But no one comes for her.

Draco waits for it, Potter or Weasley or any one of the Gryffindors she always seemed to surround herself with.

But the door opens, again and again, and it's never for her.

Slowly, she deflates. The smile fades. She draws her knees to her chest and turns toward the window instead, pressing her cheek to them like she's used to being overlooked.

He moves before he can stop himself, crossing the room until he's crouched in front of her. He knows she can't see him, that this is a memory, but he wills her to feel it anyway. That someone sees her.

But she doesn't see him. Her eyes stay locked on the glass panes, watching the fading light beyond them as a single tear trails silently down her cheek—and Draco wants to wipe it away. Where the hell were they? How could they leave her like this?

The next memory stays within the bounds of Hogwarts, though the scene shifts outside—Draco now stands in a snow-blanketed pumpkin patch beside Hagrid's hut. If he could still feel anything in this memory state, he imagines the air would bite with cold. Instead, he simply watches as his breath doesn't fog.

He turns slowly and stops when he spots the Hippogriff—Buckbeak, yes, he's familiar with the hot-tempered beast—nestled in the snow.

And there she is.

Hermione Granger, small and bundled, sitting against the creature's flank as it curls protectively around her. A book rests in her lap, open but forgotten as her gloved fingers scratch affectionately beneath Buckbeak's beak. She looks entirely content—peaceful, even—as if being out in the cold, alone with a Hippogriff, is exactly where she belongs.

"Yeh're a good lass, keepin' him company like that—ain't that right, Buckbeak?" Hagrid's familiar voice breaks the quiet, his heavy steps crunching closer.

Hermione shuts her book with a snap and beams up at him. "I'm the lucky one, actually," she says, patting Buckbeak's head. The creature leans into her touch, eyes closing, and she smiles, although there's a shadow beneath it.

"Actually, Buckbeak's the only one willing to keep me company these days."

Hagrid frowns. "What about Ron and Harry?"

"Ron won't talk to me," she snaps, her frustration pushing through the smile. "He's furious because Crookshanks keeps going after his stupid rat. As if that's *my* fault. Crookshanks is half-Kneazle—he's clever, and he knows something's off about that rat." Her arms flail in exasperation. "But of course no one listens to me."

She takes a breath, and the fight drains out of her as quickly as it came. "And Harry... well, he sided with Ron. Again."

Fuck. For all his whining and pitiful theatrics that year, in the end, it had been he

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who signed the creature's death warrant. Her... friend. And, if he's hearing right, what seems to be her only one right now.

He still remembers the wet streaks on her cheeks the day of the execution. He'd spent the whole year taunting her about it, and yet when it actually happened, when she looked at him with a devastation so raw, he felt it—every snide remark he had died in his throat.

Hagrid moves toward her, arms slightly open, but she's already on her feet, brushing snow off her coat like she's dusting off the moment. "It's fine. They'll have to talk to me eventually—we're all staying at the Burrow for Christmas."

And just like that, the smile returns. Lopsided, a little forced, but still there. That resilient optimism, warm and fogging against the cold.

Draco stares. He doesn't understand how she does it—this blind hope.

Before he can linger, the memory pulls him forward again and now they're on the train. Granger's balancing Crookshanks on one arm, a suitcase in the other as she slides open a compartment door, her face set with that same quiet determination.

"Uh, what do you think you're doing?"

Weasley's voice hits like a fork scraping against ceramic.

Potter's already inside, looking uncomfortable.

"Ron, this has gone on long enough," she says firmly. "I couldn't leave him behind for the holidays—he'd be all alone!" Crookshanks lets out a pleased little chirp, as if backing her argument.

Weasley gets to his feet, towering over her like he thinks height equals authority. "No. He's not coming." He steps closer. "And neither are you. I'm uninverting you."

It hits her like a slap. A pause, no longer than a blink, but enough for Draco to see her breath catch, her fingers tense around the handle of the case. She shifts back a single step, and without thinking, Draco reaches out, trying to steady her—but his hand closes around nothing, a futile gesture.

"Ron—" Potter tries.

"My parents are skiing in Switzerland." Hermione presses on, voice strained. "I told them I'd be at the Burrow. I have nowhere else to go."

"Not my problem," Weasley snaps.

"Ron—" Potter again, with a little more urgency this time.

"You can stay with *her* at Hogwarts if you're so concerned."

Granger turns to Potter, all wide eyes and silent pleading, hoping he'll step up and prove he's the hero everyone thinks he is. But he just drops his gaze, like a coward—or worse, like he's already made peace with leaving her behind.

"Hermione, they're my family," he says, defeated.

Draco watches the light dim in her expression. She nods, lips wobbling before she shuts it all down under a cloak of resignation.

"It's okay." She kneels down, opens her suitcase, and pulls out two small boxes wrapped in red, each tied with gold ribbon. "Here. Your Christmas gifts."

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Draco stares at the boxes, then at her, and he feels something sharp twist beneath his ribs. Those idiots don't deserve to have gifts.

"You... bought us gifts?" Potter asks, blinking like he's just solved a riddle. Truly, how one functions on a single brain cell should be investigated.

Weasley scoffs and slumps back into his seat, leaving Potter to awkwardly take the boxes.

"That's what friends do," Hermione says, with a smile too polished to be real. Potter mutters something useless, floundering for an excuse, and gestures vaguely as if to mime the absence of thought or care, or his hands empty of any gifts.

"Oh, no worries!" she chirps, "Merry Christmas!"

The smile evaporates the second she turns. She walks away with her cat in her arms, her suitcase rattling slightly behind her, and the second the door closes behind her, the forced cheer vanishes like it was never there to begin with.

Draco doesn't follow immediately. He stands there, looking through the window at the two boys too wrapped up in their own self-importance to notice what they've done, and he wonders how many more memories like this are waiting in the vials still untouched.

Because Hermione Granger, for all her fire and conviction and stubborn resilience, has been left behind again and again. Always the afterthought. Always the one making excuses for why her friends didn't show up.

He pours another vial. Then another.

And there it is again—her loneliness, stretching across the years like a frail thread, thinning with every tug and no one around to notice.

Same pattern, too. They insult her, freeze her out over something idiotic—and then, they slink back into her orbit when they remember she's useful. Brilliant, loyal, forgiving to a fault. And she lets them. Always lets them.

Draco rubs his jaw, watching another scene dissolve. He wants to shake her. How can someone so clever, so stubborn, tolerate this cycle of shallow affection and conditional love? Why does she keep hoping they'll be different?

And can someone please explain how the hell she ended up engaged to that hideous man with an old broom for hair?

He doesn't have to wait long. The next memory drops him straight into sixth year—Gryffindor common room, red and gold everywhere. Granger walks in, swiping at her eyes with the back of her wrist.

The Weaslette approaches her like she's trying not to spook a wounded hippogriff. "What is—"

"They're kissing," Granger sniffs, gesturing vaguely toward the door she just slammed behind her.

"Oh. I thought you knew about Ron and Lavender..."

Her shoulders fold in on themselves, like even holding herself up is too much. So that's when it started, he thinks. Or maybe it was before. Maybe it was always

there it is.

Happy Birthday Hermione!

Confirmation, bursting in shimmering rainbow and confetti, like a party popper to the face.

Her mother walks toward the table, a smile stretched too forced.

"Hermione, dear, I just got a call from Alexis's mother and...,"

The little legs go still. Her feet stop swinging.

"Your classmates won't be able to make it."

"All of them?" The girl's voice is small, already bracing.

"They all caught the flu."

Right.

Draco can easily spot the lie, and if Granger is brilliant now, this tiny version of her must be sharp enough to see through it, too.

"Like last year?" she asks.

Her mother crouches beside her, defeated. "Apparently so. But your father had a brilliant idea—what if the three of us go to the zoo today? Would you like that, my princess?"

"It works. The girl lights up, the wobble gone.
"Can I keep my princess dress and my crown?" she asks, already halfway out of the chair.

"Of course."

She bounces away, sadness already forgotten. But Draco...

He doubts he'll ever forget how his chest clenches at the sight of a little girl—Granger—dressed like royalty and left behind by everyone.

The memory fades.

He pours the next one. Infirmary walls rise around him. Hogwarts.

Laughter echoes through the room.

On one cot, Justin Finch-Fletchley blinks up at Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott, both leaning close, grinning as they talk over each other. Further down, Ravenclaws cluster around Penelope Clearwater. Someone hands her a glass of water. Colin Creevey sobs into his older brother's arms.

Then Draco sees Filch, cradling Mrs. Norris with shaking hands.

And it clicks.

Second year. The ones who were petrified just woke up, thanks to the Mandrake Draught.

The joy. The crowd.

It all makes sense now. Everyone's surrounded by someone.

But it's the last cot, tucked away at the far end of the room, that presses down on his chest.

There she is—Hermione Granger, older than the version he just saw, her curls longer, but her frame still small against the white sheets. She's sitting upright on the

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there, rotting quietly beneath her ribs.

He tells himself it'll get better. That she'll wake up, that feelings will be realized and destinies aligned or whatever.

He pours the next vial.

He's never been so wrong in his life.

He thinks he knows what it contains—he was there, after all—but the memory still manages to gut him like it's brand new.

It plays out exactly as he remembers: every second of that godforsaken day in his family's drawing room. Remembers the sound of Hermione's scream, the wild glint in Bellatrix's eyes, the word *mudblood* being carved like a brand into skin that never should've been touched.

He'd been useless then, as he is now, watching it all unfold again. Helpless. Completely paralyzed. Regretting every choice he made in the last years.

He could live a thousand lifetimes and never forget the scene. So he is surprised that he missed something about this day.

When Weasley and Potter emerge from the cellar, blinking at the carnage, they say one thing he never heard until now.

"There's no time," Weasley mutters. "We'll try to come back. Let's leave, now."

Try to come back. *Try*?

And that—that—is coming from the bloke she agreed to marry? To love? The answer continues to elude him. What the hell is he missing?

If this is her memory, then surely she remembers it too—*Weasley* suggesting they just leave her to die.

His lungs won't fill properly. His jaw locks so tightly it aches.

Then Potter, ever the hero, adds: "Ron, we need her."

Not *we love her*. Not *she's our best friend*. Just—we need her. Because that's what it always is with them. She's a tool. A resource. The clever one who'll figure it out, patch it up, carry them across the finish line.

And that's always been the damn problem.

Hermione Granger, the brightest mind of their generation, the girl bleeding on his drawing room floor, has always been the means to someone else's end.

He doesn't need to see the rest of the memory. He knows how it goes. They all leave together. They survive. They win.

For the whole bloody world to call them heroes.

But what he never realized—was that Tweedledee and Tweedledum entertained the idea of leaving *her* there.

The memory ejects him. Like it's had enough of him, too.

He stumbles back into her office.

Draco breathes hard. Magic tingles in his fingers, itching for something to break.

How dare they.

How *dare* they leave her, use her, come back only when they needed something clever

Chapter 2

With unsteady hands, he snaps the pathetic excuse of a locket loose and lifts the lid. Inside, a neat row of tiny vials glimmers faintly—the unmistakable sheen of bottled memories.

"*Actio Pensieve*," he mutters.

A cabinet behind him creaks open as a shallow stone basin floats out and lands gently on the desk. Not surprising. Patients in the JWD Ward often need memory analysis for curse-related trauma; of course, Granger would keep a Pensieve close by.

That has to be it. Obviously. The box and that ominous little note, *Why No One Will Miss Me*, must belong to a patient. She was reviewing someone else's memories. Preparing for treatment.

...Right?

He doesn't dwell too long on the other breach of privacy he's about to commit—that ship has sailed—before picking one vial randomly and pouring it into the swirling silver basin.

He plunges into the memory, the world tilting and spinning until his feet hit grass. A long table sits in the middle of the backyard, draped in a flimsy tablecloth printed with rainbows and suspiciously deformed unicorns. Balloons bob everywhere like someone overcompensated.

At the head of the table, a little girl bounces on a plastic chair, a crooked, glittery diadem perched in her frizzy hair. Draco stuffs the flicker of recognition deep down, refusing to name who it is—because that would mean admitting these are *Granger's* memories.

The child's legs dangle and kick, brimming with excitement, her small shoes thudding against the chair. She looks so adorable, Draco thinks to himself.

Then the door opens, and a woman steps out. Draco freezes. She's older, but unmistakable. Granger in ten years. His eyes shift to the banner above the door, and

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said or done.

He runs a hand through his hair, pacing once, twice. He wants to scream. Or punch something. Or find her so called friends and make them eat a dictionary until they learn the difference between friendship and convenience.

Instead, he plants his hands on her empty desk and bows his head. He counts to ten. Right. The whole point of this Pensieve dive was to figure out where the hell Granger had been hiding all week.

He glares at the memory box. A few vials left. And if the pattern holds, he's about to witness another masterpiece in emotional neglect.

He exhales, slower this time. His fingers are steadier, but only because he's bracing for impact. The next vial tips into the Pensieve, and the world shifts.

He heads straight for the drawer where he last saw her stuffing that suspicious bit of paper — the one who presumably started her emotional crisis on Monday. And of course it's locked.

Ten minutes, twelve spells, and one *particularly creative* threat later, he loses patience and fires off a precise *Incendio*, punching a neat hole through the side.

Not exactly a masterclass in stealth, but it gets the job done. He reaches through the gap and flicks the lock open from the inside.

All this effort for nothing. The yellow paper he's after is nowhere to be found.

But something else catches his eye.

A cardboard box with a little locket keeping the lid down.

But it's the small label on top of it that makes his pulse hammer painfully in his ears. He stands there, stupidly blinking down at the box like maybe the letters will rearrange themselves into something harmless.

They don't.

Just a few words, scrawled in her handwriting.
Why No One Will Miss Me.

His knees give slightly, and he catches himself on the edge of the desk, sitting down hard in her chair without meaning to.

He's not laughing anymore, as he officially crosses from denial into a sickening, clawing worry.

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Justified, he throws back the rest of his Firewhisky, slams the glass down, and heads straight back to St. Mungo's. His next totally reasonable, totally ethical step.

Resolute, he climbs the steps up to the fourth floor; glances around like he's sneaking into a bloody vault, and slips into Granger's office.

He locks the door behind him, casts a few wards for good measure. Probably unnecessary — it's Friday night, nine o'clock, and the healer offices are empty.

A small, rational part of him notes that Granger would probably hex him into next week for breaking into her space. But if she's been kidnapped—not that his brain *immediately* lands on the worst-case scenario, no, never—she'll be grateful he showed initiative.

He heads straight for the drawer where he last saw her stuffing that suspicious bit of paper — the one who presumably started her emotional crisis on Monday. And of course it's locked.

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"So, mate, what's your pick tonight—red, brown, or blonde?" Theo Nott's voice cuts through the haze of Draco's thoughts. Fine question in a pub, if he's talking about the beer selection. But, of course, it's a much more demeaning and objectifying question. It's about which woman Draco should drag back to the flat.

"Can you not?" Draco snaps, already feeling the tension over the missing Granger situation escalating his mood.

Blaise snickers beside him. "Someone's in a mood."

Draco slouches in his chair, sighing deeply. "Sorry; it's just—" He freezes, his eyes locking onto a table of Gryffindors. His heart skips a beat, a flicker of hope lighting up his chest.

Potter... Weasley... Weaslette... Longbottom...

And no Granger.

Theo turns around to follow Draco's gaze, exchanging a knowing look with Blaise. "Were you looking for your esteemed colleague?" Theo wiggles his eyebrows, and Draco would like nothing more than to wipe that smug expression off his face.

"Granger and I are not colleagues. We work in two different departments."

"Mmm, funny how you immediately thought of her when I mentioned a colleague."

Shit.

"Well, she's the only one who's friends with them," Draco retorts, attempting to recover.

"Yes, sure. You're not as subtle as you think you are," Blaise remarks, taking a long swig of his firewhisky.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just saying—you get bored very easily. She's the exception to your everything's-a-temporary-rule. You kept this job, *because of her*."

"I love my job," Draco says, even though it's not entirely true.

"And you also love a certain curly-haired witch."

"How preposterous—"

"And accurate."

"She's engaged."

"That never stopped you before."

Draco feels his patience snap. Is he really going to sit here and be painted as some sort of man-whore, twice in the same week, picking up every engaged woman in his path?

He doesn't fancy Granger. Really, he doesn't. "Okay, let's settle on this—Granger and I are... friendly," he starts. "And she hasn't shown up to work all week. That's not like her."

Blaise and Theo both frown, which reassures him he isn't being completely paranoid. "As a friend," he says, a little louder, "I have a duty to make sure everything's fine, right?"

They nod—sincere, mildly concerned—and that's all the permission he needs.

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Chapter 3

No Hogwarts this time.

Noise hits him first—a thunderous roar of cheers, chants, and announcers shouting over the pitch. Brooms streak overhead in a blur of red, yellow, and white. The Ellis Moor Quidditch Stadium. He recognizes it instantly—the famous England vs. Spain final from a few years back. He'd been there himself, seated quite nicely. But this view? This is even better.

It looks like a private box, reserved for players' guests.

Granger materializes, practically glowing, curls flying, hands clasped in front of her mouth as she cheers. She's radiant with excitement—happy. *Finally* happy. Salazar, she deserves a happy ending.

The stadium erupts as Weasley blocks another Quaffle. Draco scowls despite himself. Fine. He'll admit it: Weasley had been a solid Keeper, one of England's best in recent years. Too bad the idiot retired early.

Granger is absolutely beaming at her boyfriend. Bouncing. Eyes shining. Like she's proud. Like she *loves* him.

Draco refuses to name the emotion brewing in the pit of his stomach. Jealousy is beneath him and absolutely not whatever is this sour thing coiling inside him.

Although, he's relieved to see the contrast. Surely, she got happier at some point. Good for her. The box of memories must just be a reminder of how spectacularly idiotic her friends were. Maybe they all gather every summer to watch it, basking in the nostalgia of the *good old days*, back when they were absolute arses.

The final moments of the match arrive in a blur. A red-cloaked Chaser dives, catches the Snitch, and the stadium detonates into a frenzy. English fans flood the pitch and she leans over the rail for a better view, laughing, euphoric, one with the collective triumph of it all.

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Draco finds himself watching her again instead of the game, completely pulled in by the joy on her face—until it abruptly vanishes.

She gasps and raises her hands to her mouth. Draco's eyes snap to follow hers. And there he is, Weasley, standing at the edge of the pitch, basking in the applause. And beside him, a girl—tall, blonde, clearly a fan—throws herself into his arms and presses her mouth to his.

Draco tenses, waiting for Weasley to pull away. Because *hello*—he has a girlfriend. An actual, real-life girlfriend who just spent the entire match screaming his name like he'd hung the moon.

And not just *any* girlfriend.

Brilliant, gorgeous and infuriatingly perfect Hermione bloody Granger.

But Weasley, like the total wanker that he is, doesn't pull away.

He smirks. Actually *smirks* while the girl kisses him, and when she finally lets go, he doesn't even look guilty. Just pleased with himself.

Draco barely registers Granger bolting from the stands.

The memory lurches. He's dragged along as she storms through the stadium, shoved into the narrow, echoing corridor of the player's wing. The pitch noise fades behind concrete and fury. Her fury.

Weasley is leaning smugly against the concrete wall, chatting with two other players. When he spots his girlfriend charging toward him, he nods the others away with a look that says "*Bare yourselves, here she comes again.*"

Hermione stops right in front of him, breathing hard but saying nothing, daring him to speak first, to explain.

"What?" the utter cretin says, as if *he*'s the one inconvenienced.

Herjaw tightens. "You're not even going to apologize this time?"

"Why would I?" He shrugs, arms crossing. "*She kissed me.*"

"You can block fifty bloody Quaffles going sixty kilometers an hour, but not one woman?" she snaps, jabbing a finger into his chest. "You could have respectfully pushed her away instead of looking like you enjoyed it."

He rolls his eyes.

"Put yourself in my shoes," she spits. "How do you think *that* felt?"

Draco flinches as Weasley grabs her hand. At first, it looks like a dismissive brush-off—until Ron twists her finger in the opposite direction it's meant to bend. She gasps, trying to pull it back.

"Jealous that it wasn't about you for once?" Ron hisses. "Try walking in *my* shoes—the useless tagalong in the Golden Trio."

"Ron—stop." Hermione squirms, clearly in pain. Draco's fingers twitch. If he were there in the flesh, he'd snap Weasley's hand in half.

"How do you think *I* feel," Ron growls, "when every bloke drools over you, waiting for me to screw up just so they can swoop in and date the perfect Hermione Granger?"

pretends he didn't hear because acknowledging it would require acknowledging that it made his stomach drop.

He looked at her. Gone was the lively, animated Granger from a minute ago. Instead, she looked like she desperately wished the wallpaper would swallow her whole.

He didn't spend too long wondering why a witch as fierce as Granger could shrivel up so fast.

Then Weasley grabbed her wrist. Her too-small, too-frail-looking wrist. And started dragging her up the stairs like a Neanderthal.

"Why do you always have to be with *him*," Weasley spat, the grip on her wrist making her wince.

And Draco?

Oh, Draco moved.

One second he was minding his own business (sort of), the next he was stepping forward, shoving Weasley's hand off her with enough force that even surprised himself.

"Careful," he hissed, somehow finding himself positioned squarely between them, effectively shielding her.

"Mind your fucking business ferret," Weasley barked. Draco's fists clenched. He was *this* close to doing something spectacularly stupid, like punching Granger's fiancé in the face in the middle of the stairwell.

Fortunately, for everyone, Granger stepped in.

"It's okay, Malfoy. I'll see you later," she said quickly, her voice tight.

"No you won't—" Weasley started.

"Ron, we're working together. *Slosh*" she snapped back, a spark of her usual fire returning to her voice.

Draco stood perfectly still as they marched up the stairs, Weasley shooting him a final death glare over his shoulder before disappearing around the corner.

No.

Draco figures it's best to skip Weasley altogether.

He'll go harass Potter instead.

Well, it turns out Potter has about as much use as a Lumos charm in broad daylight. The prat has no clue where she's gone or whether she's taken some time off.

The whole thing—the complete lack of care from anyone involved—is starting to really grind on Draco. And no, he's not going to see Weasley. Granger's clever, independent, and surely safe wherever she is. And again, he's not worried. He's just... a bit preoccupied by her absence.

By Friday afternoon, it's officially been four days since Granger has gone... missing. Not *missing*, because that would imply concern. No, it's more like "curiously absent."

There.

Draco hopes the usual Friday night at the Leaky Cauldron will take his mind off it. He doesn't do stress. It's terrible for the skin.

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There's his answer.

"But surely she must have told you how many days she took off?"

Laura spins on her heel, disdain written all over her face.

He must have really screwed things up with her.

"Why? Is she your next conquest?"

A strange tingling shoots up his spine at the word *conquest* and Granger in the same sentence.

He pointedly does not examine whether the feeling is good or bad.

"She's engaged," he says stiffly.

"It never stopped you before," Laura replies, wiggling a finger in his face—the one sporting an engagement ring.

"Look, we—*work*—together. For one of her patients. Can you tell me when she's coming back?"

"I don't know," Laura says, voice dripping with sarcasm. "Miss Perfect just vanished without telling anyone. And now I'm stuck with all her patients and—" "What?"

The word tumbles out before he can control it. *Shit.* Not worry. Definitely not worry. Just...logical concern. Because a witch as organized and disciplined as Granger skipping work—and abandoning her patients—without warning her boss is unheard of.

"Look, I've got double the workload thanks to her, so if you're quite done—"

"Did you ask her fiance? Her friends?"

"Of course not. It's not like she's a kidnapped child. It's not my job to—"

Draco doesn't hear the rest. He's already storming off the floor.

Draco's fingers tap against his desk, his jaw resting in his palm, elbow propped up. He looks bored, but he's anything but.

He's trying to decide whether asking Weasley is worth the inevitable brain damage. Because the last time he saw him, it hadn't exactly been a heartwarming encounter. Not that it's any of his business what Granger is doing with someone like him. Absolutely not his place to judge her life choices—but, honestly, she could do better. A lot better.

Like literally anyone else. Not *him*, per say. Although, he would make a better option than this walking temper tantrum in secondhand robes, that's for sure.

About two weeks ago, he and Granger had been walking up the stairs together, on their way to her office. She wanted an update on his progress with the potion, professional business.

All very innocent.

Very work-related.

They were halfway up when Weasley came barreling down the steps, face as red as his hair and growing even redder the second his eyes landed on them.

Granger made a noise—something between a gasp and a squeak—that Draco

"You're hurting me!"

The locker room door swings open. Ron finally lets go. No apology. Just a cold look thrown over his shoulder before he disappears inside.

Hermione stands frozen in the hallway, cradling her hand to her chest.

The memory spits Draco back into the present. He stumbles into the nearest chair, breath caught in his throat.

He punches the desk, wishing it were Weasley's idiotic face.

That was years ago. *Years.* And yet she stayed.

Draco feels like a dog with a bone. What is he not understanding. He quickly uncorks another vial, needing to understand why. Clearly, Weasley was still the same imbecile he was back at school, so why is she engaged to him?

Another Quidditch pitch—but smaller this time. He recognizes it as the England team's private training grounds. Just a casual practice session.

He finds himself beside Granger again, seated high in the stands near the goal rings. Weasley floats lazily in the air, guarding the posts with an air of exaggerated pride.

"So what, you're just giving up on him?" Potter's voice slices through the quiet. The self-righteous tone makes Draco bristle immediately.

"If I'm not happy," Hermione replies, chin tilted stubbornly. "We're not happy together."

"Hermione, think about it for just more than one second," Potter exhales like it's his relationship on the line. "He'll be... devastated."

"I *did* think about it," she snaps. "And not for just one second, Harry."

"Still... with the semi-finals coming up, do you really think this is the right time to put him in that kind of mood?"

Wow. How. Dare. He. Imagine suggesting a bloody Quidditch game should come before someone's emotional well-being. The sheer audacity.

Hermione doesn't answer immediately. She fidgets, rubbing her hands together, suddenly unsure. Draco watches, horrified, as the confidence she just had starts to melt under the weight of Potter's guilt-tripping.

Sensing the opening, Potter presses further.

"If you two break up... people *will* have to take sides."

Draco actually gasps, then lets out a disbelieving laugh at the veiled threat. Who would've thought—Potter, nation's favorite boy, had it in him to be so...malicious.

"Meaning?" she asks sharply.

"Just..." Potter gestures vaguely, trying to look reasonable. "Think about what—or who—you might lose."

Then, like a complete idiot, he reaches out to grab her hand. Like he's her friend after saying such manipulative things.

She pulls away instantly. Fire flickers back into her eyes.

"*Like you?*" she snaps. "Would you choose his side, *again*?"

He opens his mouth to respond—but never gets the chance.

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WHY NO ONE WILL MISS ME

A bludger breaks loose from the practice, hurtling toward Hermione like a cannonball. Draco instinctively throws himself in front of her, though it passes through him like mist. Still, he'll have to interrogate whatever half-witted impulse that was later, because he doesn't do heroics.

She doesn't flinch. Brilliant as ever, she's already drawn her wand, already shouted a repelling charm. The bludger veers off—but rebounds. Hard.

Right into Weasley.

The crack of impact is sickening, although Draco can't help but grin as Weasley's a red and white blur, plummeting toward the pitch with all the grace of a potato sack.

Nobody reacts fast enough (thankfully, Draco might add) as the man crashes into the ground, unmoving.

Everything blurs. The Quidditch pitch dissolves into sterile white walls and the antiseptic sting of magic gone wrong.

St. Mungo's.

Hermione's voice breaks the quiet first, raw and panicked. "I—I'm so sorry."

Her cheeks glisten with tears that won't quite fall, and she chases after Mrs. Weasley down the corridor. The red-haired matriarch whirls around so fast it startles even

Draco, who instinctively takes a step back.

"You shouldn't *have* a wand if you can't use it properly!"

"It happened so fast—I didn't mean to—"

But Mrs. Weasley has already turned again, storming into what must be Ron's room. A trail of Weasley's files in behind her, each casting a dirty look at Granger.

Draco doesn't have time to follow when the memory shifts again.

Now it's a small, cramped living room. The light's too dim, the mood worse. Weasley slouches on the couch, surrounded by silence and shadows. He doesn't even look up when Hermione appears.

"How did the appointment go?" she asks, voice small, uncertain. She perches beside him like she doesn't want to touch the cushions too much, like even the sofa might blame her.

"Peachy," he mutters, taking a long drink of Firewhisky. "The Healer says my magical coordination's fried. No more Quidditch. Ever."

Hermione's face crumples. "I'm so—"

"I swear, Hermione—" He shouts the word so suddenly she jumps. "If I hear you say you're sorry *one more time...*"

He doesn't finish the sentence. Just leans toward her, voice low and poisonous.

"I'll hex you."

Hermione stares at him, stunned. Her entire body shrinks in on itself, folding around the guilt she's carrying.

Draco watches, barely able to breathe. His hands curl into fists he can't use. That moron. That shrewd little moron.

KITTYBLUSH

But a job offer *had* fallen into his lap—or, more accurately, a cute blonde witch had, who turned out to work at St. Mungo's and had mentioned they were looking for a potioneer. Potions had always been his best subject, after all.

One interview later, he got the job. And honestly, it had turned out a lot better than wasting away in his flat.

With two coffees in hand and a lemon croissant—Granger's favorite—he knocks on her office door.

He waits. No answer.

If she dares make him wait like yesterday, even if she's inside, she has another thing coming.

After a grand total of fifteen seconds (more than generous, in his opinion), Draco decides he's had enough and tries the handle. Unlocked, thankfully.

But her office is empty.

He sighs, guessing she's probably doing her rounds with her patients. Stepping inside, he leaves the coffee and croissant on her desk, casting a stasis charm over them.

On a bright pink sticky note, he scribbles:

Come see me when you have the chance. —DM

There. Comfort now offered, he walks quite confidently back to his office.

But he has yet to hear a knock on his door.

Right before leaving for the evening, he goes up to her office—this time not even bothering to knock, his irritation at being ignored practically crackling in the air.

He pushes the door open without hesitation.

Empty. Again.

The coffee and croissant still sit untouched on her desk, perfectly preserved under his charm.

Three days.

Three days of the same circus, and every time, her office is empty.

Where the hell is she?

Not that he's worried. No. Maybe... *perplexed*. Mildly.

For the eight months he's worked here, he doesn't think she's taken a single day off. He doesn't even know when she gets in or when she leaves—only that she's always *there*.

There when he arrives.

There when he leaves.

Always.

Three days of unexplained absence, especially after what happened, is decidedly out of character for Granger.

He decides to inquire with the chief healer of the JTW—Laura. (Yes, he fucked her too. No, he has absolutely no idea whether they're still on good terms.)

"Do I look like her fucking secretary?" she snaps the second he asks.

WHY NO ONE WILL MISS ME

wraps around him, tight and suffocating.

“Do you want to—”

She flinches back before he can even finish. Her gaze latches onto his, sobs tapering off into shallow breaths. Her eyes flicker to his lips, and he swallows hard.

And then, just like that, the sadness drains out of her amber eyes. What’s left behind is worse: dull, hollow emptiness.

She scrambles back into her chair, leaving Draco stranded on the floor like a complete idiot.

Granger clears her throat, smoothing down the wrinkled sheet of paper before locking it into a drawer.

Draco gets to his feet but stays close, without even knowing why. Just... because.

“Can you leave?” she asks, not looking at him, already shuffling through random files like he’s no longer there.

“What about the potion?”

“Store it. I don’t need it anymore.”

What the hell? After months of badgering him about it, now she doesn’t even want it? He could have been enjoying a peaceful morning tangled up with Alicia—Felicia—whatever her name was. Instead, he finished her bloody potion for nothing.

“Fine,” he snaps, biting the word off as he slams the door behind him.

His brain feels thick, buzzing uselessly. Every thought loops in a circle and slams into a dead end.

This whole depressing episode drained the life out of him. No way he’s getting any more work done today.

Might as well take the afternoon off.

Come next morning, Granger’s tormented expression is the first thing that greets him—even before he manages to pry open an eyelid.

He feels bad about how he reacted. He should have stayed, offered some comfort, not stormed off like a selfish asshole just because she didn’t seem to care about the brilliant potion he had finally delivered.

But still, he isn’t sure it was his place. Sure, they had grown somewhat close over the course of his employment, but not more than two friendly colleagues. Surely someone like Potter would be better suited to console her—or better yet, her fiancé. Although, honestly, he doubts the Weasel has the emotional range to offer anyone real solace.

The morning chill bites at him as he steps out of his flat—and definitely *not* the thought of Granger’s stupid fiancé—making him wince.

He stops at a café on his way to St. Mungo’s. Yes, his flat is only a five-minute walk to his workplace. A happy coincidence? Not even remotely.

He just happened to like his flat. If a job offer hadn’t fallen right into his lap he would have been perfectly content staying unemployed, living the single life, and loitering around all day.

KITTYBLUSH

The scene spins again, too fast to catch, the memory warping through time until the darkened living room gives way to warm afternoon light seeping through half-closed blinds.

Weasley’s still slouched, but now on an armchair, unshaven and glum.

“Do you have it?” he barks the moment Hermione steps into the room, clutching a paper bag filled with groceries.

She hesitates, glancing at the still a quarter full bottle on the coffee table.

“No. You still have some.”

Weasley scoffs. Grabs the Firewhisky like it’s proof of her betrayal.

“This one?” he sneers, and tips it upside down. The amber liquid gushes out, flooding the surface of the coffee table. The bottle spins, teetering on the edge.

Hermione lunges, just in time to stop it from crashing to the floor. Her fingers are wet. Her jaw tightens.

“That’s because you *wasted* it,” she snaps.

Weasley grins, lips curling into something mean and feral.

“Then lick it. If you care so much.”

Before she can react, he grabs a fistful of her hair and shoves her face into the mess he made, struggling to breathe through the liquid.

Draco staggers back into Granger’s office, breath ragged, heart clawing at his ribs.

The memory isn’t over, but it’s as if the rage burning through him spit him out.

Pacing. Pacing. He circles the desk, chest heaving, fury flooding every vein. His neck cracks when he rolls it, jaw locked tight.

Fucking Weasley.

He could track him down—he hex him into dust. Avada him. Just one clean spell.

But he doesn’t even know where they live. And who is he kidding—he’s no assassin. Just a pitiful, over-groomed wreck of a man who spent too much time perfecting his hair and not nearly enough noticing that Granger was going through this nightmare.

A coffee here, a lemon croissant there. Morning chats in either one of their offices. He should’ve noticed it sooner. The way her spark had dimmed, burned low beneath layers of exhaustion. But he hadn’t. And now, he’s terrified it’s too late to matter.

He inhales. Exhales. Forces himself to return to the memory.

The light hasn’t changed. Granger’s still on the floor, face pressed to the table—but her eyes blaze now. She throws a wandless blast that sends Weasley sprawling back.

Good. She fought back.

The memory spits him out and he quickly pours another vial.

The table could seat ten, but tonight it hosts one. At the far end sits Weasley, all dark and brooding. The single lamp in the corner does a poor job of lightening up the room. Draco doesn’t even spot him at first and Granger doesn’t either; if her startled gasp is anything to go by when she steps in from the hallway.

“Where were you?” Weasley grinds out, jaw clenched.

She presses a hand to her chest, still catching her breath. “I was working.”

WHY NO ONE WILL MISS ME

"Until midnight?"

She leans against the doorframe, and now that she's in better light, Draco can see how exhausted she looks. Hollow eyes, limp hair, a sort of faded posture that screams she's run out of whatever it is that keeps people standing upright.

"I told you. I picked up extra shifts at the hospital."

Weasley scowls like this is brand new information.

"Because, now that you're not working—"

"And whose fault is that?"

That lands. She flinches, but her face resets quickly. Calm, composed. "I'm just saying, someone has to pay the bills."

That's why she seems to live at St. Mungo's. Working overtime to provide for a man who contributes nothing but a waste of oxygen. Draco's lip curls. The loathing is instant, visceral.

Weasley watches her from across the table. He's quieter now, but the tension in his neck hasn't gone anywhere.

"You said you were making roasted beef for dinner."

She blinks, not understanding. And Draco doesn't either. "I know I was going to, but this shift came up last minute—"

"You said *tonight*."

The way he says it, flat and expectant, he half-wonders if Weasley thinks meals cook themselves in seconds.

"You haven't eaten? I'll try to arrive earlier tomorrow and—"

"I've been waiting for you," Weasley says, not angry now. Just... blank. "I can wait another hour while you cook it."

Granger's mouth parts in disbelief. Surely not. Surely, she won't—

"But—"

"The more you argue, the less time you have for sleep."

Her eyebrows lift into a perfect arch of shock. That's the moment. That's when she should say something. Scream. Hex him. Leave. Draco holds his breath, willing her to speak.

She doesn't.

She just sighs. A small, tired sound. The kind of sound people make when they've already lost and know it. Then she nods, and turns toward the kitchen like it's her only option.

Draco watches her walk away and doesn't realize his fists are clenched until his nails bite skin.

The next memory feels familiar before it even begins. Draco knows why the second Granger's voice cuts through the fog.

"Ron, we're working together. *Soph*."

He's heard this before—because he was there.

He sees himself, useless and oblivious, standing halfway down the stairs while

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Her eyes are the first thing he notices—red and glassy, like she's been crying for a while. Her cheeks are still damp, and a lone tear slides down, tracing a path through the freckles dusting her skin.

He freezes. No idea what to do with himself. Should he leave? Should he pretend he didn't see anything?

He risks a glance at the crumpled paper clenched tightly in her hand. Probably the culprit.

But she doesn't look at him. Her gaze is locked on the tray of vials, and the longer she stares, the more ashen she grows.

Finally, her hand falls, dropping the paper onto the desk with a soft rustle, and she buries her face in her palms. Silent, except for the small, helpless tremble of her shoulders.

Something—Merlin knows what—tugs him closer.

"Hey," he says, crouching in front of her chair, trying to catch her eye. "What's going on?"

She lifts her head, as if realizing for the first time that he's here. He barely has time to process it before she throws herself out of her chair and into his arms. He falls flat on his arse, but catches her without too much damage.

Her body is so limp, he's not even sure she jumped on purpose. It's more like she just collapsed and he happened to be there.

"Granger—"

A ragged sob rips out of her chest, deep and raw, a sound far too big for someone so small.

His arms wrap tighter around her, cradling her against him. Salazar, why does she feel so small? It's as if she hasn't grown an inch since Hogwarts, and somehow, she seems even more fragile now than she did back then.

He noticed it the first time he saw her again—when she knocked on his door, asking for help with that mystery patient.

Her face had sharpened, no longer childish: a delicate nose, pink full lips, a complexion that under St. Mungo's harsh lighting looked ghostly pale, but in truth carried a soft peach glow, peppered with rare freckles.

He used to think her eyes were plain brown. They weren't. Up close, he could see they were amber, gleaming like rich honey under the sun.

But it was her silhouette that caught his attention the most. Not in a weird, creepy way—he just didn't remember her looking like that back at school. She wasn't tall by any stretch, just... average. Like every other girl their age. But leaning against the doorframe of his office, it looked like a strong gust could lift her straight off the street.

Even under the baggy clothes she wore, he could see it—the thin, brittle outline of her frame. It's as if the world grew up without her knowing.

But now, he lets her cry, frozen in place, unsure what to say or to do, beside making sure not to snap her frail body in two. Empathy isn't really his thing—but her anguish

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A puff of yellow smoke rises, filling the air—exactly as expected.

Good.

Someone's going to be thrilled this bloody potion is finally finished. Granger has been pestering him nonstop for months now, tracking his progress like the overbearing know-it-all she was at Hogwarts.

He doesn't like being hovered over; but he has to admit, without her breathing down his neck, he might have procrastinated another few weeks. Maybe months.

It started just a few days after he was hired as a potioneer for St. Mungo's.

Granger knocked on his door—no hello, no niceties—asking if a custom potion could help a patient she was treating in the Janus Thickey Ward (JTW), one floor up from his.

When he asked if he could examine the patient, she flat-out refused with no explanation. Since then, the whole thing has had an irritating air of mystery.

If it weren't for Granger's relentless follow-ups, he probably would've buried this project at the bottom of his to-do list.

But he didn't.

He got it done, not that he ever doubted himself, and he can't wait to shove the results in her snug pretty face—uh face. Just snug face.

He takes his long-awaited nap and already feels the edge of his hangover receding. Once the potion finishes brewing, he bottles it into small vials, each one shimmering delicately under the lab lights.

Feeling almost like a new man, he decides to take the stairs up to Granger's office instead of the lift.

He glances down at his handiwork on the way—a soft lilac brew, scattered with tiny silver stars—and a flicker of pride stirs in his chest.

At the top of the stairs, he takes a left turn and knocks sharply on her door where a small silver shines:

Healer Hermione Granger

Mind Specialist

There's no answer. The door, however, isn't properly closed. He takes that as an invitation.

She's there after all. How rude not to answer.

Her chair is turned away from him, and all he can see is her long, dark-brown hair braided neatly down her back.

"Granger?" he calls out.

Still no answer. Just the faintest startle in her shoulders—enough to tell him she heard perfectly well.

"I've got the potion you asked for," he says, a little sharper than intended. Damn her for wasting his time on his not-so-busy schedule.

She whisks around so fast that he instinctively flinches, taken aback by the raw distress pouring off her.

KITTYBLUSH

Weasley's fingers dig into the soft flesh of her wrist, dragging her up.

They reach her office. Weasley shoves the door shut behind them and Draco barely slips inside before the door slams. Weasley pins her there, her back to the wood, his breath far too close to her face.

"It's late," he hisses. "Don't tell me it was another shift. I talked to your boss."

There's barely an inch between them. Draco can feel the pressure like it's happening to *him*.

Granger pushes him back with a brave glare. *Supidly brave.*

"I'm working on something personal," she says, walking to her desk. "I'm researching a way to reverse the Obliviation spell."

Draco's mind trips. *The potion?* The one she had him brewing, where she asked about lifting memory blocks? That was a personal for her?

She'd said it was for a patient at JTW.

"You're still working on that?" Weasley sneers. "It's been four years."

"They're my parents, Ron."

Everything inside Draco stops. Her parents. She never let him meet the patient. Always dodged the idea of a consult. Because it wasn't some stranger—it was for her parents.

Intense guilt claws at his chest.

Would he have worked differently if he'd known? Harder? Smarter? He's not sure. But now he feels like an idiot. And, fine, maybe a little insulted that she hadn't told him the real reason, that it was for her parents. She couldn't trust him with that?

"You told me it had been too long, that there was nothing else you could do." Weasley snaps.

"I lied. You hated when I brought it up." Her voice stays level, eyes fixed on the file in front of her. She won't look at him. Probably safer that way.

"I hated it because you're never home!" His voice pitches higher, more frantic. "All I do is wait for you."

She sighs and rubs her temples. "You *could* get a job, you know. There are things that don't involve chasing a ball mid-air."

Draco almost claps. Possibly the most polite version of "get off your arse" he's ever heard.

"I *can't* work," Weasley snarls. "Your department diagnosed me—"

"Clinical depression, yes, I remember." She cuts in, but in a softer voice. "I'm not being cruel, Ron. But maybe even something part-time would help. Ten hours a week. Anything."

"I *had* something!" he shouts, and in two steps he's towering over her. His arms cage her chair. She doesn't flinch, but Draco sees the fine tremble in her fingers.

"That was my job. My passion. And *you* took it away."

She exhales. "I don't know how many more times I can say I'm sorry—"

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One second he's shouting. The next, his hands are around her throat.

Draco freezes.

Weasley shoves her against the window, yanks it open with one hand. Cold air rushes in. Papers lift off her desk and scatter like frightened birds.

"Stop saying you're sorry!" he howls. "It doesn't mean anything. You need to understand what I feel!"

Then he grabs her jacket and drags her forward, until half her torso is hanging out of the window.

Draco can't move.

She kicks her feet, scrambles for purchase, her eyes wide with terror. The wind roars around her.

"It's the fourth floor, right?" Weasley says conversationally. Too calmly. "Pretty much the same height as my fall."

He looks out into the dark like he's admiring the view. His face is hollow. Dead-eyed. Draco's stomach churns. Acid surges up his throat.

"P-please, Ron," she begs.

Draco wants to scream. To reach through the memory and shove the bastard out the same window, but this time, he hopes the fall kills him.

Weasley pulls her back inside, just as abruptly as he pushed her out. Her back slams against the wall with a sickening thud that almost makes the plaster crack.

Then, he lets go. Walks out. Leaves.

She's still. For a beat. Then her knees buckle, and she sinks to the floor, arms wrapped around herself like she's trying to disappear.

Her breathing is ragged. Her whole body trembles. And Draco—

Draco just watches.

The real him, the memory him, had been one floor below, in his potion lab, completely oblivious to what she was going through.

He could've stopped it.

He *should* have stopped it.

Like the resilient witch she is, she brushes the tears from her cheeks, stands, and reaches for an envelope. She slips a paper inside, then presses a tiny square into the upper-right corner—some sort of Muggle thing, probably. Whatever it is, she handles it with care, like it matters.

The memory fades, and Draco stumbles forward into her office. The same one. The same bloody window she was nearly thrown out of. He blinks, chest tight, eyes landing on the box.

Only one vial left.

His last chance to figure out where she went. What happened. After everything he's seen, he just hopes it's somewhere—*anywhere*—still among the living.

Some place he can reach. Somewhere he can find her. Because the alternative...

Chapter 1

"Good morning, love," Draco groans into the hair of the witch curled against him as the first rays of sunlight slip through the cracks of his bedroom window.

That's rule number one: always stick to general endearments—never names.

He learned that the hard way during the Great Incident of 2002, when he called the daughter by her mother's name.

Hard to blame him, really. Both witches had painfully forgettable names, and, in his defense, he slept with them both in the same week.

The witch—*Alicia Felicia*? Whatever—shifts in his arms, flashing him a wicked little look that promises they'll both be late for work. And late he is, *again*, as he drags himself into St. Mungo's, the elevator groaning as it hauls him up to the third floor.

Last night's activities drained him more than he likes to admit.

At least today is easy: he only needs to toss in one last ingredient and let his potion brew itself for an hour. A perfect amount of time for a quick nap.

Something he could and should have done yesterday.

But he got bored and the pub sounded infinitely more appealing.

He pushes open the door to his lab, shrugs off his coat, and slips into the traditional green robes.

Not his color—a pale, minty shade that does absolutely nothing for him—but they're heavily warded against potion splashes.

And more importantly, he doesn't fancy ruining his very expensive white oxford shirt with Armadillo bile.

He flips open his notebook, double-checks the dosage, and adds five careful droplets to the cauldron.

KITTYBLUSH

His throat tightens. No. He's not thinking that. She didn't... She couldn't..

The next memory drops him back at the same place he was hours ago with his friends, the Leaky Cauldron, but definitely not the same night. He sees himself immediately in the back corner; tucked in the shadows. Or rather, *past him*. Arm slung lazily around Melissa—no, Felicia?

SELLING FANFICTION IS ILLEGAL.

DON'T DO IT.

IF YOU BOUGHT THIS, SHAME

ON YOU.

IF YOU BOUND THIS

YOURSELF. IM SO PROUD OF

YOU!

XOXO -~~JENNNA~~



"Hermione, I think you should take Ron home. He just tried to punch the barman."
"It... w-was—he—it's h-his fault," Weasley slurs, pointing vaguely at a bar stool. Granger exhales. She's already rising before Potter finishes the sentence. Together, they hoist the ginger disaster up by both arms and drag him toward the Apparition point.

Then, a sharp tug and Draco is back in their house, watching her half-carry Ron inside. Which is impressive, really, because judging by the alarming difference in height and build, there's no way she should be able to move him at all. Somehow, she manages to drag his dead weight across the room... only to drop him, just out of reach of the couch. He lands face-first on the floor. Draco laughs.

"W-what the fuck!" Ron snarls, his breath sour, his grin leering.
She doesn't reply. Just shoots him a look that could curdle milk. Her lip lifts in disdain, and she lets him drag himself up to the couch.

She turns to leave. Then pauses.

There's something crackling in the air. Her spine straightens. Her chin lifts. She spins back around, resolute.

"Ron," she says. Calm. Measured. "I'm done. We're over."
What?

Draco flinches. So does Weasley.
"What?" Ron blinks stupidly, trying—and failing—to stand.

"I'm breaking up with you."

Yes. *Yes*. Draco can't be more ecstatic. Finally. Finally, she's cutting the dead limb. There's a light in her eyes, fierce and free. He feels a rush of pride that doesn't even belong to him. She turns on her heel, practically bouncing down the hall. A gleam in her step. Hope curling at the edges of her silhouette.
But of course, the moment doesn't last.

Weasley, despite looking like he couldn't tie his own shoelaces, can still inflict damage

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with his wand.

Snape:

Her body freezes mid-stride. Then topples like a felled statue.

Draco's heart lurches.

Ron stumbles toward her. Crawling. Panting. He straddles her stiff form on the floor, shaking as he presses both hands to her throat.

Her eyes are still showing her expression—terror and panic. It's unbearable.

The spell fades—poorly cast, probably—but his hands don't falter.

"No," Ron growls. "No, you're... no."

And then he's choking her.

Not metaphorically. Literally.

Draco watches, paralyzed, but only for half a second.

He throws himself at the ginger, trying to tear him off her—but it's like trying to tackle a ghost, like those dreams where you run and run and go nowhere. His arms won't work. His voice won't carry. And it is a nightmare, one he can't wake from, as Granger's face darkens to a deep, terrifying shade of purple. His heart plummets. He's useless. *Fucking useless.*

Then, mercifully, Weasley's grip loosens. But the relief is short-lived—his hands only shift to her blouse, yanking her upright until her face is pressed too close to his.

"You're not leaving," he growls.

She coughs, ragged and desperate for breath.

He slams her back down. Hard. Her head cracks against the floor, and Draco swears he hears the sound. The thud is sickening. Her eyes roll for a moment, unfocused, like she's trying to stay conscious.

Draco drops beside her, helpless and stricken, and hopes—*hopes*—that his words are enough to cross time and space.

"Leave him, Granger," he whispers. "Please."

He's begging. He *never* begs. But he will for her.

Weasley collapses at last, succumbing to what Draco can only pray is an ethylic coma.

Granger scrambles back until her spine hits the wall. She cradles the back of her head and blood paints her fingers.

Her gaze locks on the unconscious heap of her fiancé.

Then she's up, staggering toward the Floo, blood in her curls, rage in her breath. And vanishes in a roar of green flame.

The memory is about to end, but Draco knows what's his next step.

All this time wasted—analyzing every bloody moment—when the answer's been staring him in the face. She *always* comes back. No matter how badly she's hurt. No matter who breaks her. She forgives.

Draco strides toward the window of their living room, scanning for anything that could give away where they live. And there it is. He nearly groans at his own blindness.

KITTYBLUSH

Of course the Weasel would pick a place based on *his* convenience. Why think about Granger's needs when you can make her live right next to your precious practice pitch?

Right across from the hidden portal.

Where Muggles see a half-collapsed underground walkway, taped off for "ongoing *rhabas*," magical folk see a tunnel made of stone and vines, curling up the archway like braids. He's been there before.

Why No One Will Miss Me

Written by: KittyBlush

What he didn't know was that their house had been right there—just in front of it the whole time.

He yanks himself out of the memory and he focuses on the location.

He Disapparates—and thankfully, the same tunnel greets him.

Draco spins in place, squinting, trying to match the exact angle from their window. It doesn't take long. Mercifully this isn't one of those god-awful rows of terraced houses where every door is a clone of the next.

There. The bay window gives it away. Same view of the hidden portal. Same deep blue curtains, drawn shut like always.

The door isn't even locked, thank you Granger and her pathological trust in the world.

He storms inside, the layout half-remembered from memory, but it takes no effort to navigate.

"Granger!" he shouts, voice cracking through the house. He half-expects her to come barreling out, mildly annoyed but perfectly fine.

Instead, the universe gives him the Ginger Disaster himself.

"What the fuck—"

Draco doesn't wait for the rest. He grabs the front of Weasley's shirt, slamming him into the nearest wall. His wand presses firmly between the idiot's eyebrows.

"Where is she?" Draco snarls, making sure to *perfectly* enunciate—both so the dimwit might actually understand, and so every syllable lands with a fresh coat of spit across his stupid freckled face.

"Let me go!" Weasley shouts, but Draco just presses the tip of his wand harder into the idiot's forehead. Then, for good measure, he grabs him by the collar and hauls him up against the wall—feet dangling, face turning red.

Let's see how *he* likes being choked. After all, he did the same to Granger. There are no rules when the world's burning.

Weasley's eyes bulge comically from their sockets, fear slapped across his face like a bad painting.

"O-okay, okay," he wheezes, trying to sound reasonable.

Draco, picture of mercy, drops him. He crumples to the floor with the grace of a mountain troll—only to be immediately bound by an *Incarcerous*. Draco isn't in the mood for chances.

"Speak."



WHY NO ONE WILL MISS ME

"I don't know where she is!" he croaks. His face is an impressive shade of purple, honestly an improvement over his usual blotchy red. "I haven't seen her since Monday night."

Draco scoffs. "Right. Because when she's late by an hour you sprint to St. Mungo's like a controlling cretin, but she vanishes for four days and that's just *normal* to you?" "We had a disagreement on Monday—"

"Disagreement, my arse. You *strangled* her and cracked her skull against the floor."

Draco kicks him square in the stomach. Not hard enough to kill, just enough to remind him that he's still breathing. Unfortunately.

Weasley doubles over, wheezing like a broken accordion, then looks up, wide-eyed, blinking, like a confused Mooncalf.

"She told you?" he gasps.

"No—I saw," Draco snaps, eyes glinting. "A lot of it."

He takes a step forward, wand still aimed, voice low but rising.

"I saw the way you and Potter treated her. Every time you left her behind at Hogwarts. Every time she picked up your mess."

Another step. His grip tightens.

"She wanted to leave you!" He lunges, grabs the front of Ron's shirt, yanking him closer. "But chose not to after your accident—to take care of you—"

Weasley's eyes grow impossibly wide.

"—and you repaid her by turning into a violent ogre!" He shoves him down, once again, as he tries to regain a sense of composure.

"H-how?" His words became shrill with fear. The fear of having the truth exposed.

Draco exhales and glides down the opposite wall of the corridor, suddenly drained. Weasley visibly doesn't know where she is. He's not hiding her. He is not trying to find her, but at least he is not hurting her. His throat is dry.

"She left a box of memories," Draco says, voice flat. "But it reads more like an evidence file as if she's building an abuse case against you and Potter."

Silence. Maybe Weasley's finally grasping the weight of it. Either way, Draco doesn't expect anything useful.

He stands, exhausted. Defeated. The *Incarramus* spell will hold for another ten minutes—plenty of time to get to the Auror's office and... what, exactly? He doesn't even know the name for what he's about to do.

Report her missing, he supposes. His stomach contracts into a tight ball.

"She'll come back," Weasley says, too sure of himself.

"But she didn't."

"She always comes back."

Draco laughs. It's a cold, bitter sound. Because that's the problem, isn't it? She *did* always come back—just a little more broken each time.

Until one day, she ran out of pieces.

"The box was called *Why No One Will Miss Me*." He says with a hand on the doorknob,



KITTYBLUSH

"It does seem like all the shit you put her through during all those years—maybe she—" He can even bring himself to say it.

"Maybe she's gone to a place that there's no coming back from.

"The way you talk, it's like we're the only ones to blame." Weasley scoffs. "Because you are!" Draco snaps, whipping around, voice hot with anger. He's then met with the Weasel's most nauseatingly snug expression. Which is rich, considering he's never had a single damn thing to be proud of.

"Ah." Weasley sneers, dry as dust. "You still don't know, do you?"

He doesn't want to play into whatever self-righteous performance Weasley's gearing up for—but his curiosity is louder than his pride.

"Don't know what?"

There's a pause. Not silence, but hesitation—like the Weasel's brain has to buffer before putting together a full sentence.

"How her deepest scars came from someone you didn't mention."

Draco has to admit that he didn't think Weasley had that kind of prose in him. No wonder it took a second to spit it out.

"And who would that be?" he asks, keeping his voice level, though his pulse has begun a steady hammering in his ears.

"Are you sure you watched everything?" Weasley asks, and his tone has shifted—less cocky, more pointed. "You really think it was just me and Harry?"

The fucker has a point.

Draco hadn't exactly taken inventory. He was so hellbent on getting here, so focused on stomaching the worst of the Golden Boys, he hadn't actually made sure he saw all of it. And now that he's thinking about it, the memories were weirdly centered on the two dimwits.

But they weren't the only ones, were they? Salazar, he should know that better than anyone—he'd made it his job to torment her for the first half of their schooling. So who knows what else he missed?

Fine. He'll make a stop at St. Mungo's on the way to the Auror's office. Double-check everything. Properly, this time.

Before walking away, he throws in a stinging hex on his way out for good measure. Granger's office is as neat as ever, save for the box on her desk. He picks it up and tilts it sideways, checking all faces and edges of the box. Nothing falls out. He lifts it above his head, peering underneath. Still nothing. He opens the lid and starts pulling out the vials one by one, lining them up for inspection.

Just glass and glimmer. A velvet lining at the bottom of the box. But—wait. Is that fabric stitched down?

He narrows his eyes, fingers brushing over the surface until they catch on a barely-there silk tab.

He tugs it.

And just like that, the false bottom lifts to reveal what he missed: a second layer.

WHY NO ONE WILL MISS ME

Smaller vials. Dozens of them. Tucked beneath an Undetectable Extension Charm, no doubt.

Clever witch.

He grabs a vial at random and pours it into the Pensieve.

Then another.

And another.

Until he knows for certain.

"How her deepest scars came from someone you didn't mention."

His jaw locks, but it's not enough to stop the nauseating wave curling through his chest. He staggers back and ends up on the office floor, choking on dry heaves.

It was him.

He was the one who shattered her. Slowly, over years.

He didn't realize.

He thought an apology for the names and the sneers would be enough.

But he never saw the moments that truly broke her.

He's no better than Weasley or Potter.

Hell, he might be worse.

Why No One Will Miss Me

WHY NO ONE WILL MISS ME

Not like the one she had with—no, she reminds herself, that chapter is closed, if it even began...

She didn't find a way to reverse the spell. And maybe there isn't one. In the process, she became the most specialized mind healer at St. Mungo's, the one they send the impossible cases to. But for her own, there's no one else to rely on. She has combed through every theory, brewed every potion, explored every hypothesis. Nothing.

So she decides to return to Australia. To slip into a warmer life, where her parents know her only as a kind-faced relative. And maybe, with time, they'll grow so close that she can finally tell them the truth—that she's their daughter.

But then...

Word reaches her that a new potioneer has been hired. Very clever, apparently. She tells herself it can't hurt to ask. Just one last effort before she lets go for good.

She shows up at his door and forgets how to breathe. Blink. Blink. Joy sparks like a long-forgotten memory.

After three years of not seeing him, Draco Malfoy steps back into her life in the most unexpected way.

But only for a second. Then the mask slips into place—the calm, composed face of a professional.

After three years of not seeing him, Draco Malfoy steps back into her life in the most unexpected way.

She allows herself to believe it. Just one more chance before she gives up.

If anyone can help, it might be him. And as they work together—bickering, teasing, pushing each other further—she lets herself believe he might find the solution.

Her life isn't so hollow anymore, not when her days are filled with *him* now.

And maybe, maybe, she'll have her friend back.

Not more than that, of course. Never more.

Not when he seems intent on dating everyone at St. Mungo's. Everyone, except her. Never her.

She wants to fling her engagement ring into the wind—but doesn't, too afraid of Ron's reaction.

So friendship with Draco would be enough. Until it isn't.

Because it hurts. It hurts like hell watching Draco walk out of the hospital arm-in-arm with someone else, every other week, while she pretends not to care.

She needs help. Good thing she has rolodex of the best therapists in the mind healing field.

That's when she meets the healer with all the answers.

After just a few sessions, she almost laughs at how easily her therapist sums up her life in one word: abandonment. Or more—the fear of abandonment.

Of course, as it's often the case, it all traces back to her childhood. To being left out. While some people respond by isolating themselves—pushing others away before they can be pushed—people like her cling to people. They believe they have to *earn* love. By being useful. Patient. Perfect.

KITTYBLUSH

Her unresolved trauma draws her back to those who've hurt her the most.

That fear, paired with her low self-esteem, is a recipe for disaster. Add intermittent reinforcement—those rare, unpredictable moments of affection or approval—and her emotional investment only grows.

Like a gambler chasing one more jackpot.

She thinks she's broken with no way out.

Until her therapist gives her a task: to remember everything that broke her. To quiet the need to forgive easily when not deserved. It might hurt, but that way, she might stop repeating the same patterns.

So she finds a blue box and begins collecting memories—the most painful ones. With a touch of dark humor and a flair for dramatics, she labels it: Why No One Will Miss Me.

She has a plan now. She'll give Draco two more months to work on the potion. If it works, wonderful. But in two months she's leaving for Australia—reversal or no reversal.

And so she fills the box. It becomes a mantra. Every memory she selects, every time someone hurt her, she repeats it silently: *No one will miss me when I'm gone. I need to live for myself. Those people don't deserve me. I don't have to come back.*

She keeps writing to her parents as the pretend cousin. They send back photos—of themselves traveling through Australia in their mint Westfalia—and she tells herself: **Wait for me.**

She just wants to be with them. The only people who ever truly loved her.

Until one day, a letter arrives from Melbourne.

The handwriting isn't theirs. And just like that, there's no one left to go back to.

Dear Mrs. Hermione Jean Granger,

I am writing to you in my capacity as the executor of the will of the late Mr. Richard Granger and Mrs. Jean Granger.

I am deeply sorry to inform you of their passing, following a car accident which occurred on September 15th, last month.

Draco stares at the absolute wreck that used to be Granger's office. Parchment litters the floor and flutters in the air—fallout from the moment he

WHY NO ONE WILL MISS ME

swiped everything off her desk in a white-hot fit of rage. That was when he realized her hands had been bloodied in the mud because of *him*. Because of some precious gift she'd bought *for him*.

The desk now lies on its side—casualty of another wave of rage, the one that hit when he saw her pain after he left her under the bloody mistletoe. Just walked away. Abandoned her, like Potter and Weasley before him. And for what? He'd thought it was obvious he wanted to kiss her. She'd even closed her eyes—tilted her face up slightly, rosy lips parted just enough to make him insane. Practically inviting him to taste her.

But no. Of course not. He'd already known which sides they'd end up on once the war properly ignited. And he couldn't afford another weakness. Not with Voldemort dangling his parents' lives like a carrot over a cliff, not when failure meant their deaths. Getting attached to the most famous Muggle-born in Britain—who did end up Undesirable No. 2, just to prove him right—wasn't just reckless, it was idiotic.

Still. There were at least a thousand better ways to handle it than leaving without a word. Than making her feel like she'd imagined the whole thing.

So now, he's sitting on the floor, in the middle of the office. Because like a complete bloody troglodyte, he cracked the chair through the window. That's where the breeze is coming from. That particular outburst happened after he watched her crumble—watched her obliterate her parents' memories with a steadier hand than he's ever had for anything.

He gives up the performance of dignity and collapses fully, starfished on the floor like the tragic cliché he's become in the last hours. Out of breath. Eyes on the ceiling, heart somewhere under the rubble.

All he can think about is the way her kind and warm eyes first looked at him back at the train station. Like he was someone worth knowing. Worth trusting. Maybe even worth loving.

But he wasn't and still isn't.

Not yet. No until he finds her and explains, something he should've said years ago. Then... maybe... he can think about *more*. No—shut up. First, find her. Then—maybe, just possibly.

Good thing he has a photographic memory—one of his more useful, if underappreciated, talents. He sees the yellow letter clear as print, every word etched into his mind from the moment he spotted it in one of her memories.

The same letter she'd received days ago.

The one she held, shaking, after learning her parents had died—and he, clueless as ever, hadn't noticed a thing as she'd cried into his chest.

Guilt punches through him. Again.

Every word of that letter is branded into him now.

I am deeply sorry to inform you of their passing, following a car accident which occurred on September 15th, last month.
Confirmation from the Commonwealth Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages indicates that you

KITTYBLUSH

After that, the invitations pour in. She begins to feel like a puppet, always dressed up, always showing up besides Harry and Ron to fit the narrative the public wants. Somewhere along the way, she becomes the most sought-after single witch in the country, her name linked to wizards she's never met, her photograph printed next to headlines she never approved.

But she wants none of it.

She doesn't want the attention, or the praise, or the relentless questions about her love life. Because she already knows the answer, even if she refuses to say it out loud. She's still clinging to the thought of one infuriating wizard who she hasn't seen since the day she saved him from Azkaban, and who now might very well be the most eligible bachelor in the country—especially with Harry settled with Ginny, and Ron...

Well, Ron isn't quite as popular. The tragedy of being the third wheel, as Rita Skeeter once wrote—though in Ron's case, she didn't bother to write it at all.

Still, he remains her friend. Which means he witnesses the awkward mess that is her dating life. And one evening, in the quiet pause between another ill-fated date and the next obligation on her calendar, he tells her something she never expected to hear. That he's had feelings for her since sixth year.

She doesn't believe him. Not at first.

But then, after a second date with a man named Andrew—whose hair is so pale it reminds her of someone she's trying so hard to forget—she comes home to find Ron standing in front of her porch, holding a bouquet of roses. They're not her favorite, but she doubts she ever told him what her favorite flowers are... or that he even asked her. He tells her he loves her. That he's always loved her.

This time, she believes him.

Merlin only knows why.

Her mind healer would later tell her that it was typical jealousy on his part, the kind of attachment that surfaces when something once taken for granted suddenly feels out of reach. The kind that wants what it can't have, and loses interest the moment it's offered freely.

And as for her? Just another trick of the mind—always ready to accept affection the moment it's offered, terrified of when it will inevitably vanish. A textbook pattern of abandonment, though she'll only come to recognize it later.

Because it will take her years of quiet misery beside Ron before finding this mind healer that will have all the answers.

Although, when he hits her the first time, she thinks the matter is settled. She's done. The last time she made up her mind to leave, his accident trapped her in a spiral of guilt and obligation.

But not this time. This time, she won't look back. It's better to be alone than to stay with someone who breaks her spirit piece by piece. And yes, she knows leaving him means losing Harry too, but perhaps, with time, she's come to accept that what she thought was friendship might never have been.

WHY NO ONE WILL MISS ME

Ron like that, but she kind of likes how it sounded in *his* voice.

"Did you perhaps forget her behind, Weasel?"

And without another word, Draco walks away, his back straight, his pace unhurried, leaving Ron seething and speechless, and Hermione still reeling from the impossible fact that he came back to save her.

That's what she tells the Wizengamot, standing tall as she attests to his good character, recounting not just his actions, but the quiet ways in which he had changed. What she wouldn't know until later was that her testimony had tipped the scale, just enough weight to keep him out of Azkaban.

The morning after the hearing, she boards a plane to Melbourne, determined to find her parents and reverse the Obliviation spell. She easily finds their house—a small, gabled cottage painted in a soft blue, with a mint-coloured camper van parked in the driveway. She smiles at the sight, remembering how her father had said, with childlike excitement, that if they had to run away because of the war, Australia was the place to go, where they could travel the coast with nothing but a map, a van, and the sky overhead. Somehow, they had followed that dream, just without Hermione.

She knocks on the door, rehearsing the story she's crafted, and when they answer, their faces warm and welcoming, she introduces herself as a distant cousin from her mother's side. They don't question it for a second. Having seen some old pictures, she does look like her mother in her teenager years. So they invite her in without suspicion.

She tries to reverse the spell. The first attempt fails, as does the second. Obliviation, she learns, isn't designed to erase something so deeply rooted as the memory of a child. But she succeeded in casting it once, and she refuses to believe she can't undo what she has done.

Two weeks pass in a blur. When nothing works, she admits to herself that her knowledge might be insufficient.

So she returns to England and applies to the Mind Healing Apprenticeship Program at St. Mungo's, which trains the next generation of mind healers, not expecting much. But what she doesn't know is that while she was away, struggling to reverse her parents' memories, the legend of what would come to be known as the Golden Trio had grown into something exponential.

She's accepted without hesitation.

From then on, she throws herself into her studies, soaking up every lesson, every lecture, every scrap of insight the leading experts in the field have to offer. Everything is bringing her a step closer to reverse the spell on her parents.

Ideally, this would be her sole focus. But the Wizarding World had other plans for her. She has become someone they call the Golden Girl, a name she never asked for. At first, she refuses all the interviews, all the charity galas. She says no to every request to retell the same story—the tale of three children who somehow conquered the Dark Lord.

But it only takes one yes.

are their biological daughter.

Please find enclosed a copy of the will, according to which you have been named as the sole beneficiary of their estate, which includes the property located at 345, Parsons Lane, St Albans, VIC 4565, Australia.

I ask kindly that you attend our offices within thirty (30) days of the date of this letter to formally accept the will, collect the keys to the said property, and review final details. If you are unable to attend within this delay, please let me know and we will make alternative arrangements.

Please accept my sincere condolences,

Best regards,

Bryan Lee,

Solicitor & Executor

Pratt & Lee Legal and Associates, Melbourne Branch.

And just like that, he knows exactly where she went.

He checks his watch.

2:45.

Good thing he's filthy rich, because the Magical Transportation Office is going to bleed him dry for an international portkey at this hour.

And of course, she had to be at the furthest place possible from here.

But at least it's somewhere he can get to, not the place he briefly feared was out of reach.

KITTYBLUSH

KITTYBLUSH

Then, through the heat haze, she catches sight of him.

Draco.

He's climbing from the opposite side of the wreckage, zeroed in on the broom. Until he sees her.

He's going to take it, she thinks, and the thought doesn't even sting. Let him save himself. The table beneath her shifts suddenly, tipping sideways, and she loses her balance. She crashes down, scraping skin and bone against the wreckage, catching herself only by wrapping one hand around a bent lamp post jutting from the chaos. She dangles above a pit of fire that hisses and grows by the second, threatening to swallow everything.

“Maybe she should let go, a quiet voice inside her whispers.

Would anyone even miss me?

Her arms tremble. Her grip falters, too tired to hold on. And just when she's sure she's seconds from slipping—

A sharp swoosh cuts through the smoke.

“Granger!”

Her head jerks up. Draco's flying straight toward her, flames licking at his robes, a determined glare cutting through the smoke.

“Take my hand!” he shouts.

She reaches up, straining, her other hand already slipping. Her arm stretches just an inch too short and her fingers lose their hold.

She falls. But Draco Malfoy is faster than gravity. He dives, snatches her wrist, and yanks her up onto the broom in one swift motion, pressing her back against his chest as they jerk upward.

She's alive.

They're alive.

“Still can't summon a broom properly, Granger?” he mutters, breathless but with no malice.

She's never been this close to him. His arms secure around her, his heartbeat pounding strong against her spine.

Let the world burn, she thinks foolishly.

Let it all burn—as long as he holds her like this.

The fire chases them down and just as the bristles of the broom catch flame—they burst through the archway, skidding across stone and crashing into the hall.

Harry kicks the diadem away—the one Hermione found ten minutes ago—gasping. They all look back as the great doors of the Room of Requirement slam shut, sealing the inferno behind.

“What the fuck are you doing, ferret!” Ron explodes, charging toward Draco like he's ready to throw a punch.

“Saving your *girlfriend*,” Draco shoots back coolly. Hermione flinches at the word *girlfriend*. She loathes the association of being tied to

Chapter 5

“Where to, mate?”
“345, Parsons Lane.”

Draco repeats it with what he hopes is casual authority. The old man nods from inside the Muggle transportation box—the *taxi*, as the wizard officer from the Portkey Terminal called it. The word's glowing on the roof, so that checks out.

So far, so good. Except he has absolutely no idea how to get in.

The driver blinks at him, then sighs like Draco just personally offended him by his clueless existence. With some effort, the man climbs out, shuffles around, and yanks open the door.

“Hop on, ya royal highness.”

Charming.

Draco slides into the back seat with all the royalty he can salvage. It smells like cigarettes and something vaguely fried. The sun is blistering through the windows, and he's still dressed for English winter.

After what feels like two small eternities and a near-death experience at every intersection, the taxi jerks to a stop in front of a light blue house. Draco recognizes it instantly from Granger's memories.

Thankfully, he'd used the first eternity to silently study the door mechanism. It's a handle. Easy. Breezy.

He offers the driver one of the green Muggle notes, which earns him a grin so wide it's either gratitude or daylight robbery. Possibly both. But he doesn't have the mental energy to calculate getting the fee right.

Nordoes he have the mental reserves to deal with another elderly stranger approaching him with a cane—but here comes one anyway, shuffling across the sidewalk with all the speed of a dying snail. Likely the next-door neighbor, judging by the woman waving from the porch.

WHY NO ONE WILL MISS ME

And now, suitcases in hand, they climb into a taxi that will take them to the airport—and away from her.

They look so calm. So happy. Like a couple about to start their retirement adventure, not parents unknowingly abandoning their only child.

They have no daughter anymore.

She sinks down, crouched beneath the windowsill, hands clamped over her mouth to keep from sobbing too loudly. Her whole body trembles. It feels like she's dying.

And she wishes, more than anything, that someone was here. To gather her off the floor and say she did the right thing, to tell her it's not the end, that she'll find them again, that love doesn't vanish with a spell.

She wishes for Draco.

For the boy who, in the quiet corners of the castle, made her feel like maybe she wasn't so hard to care for after all.

But Draco hasn't been here for a long time—not since past December; not since he chose Pansy and left Hermione behind without a word.

He isn't coming. He probably never cared.

So why...

Why does he look at her like that—like she might be more than an afterthought. Maybe she's imagining it. Maybe it's the blood loss, dripping down her arm onto the marble as Bellatrix carves her like wood, cutting so deep she swears she can see bone.

Maybe her vision's too blurred to trust. But through the haze, through the tears, she *thinks*—God, she *sweats*—his face twists. Not with disdain. Not with indifference. But something closer to agony. Like watching her break is breaking him too.

She's probably delusional.

Hermione might be failing, but her hearing is sharp. Sharp enough that Ron's voice cuts clearer than Bellatrix's knife.

"We'll try to come back. Let's go. Now."

Not even two months after, she swears Ron's eyes mirror the same thought as he tosses her a broom across the flaming mess of the Room of Requirement.

But the broom gets stuck between two chairs, lodged at the top of precarious pile of furniture towering above her. She starts to climb, while fuming at Ron's lack of care.

What the hell is he thinking? She hasn't ridden a broom since first year, and even then, she barely managed to stay in the air. Above her, Harry and Ron soar into the smoke, vanishing toward the exit without a second glance to see if she's behind them.

She claws her way up, her eyes locked on the broom, screaming, "Up!" again and again, but it won't budge.

The flames are kissing her heels.

She shuts her eyes, trying to recall the way Draco's voice used to sound when he instructed her how to summon it in first year. But her brain is thick with smoke and panic.

KITTYBLUSH

"Hello there," the man says, voice croaking but warm. "Boyfriend of the Granger girl, I presume?"

Draco blinks. Maybe it's the jetlag (the five-minutes of international travel—mind you). Or the Portkey-induced nausea. Whatever it is, the word comes out before he can stop it.

"Yes."

It feels... weirdly nice.

"Poor thing," the old man says, cane tapping the concrete as he leans in. "The whole neighborhood was in bits when we heard about the Grangers. Fatal car accident. Just awful."

"And the daughter," the woman adds. "Imagine our shock—after all these years not knowing they had a daughter, and suddenly she exists."

"A tragedy," Draco agrees, voice even. "If you'll excuse me, I'd just like to be with my girlfriend."

It's the most practical lie he's ever told. No need to confuse these kind souls with the fine print of *not* being his girlfriend. Still, something flickers in his chest at the word. Merlin.

"Of course, dear, of course," the woman says quickly. "She needs all the love she can get. She was in a proper state when she arrived four days ago. She still hasn't left the house. We did try to—"

But Draco's already moving. Fast. His heart kicks against his ribs as he bolts up the path, the last words of the woman fading behind him. He doesn't like the sound of that. Hermione, locked inside, for four straight days. He's scared to find out why, but after everything he saw, dark ideas come to him quickly.

His fist hits the door a little too hard for someone playing the doting boyfriend. Subtlety has never been his strength. Before he can overthink it, he mutters a wandless *Abhornora* and slips inside.

As history shows, Draco Malfoy has never lost sleep over invading personal space.

The house isn't big. A few steps in and Draco's already certain she's not on the ground floor.

"Granger!" he shouts, because naturally, panic robs him of manners. A well-adjusted person might have called out gently. But Draco Malfoy under emotional duress is not known for gentle.

No reply.

He remembers from her memories that the bedrooms are upstairs. He takes the stairs four at a time.

The first door opens to what looks like a guest room. Empty, confirmed with a quick *Homenum Revelio*. He keeps moving, long strides carrying him into a larger room—her parents' bedroom, if the framed travel photos are anything to go by.

WHY NO ONE WILL MISS ME

Then he hears it—a soft, muffled *thud* from the closet.

Dread grabs him by the throat. His mind flashes to things he refuses to picture.

He swallows down the panic—almost chokes on it—and inches forward, torn

between wanting to know and desperately not wanting to. His hand finds the knob. His

eyes squeeze shut. And then he yanks the door open.

There she is.

Curled into a tight ball on the closet floor. Trembling. Alive.

The relief is so sharp it nearly floors him. He drops into a crouch, arms halfway out, instinct driving him to pull her close. To make sure she's real. Breathing.

But her eyes fly open—and focus on him. Wide. Wary.

Which is understandable, because now that he's thinking rationally, she is indeed a woman who just spent four days alone, only to hear someone break into her house, scream, and barrel up the stairs like a lunatic.

Shit.

"D-Draco?" she croaks. Half-relieved, half-confused.

It hits him then. Really hits him. He found her.

His arms move purely on instinct, reaching for her before his mind prohibits him.

He pulls her in with a force that startles even himself.

His knees give out and he drops hard, landing on his arse with a graceless thud, arms still locked around her. His face buries in the curve of her neck, breath shuddering against her skin as he clutches her closer.

But she's rigid in his arms, stunned and he holds her tighter—willing warmth into her bones, begging her to thaw. Just a little.

He doesn't ask her to hold him back.

He just hopes she might melt.

Eventually.

"Fuck, Granger—I thought—I..." He flounders, trying to explain in a very *equivoical* way. Something vague, dramatic, entirely unhelpful. He unwillingly pulls back, his hands settling on her shoulders, needing to see her face. "Shit, you scared me!"

She blinks. Then narrows her eyes.

"I scared *you*?" she snaps, voice cracking with emotion. "I thought you were a burglar! Or worse—Ron—or—"

Her voice trembles again. So does his chest at the mention of Weasley and all the things he's done to her to make her think that he was worse than an intruder.

"Do most thieves call you by name?" he mutters, too tired to resist the instinctive tease.

"Not the point!" she growls. Then deflates with a long, shaky breath. "What are you doing here, Draco? How did you even find me?"

"Porkey."

She glares.

"You know that's not my question..."

repeats it enough, maybe she will start to believe it.

But the day he walked away from her beneath the mistletoe turned out to be the last they spoke—for a very long time.

Because when their next patrol arrives, he doesn't show up.

Instead, it's Theo Nott who appears in his place, offering a shrug and a vague explanation that Draco had asked to switch partners, that he's now patrolling with Pansy.

Apparently, they're betrothed. Whatever that means.

They don't patrol again together. Not once. She tries to catch his eye in the corridors, but his gaze slides past her like she's nothing more than a blur on the edge of his vision.

Had she known, she would've set the damn mistletoe on fire and kept her foolish feelings buried where they belonged. Of course he got scared—what else was he supposed to do, once he realized someone like *her* liked someone like *him*?

And it hurts. God, it hurts. Something is breaking far beneath the surface, where no one can see.

Harry and Ron only begin to speak to her properly again at the end of the year, after Dumbledore dies. That's when she learns what Draco had been carrying all year: the task and the guilt that must have consumed him every hour of the day.

But he didn't go through with it. She's not the least bit surprised because she knows his heart. She knows he isn't just darkness.

But still. She wishes he would have told her. She would've listened. That's what friends are meant to do.

And right now, she's in desperate need of a friend.

Someone to hold her hand steady, to remind her she's not a monster for what she's about to do. Someone to tell her this is the right thing. But there is no one.

She lifts her wand. Her fingers barely obey.

There's no other choice—Harry needs her, the war needs her, and if her parents remember her, they'll be targets. She won't let that happen. She won't let them be hunted for loving her.

Obliviate.

And the worst part is that they smile afterward.

Last evening, she had smiled with them. They pulled out old photo albums, told the same stories they always did—her father's ridiculous haircut the day she was born, her mother's obsession with baby teeth, the time Hermione painted the cat blue. They played Clue. Her mother cheated, as usual. It was perfect.

She told them about the war and they agreed to move to Australia, as a family. They believed her so easily, because why would their only daughter choose to stay behind? A question that will haunt her for years.

She could have gone. Could have left the war behind, slipped away with them into sunlight and safety and anonymity.

But she didn't.

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WHY NO ONE WILL MISS ME

It becomes impossible to ignore once they return to school. She's not the only one who notices, for Harry practically appoints himself Head of *What is Maffy Hating* task force. Hermione wants to know, too, but not to expose him. She only wants to help. To be his friend. To draw out whatever darkness is eating at him and take it into herself if she could.

He never names the weight he carries, but in quiet moments, when their fingers brush, when he lets her hold him, she feels it lessen. Once, he even lets her wrap her arms around him, and he holds her back—desperate, tight, as though for a few seconds, her touch makes him lighter. That's when she starts to want more. That's when she finally admits that she doesn't want to be just his friend.

When December arrives, and mistletoe flowers bloom in every shadowed archway, she dares to hope. They pause together beneath one in a deserted corridor. His gaze flicks to her lips. She hopes and she closes her eyes.

And waits.

Only to hear a sharp breath—and footsteps. When she opens her eyes, he's already walking away, his back to her, unmoved. Her face burns with shame.

Maybe she hadn't made it clear.

So she decides she will. She'll ask him to Slughorn's Christmas party as her date.

But when she finally finds him, her heart cracks open. He's pressing Pansy Parkinson against a stone wall, kissing her like he means it, not ignoring her. Not forgotten under the mistletoe like she was.

The world doesn't break so much as vanish from under her. Jealousy isn't even the right word. It's devastation. Betrayal. Stupid, naive heartbreak.

She stumbles back to the common room, her chest heaving with sobs, barely able to catch the breath needed for the next. When she finally manages to speak, the words fall out in a broken whisper.

"They're kissing."

Ginny misreads the pain instantly.

"Oh. I thought you knew about Ron and Lavender..."

Hermione couldn't care less about Ron. Truly. But everyone around her seems to believe otherwise—that she's avoiding them to spare herself from watching his new romance bloom.

She just needs to breathe, to be able to mend something torn open inside her chest. She just needs a few days...

But they all let her drift. With such ease, as though her absence doesn't even leave a gap.

Harry doesn't come looking for her. He doesn't ask if she's all right. Once again, he chooses Ron. Not that she's surprised.

So she is left to carry the weight of her own broken heart, in the same quiet way she always has.

But at least she still has Draco. Her *friend* Draco. Not more than that. No. If she

"First," he says carefully, "can we crawl out of the closet so we can have a proper conversation elsewhere?"

There's a solid sixty seconds of a silent standoff. She stares at him like she's deciding whether to hex him or hug him back. It has no effect on Draco, of course—he's far too focused on the sharp sting behind his ribs now that he can see her mesmerizing amber eyes again.

Finally, without a word, she unfolds herself and stands, motioning for him to follow. Downstairs, she gestures toward a barstool with a sharp flick of her fingers. He obeys. She moves around the kitchen, pulling mugs from high shelves, setting a kettle to boil—going through the motions with stiff, exhausted efficiency. He watches her in silence, noting how her shoulders slump even as her hands stay precise.

She slides him a cup. Tea with three sugars. Just how he liked it.

"Speak," she says, sitting beside him.

He likes the way she ascertains her authority. After watching all the memories, it still strikes him that he's the only one she ever seemed comfortable enough with to be that assertive—especially in the last few months at St. Mungos.

But he can't mention the memories. As much as he had no problem invading her space *then*, he now realizes the slight ethical issue she might have with it. Best to shut up for now and avoid any reference to the fact that he saw her at her most vulnerable. Good thing Draco is quick on his feet, because he already has an answer to how he found her.

"Muggle technology," he declares, proud.

Her brow furrows. "Computer?"

Shit. *Was that*—astonishment? No, skepticism. Definitely skepticism.

"Exactly," he says, too quickly.

"Oh, and do pray tell," she scoffs, resting her chin in her hand like she's settling in for a story. "How did you use the computer to find me? I'm *very* curious."

Ah.

Well. He's fucked.

He fumbles for logic. Computer. From the verb *compute*. To calculate. Brilliant. Utterly useless.

I—just like anyone would," he says, stalling. "I calculated... things. And voilà."

Her eyebrow arches so high he half expects it to detach and levitate off her face.

Okay. Plan B.

"Fine," he mutters. "Zabini helped me."

That earns a subtle nod. She knows Blaise works for the Auror Department's Tracking people is quite literally in his job description among few other tasks. Her eyes drop to her coffee. She nods again, this time slower. Quieter.

"What do you know?" she asks, voice small.

Everything. Her pain. Her loneliness. Her...silly crush for him at school, one he never earned

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and certainly never deserved.

How her friends gave up on her. And he was just as much to blame.

Still, his hands burn to hold her, to offer some form of comfort—just like he did days ago when she learned the truth about his parents. So he gives her what he can: the truth he's allowed to share. Maybe it's enough to ease the weight, just a little. Maybe she'll trust him enough to tell him more.

Holding her might be too much. So he settles for her hand.

The contact startles her, but he sees the tension in her shoulders loosen, just slightly.

"I know about your parents."

Her bottom lip wobbles. Her eyes snap shut.

"And that the potion we worked on... was for them."

She doesn't reply—just exhales slowly, as if trying to keep the pain at bay. A tear escapes, and Draco wipes it away before thinking, his thumb lingering on her cheek in a slow, soothing motion.

Her skin is buttery soft, he thinks. Which is absolutely not the point.

"I'm sorry," he says quietly. Granger opens her eyes again, frowning slightly.

He imagines there are plenty of things he should apologize for, but he goes with the more pressing one. The rest can wait.

"If I'd worked faster, or just worked harder, maybe—"

She swats his hand away. Both of them. He misses the contact instantly. "Don't," she snaps, pointing her index at him, her voice regaining that firm, commanding edge he likes far too much. "None of that."

She stands, moving around the counter. Her back is to him now as she reaches for the coffee pot. She speaks while refilling her cup, her voice lower, but steady.

"I went down that road already. And with enough what-ifs, maybe Voldemort never existed, and maybe I never obliterated my parents."

Draco stays silent, watching the curve of her shoulders, the way her hand trembles just slightly as she sets the pot back down.

She turns around and leans forward, setting both elbows on the edge of the island, her hands wrapping around the mug.

"Okay," she says, her gaze fixed on his. "You've explained how you found me. Now I need the why."

Draco takes a sip of his tea, because there's nothing quite like lukewarm tea to remind him how much he hates it. He slides the cup toward Granger with a grimace. She takes the hint and tops it up with hot water, but the truth is—he just needed a few more seconds. Because how does one explain *why*, when he doesn't even know himself?

He could say he was a worried colleague. Pretend he needed her for some urgent project. But the lies are already stacking in his brain and he can feel the headache forming. So he reaches for one of the truths. One that's been quietly following him for years—since their first patrol back in fifth year, give or take a few detours.

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It doesn't sting. Not like hers.

It feels—warm. Calming.

Although, she thinks it might be his fingers that soothes her most of all, caressing her skin in such a gentle way.

A minute later, the skin is smooth again. Not even a scar.

She stares, amazed. Reaches to pull her arm back to inspect it—but his grip tightens.

He doesn't let go.

"I'm sorry," he says quietly. His eyes stay hidden, shadowed beneath his fringe.

She wants to ask *for what?* There are so many things. Too many.

But she doesn't want to risk it. Doesn't want to break the fragile friendship they built over the last months.

"It's okay—" she begins.

"No. It's not."

He lets out a breath, almost a laugh, but there's no humor in it. His head bows lower.

"Seeing your arm just now... it reminded me of the time I shoved you into the mud. Your hands were bleeding then, too."

She watches him, unable to speak.

"I kept treating you like shit," he says. "Because of your blood."

There's a pause. Then he lifts his thumb, stained with the last trace of her blood. He stares at it.

"Funny," he murmurs. "Because it looks just like mine."

He swallows, voice thick. "I started to see it last year. But this—this is proof."

And from then on, their friendship blossoms—especially that summer. Hermione expects it to be dreadful. Stuck at St. Mungo's, still recovering from Dolohov's curse, with no visitors allowed unless they're magical. Her parents can't come. Ron and Harry don't. She tells herself she understands. It's summer. Who'd want to spend it in a hospital room?

But then, one morning, a pale flash of blond hair appears in her doorway. Draco. He says he's visiting Blaise, who nearly killed himself trying to transfigure water into Firewhisky. (A bad idea. A worse hangover.) Blaise is discharged after three days. But Draco stays.

He comes back with news, gossip, sweets stolen from the hospital kitchen. He vents about Lucius—now in Azkaban—and she listens. And maybe, in those quiet afternoons, he starts to realize his father isn't just flawed, but dangerous.

By the end of August, though, his visits grow fewer. The last time she sees him before school, he's taller, sharper in the jaw, still beautiful—but his eyes are shadowed. He doesn't say much that day. And when she asks what's wrong, he shrugs it off, then goes quiet.

She doesn't push. But something's changed. And she feels it.

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Better two damaged bodies than one broken.

There's no sound except the wet scratch of Umbridge sipping tea and the shallow intake of Hermione's breath every time the Blood Quill bites, carving its steady sentence into her skin: *This is my punishment for being friends with a liar*.

Then the door bursts open with no knock.

"Professor, there are students making trouble in—"

Hermione lifts her head. She knows that voice. Draco's eyes land on her, and in an instant, they freeze. His gaze drops to her bloodied arm.

She yanks down her sleeve, wincing as it scrapes the raw skin.

"Where?" Umbridge snaps, voice shrill enough to pierce glass.

Draco doesn't answer immediately. He's still staring at her. He looks pale. Confused. "What?" he blurts.

"The students, Mr. Malfoy," she says again, sharper this time.

He blinks, snapping upright. "Right—yes. Near the Ravenclaw tower. Students flying in the corridors."

Umbridge gasps as if he's just announced that an Unforgivable has been cast. She's out of her chair in seconds, muttering something about the Minister hearing of this, waving vaguely in Hermione's direction.

"Detention is over," she tosses behind her, disappearing through the door.

And then—silence.

Until Draco flicks his wand and summons a chair, dragging it across the room so he can sit beside hers.

"Show me," His voice is low, clipped.

Hermione blinks in confusion. "What?"

His eyes drop pointedly to her sleeve.

"It's fine," she says quickly. "I have Murtlap Essence in my room."

He doesn't respond. Just reaches out and lifts her arm gently, settling it on his thigh like she's something fragile.

"Well," he mutters, "I bet the one I brewed is better."

He tugs at the fabric, and a sharp gasp escapes her as it peels away from her skin. The blood had dried into the threads, and the motion tears the wound open again. His breath catches.

"How long has she been doing this to you?" he asks, turning her arm to examine the gashes. His fingers are cool against her fevered skin.

"I don't know," she says honestly. "I've lost count. Since last month, I think. But I'm not the only one—everyone else—"

"Shut up," he says, and it's not mean. Just decisive. Like the rest of her sentence don't matter.

He pulls a small vial from his pocket and uncorks it with one hand. The scent is potent and herbal. He dabs it onto her arm.

She hates to admit but he was right in saying that his is better.

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"Because that's what friends do," he says simply.

Her eyes widen. In shock, disbelief—hard to say. But then comes that smile. Small.

Subtle. Childlike. Infuriatingly addictive.

He wants another one. Desperately. So he repeats the word like an experiment.

"What friends don't do," he adds, "is vanish across the world with no goodbye, no note, not even a bloody owl."

Another smile—there it is again.

"Alright then," she says lightly, twirling like she's presenting herself on stage. "As you can see, I'm perfectly fine. You can go home now, back in peace." She gestures toward the door with a theatrical flourish.

But Draco's not going anywhere. He might not know why he did all this—especially since effort is not exactly his brand—but he knows he's not ready to leave.

He hasn't believed in permanence for a long time. Not since the war. Not since living day-to-day with a madman under his roof and the looming threat of a kiss from a Dementor if things didn't fall the right way. Two years of waiting to die can really ruin a person's work ethic.

So he stopped trying. No long-term goals, no big ambitions. Why bother when the world could burn down overnight?

But with Granger—these last few months—maybe... maybe he started to believe again. That something could last. That caring might be worth the trouble.

"What a great hostess," he says with a grin. "Already kicking me out?"

He stands, scanning the room until his eyes land on the couch. Perfect.

"The jet lag's gutted me," he declares and throws himself dramatically onto it.

"You took a portkey," she deadpans from the kitchen.

"I'm aware," he says, muffled by a cushion, but he hears her footsteps approaching.

She sinks into the armchair with a quiet huff, curling her legs beneath her.

"It's still the middle of the night in London," he mutters. Now that he says it aloud, the exhaustion hits properly.

"Portkey night travel is so expensive," she protests. "What was so urgent for you to travel that late?"

A fair question. One he doesn't have an answer to that doesn't involve *admitting* he'd spent half the night going through her memories—panicking, really—and going straight to the Magical Transportation Department with the kind of energy usually reserved for mortal peril.

So no, he's definitely not saying that.

Maybe it's the lack of sleep. Maybe it's the sheer relief of seeing her whole and safe, within reach. Maybe it's the way the couch feels warm beneath him, or maybe he's already dreaming. But he's almost certain—*almost*—that what comes out, right before sleep takes him, is:

"You."

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He wakes up after a nightmare he can't remember, though he can guess who it was about, given he screams "*Granger!*" while bolting upright, heart racing.

Draco blinks against the dim light, brain catching up to reality. Small living room.

Brown couch. A blanket tangled around his legs. And the air smells... oddly delicious.

Then his eyes land on the witch herself, still curled up on the armchair next to him, a bowl of what looks like pasta in her hands, frozen mid-bite. Watching him like he's grown three heads.

Ah. Right. He did just shout her name like he was possessed.

Instead of addressing that mess, he clears his throat and goes for casual. "How long was I out?"

She seems happy to skip over it as well, glancing at the nearby clock.

"Three hours," she says, then takes another bite. "Hungry?"

His stomach answers for him with a loud, undignified growl. "Tamished."

She moves to get up, but he motions for her to stay put. "Please. I can serve myself pasta. I'm not completely helpless."

He heads toward the kitchen, expecting to find a pot still on the stove—but the surface is spotless, and now he feels immediately and completely out of place in this Muggle kitchen.

Sensing his confusion, Granger offers:

"In the fridge."

He stares blankly at his surroundings. His knowledge of Latin and the syllables *fīd-gē* are no help whatsoever.

She chuckles and points toward a large, white rectangle prism.

"It's the big shiny box with the black handle."

"I knew that," he scoffs, grabbing the handle. A wave of cold air rushes out to greet him.

Well. That's just a glorified enchanted icebox. Why do Muggles insist on giving everything such ridiculous names?

Inside The Fridge, he finds at least a dozen glass containers, each packed with food that looks better than the last. His eyes immediately lock on the meat macaroni. He snatches it like a starving goblin, stomach growling again.

"You can heat it in the microwave," she offers casually from the armchair. He ignores her, partly because he has no idea what a *microwave* is, and partly because—hello—he's a wizard. Heating charm, anyone?

"Do you invent words just to torment me?" he says, summoning a bowl, which flies neatly into his hand as he dishes himself a very generous portion.

From the corner of his eye, he sees her rise, and just as he raises his wand to warm the bowl, it floats from his grasp and glides toward a sleek black box on the counter.

Wand still at the ready, he watches, mildly affronted, as Granger opens a small door, places the bowl inside, and presses something with one finger. A soft series of beeps, then a low hum fills the air.

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unsure what version of Draco Malfoy will show up this year. Welcoming? Mocking? Distant? He says nothing for the better part of their round, and neither does she, keeping her eyes forward, spine straight.

But she notices the small things. The way he keeps swallowing, like something's caught in his throat. Like there's a sentence he doesn't know how to begin.

And then—he does. He asks her about her summer. In a casual way. Almost like it's nothing.

To anyone else, it might be.

To her, it's everything.

For the first time in her life, a person other than her chooses to make the first step and repair broken pots.

The last time they exchanged polite words, they were eleven. Before the name-calling. Before he made it clear what he thought she was worth.

This time feels different. And she really wonders what happened over the summer. Harry told them about Lucius, about the graveyard and that Voldemort is back. That much is certain. Draco must know it too, if his father has returned home as a Death Eater. Maybe...he changed?

She hates how quickly she forgives him. Hates that she doesn't even make him work for it. For the insults, the slurs, the years of cruelty. She wishes she were stronger and had higher standards. The kind of girl who'd make him suffer for every word.

But she isn't. Not with him.

Because she wants this. She wanted it for so long, she doesn't want to compromise anything.

Now, every week before patrol, she wakes with something close to joy in her chest. She sprints out of bed like it's Christmas morning, heart full, cheeks warm, braiding her hair with more care than usual.

Four months in, and she lets herself believe it. Draco Malfoy is someone that she can finally call her friend.

Even if he never looks at her in the corridors.

Even if he turns away when others pass them.

Even if he never says a word to her outside their little bubble of torchlight and whispered conversations.

She tells herself it's fine. He's just cautious. Their world doesn't make space for this kind of friendship—not yet. And she can't tell Harry or Ron, not without losing them again.

So she keeps it quiet. Just hers.

Her secret, fragile thing.

One evening, she finally receives the apology she never let herself hope for. She's in Umbridge's office again. Detention, not for anything she did, but because she couldn't stand to watch Harry come back with his hand torn open every time. So she negotiated and the professor agreed to split the hours between them.

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more for show.

And then comes a day when she's already fragile. Harry had snapped at her—told her she was annoying, that he didn't need help with the egg. Ron has ignored her for days, though she can't even remember what she did wrong.

So when Malfoy mutters to Goyle as he passes, "Still *eating alone*. What a *pathetic Mudblood*," it cuts deeper than it should.

It's not even the word that breaks her; more the sudden sting of being invisible to the people who matter and exposed to the one who shouldn't.

An embarrassing sob escapes her before she can stop it.

He freezes. For a moment, she braces for his habitual awful smirk.

But he just stares at her.

Something in his expression falters. Not pity—she wouldn't accept that from him—but...*something*. Hesitation, maybe. Guilt, if she were being stupid.

Then he leaves.

She tries not to think about it. But years later, she'll realize that it was the last time

Draco Malfoy ever called her a Mudblood.

From then, he keeps behaving in ways she doesn't expect.

At the Yule Ball, they're paired for one brief, awkward waltz. He doesn't insult her. Doesn't even sneer. Just stands there with his hand awkwardly in hers, eyes darting, jaw tense, as if struggling with nerves.

That night, lying in bed, she catches herself smiling. Just a little. Her fingers press into her palm, remembering the shape of his hand against hers. The warmth of it. The fact that he hadn't cringed. And the fact that it had been the first time they touched.

Stop it, she tells herself. Those feelings were squashed. Gone. Buried so deep they should never see light again.

But then the second task comes.

She's pulled from the icy depths of the Black Lake, skin blue and trembling, lungs aching. She hates swimming, maybe scared even. The platform is a blur. Voices call out, but it's his hand that reaches her first.

She hesitates only a second before taking it as he pulls her up, pressing firmly his fingers around hers.

For a few quiet, breathless seconds, she wishes he wouldn't let go.

That night, she lies awake again, hand cradled to her chest, heart doing something she doesn't want to name.

She tells herself it's nothing. That he's still the same. That she's imagining it all.

But it's too late. What she thought was buried has started to breathe again.

Because, finally, in fifth year, the friendship she's longed for—foolishly ever since that first train ride—starts to take root. Just when she'd finally convinced herself it had only ever been a silly first-year crush, based on too few glances and nothing but naïve hope.

It begins with patrols as Prefect duty, scheduled weekly. Just the two of them, walking halls together under the glow of enchanted torches. She's nervous their first round,

The bowl begins to rotate inside the contraption, like it's on display at some bizarre culinary museum.

"Magic?" he asks, transfixed by the slow spin and the gentle heat radiating from it. She nudges him aside. "No, this is the microwave," she says, sitting back down at the counter. "It heats food using radiation."

He raises an eyebrow. "Radiation?"

"Some people think it causes cancer if you stand too close, so maybe don't hover like that," she adds between bites of pasta.

The microwave chimes with a cheerful little tune. Draco decides that must be the signal, because—despite what she thinks—he's *not* a complete moron.

He joins her on the next barstool, grabs the warm bowl, and takes a bite. A pleased hum escapes him.

"Tasty. Did you make it?"

"No," she snorts. "That was Linda and Roger—the next-door neighbors."

Ah. Must be the ancient couple he ran into earlier.

"My parents were friends with practically everyone in the neighborhood. Since I arrived, people keep turning up on the porch with food. Hence..." She gestures toward the overflowing fridge. "...the abundance of ready meals."

Then, a little sadder, she adds, "They were all so shocked to learn that their friends had a hidden daughter. Like they're the ones who did something wrong for not knowing."

Her fork scrapes up the last bite with a sharp, bitter twist.

Silence settles over the room. Only the quiet clink of cutlery against porcelain and the soft sounds of chewing remain.

Draco doesn't know what to say. There is so much to say, and yet none of it feels right. Nothing that wouldn't sound clumsy or trite.

He still remembers the day he found out his father was dead—well, killed himself, technically, in Azkaban.

He remembers the cold numbness that followed, dragging through the motions of grief for a man he had long stopped calling a father. And even then, *he* hadn't done it alone. His mother had been there. They'd grieved together. Sorted through the grim logistics—claiming the body, arranging a funeral. A mess, but a shared one.

Granger had done all that by herself.

But not anymore. Now he's here. She doesn't have to go through this alone. "Can I help, somehow?" he asks finally. "With the funeral. Or, whatever Muggles call it."

It earns him a faint smile—but it fades almost as quickly as it came.

"It's also called a funeral," she says, standing to gather their empty bowls. She moves to another one of her mystifying appliances and stacks them inside. "But there's nothing to help with now."

He watches her, puzzled.

"They died two months ago," she explains, not quite meeting his eyes. "No one

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knew I existed then. So they were buried, surrounded by friends instead.”

Draco’s chest tightens. She missed the funeral—didn’t even get a chance to say goodbye. No closure.

“Where?” he asks, already forming a plan.

“What?”

“Their graves. Have you been?”

Her shoulders dip, folding slightly inward. That guilt—he’s starting to recognize it. It clings to her like a second skin. It’s as if she’s always bracing for judgment. And *fuck*—he knows he’s part responsible for it.

“No. Since I got here, I haven’t really gone out, I—”

“Then we’ll go tomorrow. Visit them.”

She looks at him, startled. Like kindness always comes with strings. A pause. Then, the corners of her lips twitch into that soft, barely-there smile—the one he’s started craving like an idiot.

“We?”

“Yes.”

He means it.

After a half-decent night’s sleep—him in the guest room, Granger in her parents’ bedroom—he wakes feeling slightly more human. The rooms were close enough that he could hear her tossing and turning now and then, but not close enough to do anything about it. Not that he would have. Probably.

They step out of the house, the mood quiet, respectful. A visit to a graveyard doesn’t exactly call for chatter. Granger locks the front door behind her, and just as she turns the key, both of them jump at the sudden voice from across the porch.

“Oh, Hermione! So glad to see you out and about,” calls the old man from next door, appearing out of nowhere. “And that your boyfriend is finally here!” his wife chimes in, marching up with a tray of muffins. “We were starting to worry you’d stay alone in that house forever!”

Draco feels his ears heat. Bloody hell.

Slightly puzzled, Granger takes one of the muffins with a soft, automatic thank you, then grabs a second one and hands it to him. Her hand brushes his. He ignores that completely, like the mature adult he is.

As they walk away, she mumbles under her breath, “What are they on about?”

Draco exhales, half scoffing. “No idea. It seems dementia also impact muggles.”

But as they reach the camper van parked out front, any lingering amusement drains from his face. She’s heading straight for it—keys in hand, like she actually intends to drive the thing.

He eyes the vehicle warily. Its color reminds him of mint swirl, his favorite ice cream from Fortescue’s, but that doesn’t mean he trusts it to carry them safely without bursting into flames.

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for the boy, and the part of herself that still wishes it had gone differently.

When she finally wakes up from the Mandrake Draught, it’s the first thing she wonders. Whether he will come to see her. Now that she almost died, maybe he regretted his words. She waits. Hopes.

But he never comes.

So she too gives up. She finally understands. Some things—some people—are not worth to come back to.

After all, he proves her more than once in third year, that whatever it was she felt for him, it’s gone.

He seems determined to throw the word *Mudblood* at her every time she walks by. Sometimes loud, sometimes low, just enough for her to hear.

At first, she flinched. Now she keeps walking. He’s said it so often, it’s almost lost its sting.

Almost.

The insults don’t stop there. He mocks her hair, her teeth, the way she speaks. He calls her ugly—not in clever ways, just repeated, dull cruelty. It shouldn’t matter. It’s not even creative. But somehow, the more he says it, the more it starts to sink in.

She tells herself she doesn’t care. She lifts her chin. She’s smarter than him. Stronger. Braver.

But some nights, when she tries to brush her hair and it gets stuck on a knot, she catches her reflection and wonders if he’s right. Just a little.

Just when she thinks her feelings for him couldn’t be buried deeper, he taunts her about Buckbeak’s execution. She hits Malfoy for that. Her knuckles catch his jaw the moment he laughs when she cries, just as the axe fell on her feathered friend.

Her hand throbbed for hours, but it was worth it.

Joke’s on him anyway. She saved Buckbeak with the Time-Turner. Officially, it was to save Harry’s godfather. But deep down, it was the Hippogriff she couldn’t leave behind. Her dear friend, and sometimes only friend this year, when Harry and Ron were ignoring her.

Malfoy doesn’t matter. She thinks the more she repeats it, the more it will sink in. He’s not worth it. Not anymore.

But the ache stays, soft and stubborn, refusing to leave. Just like him.

She wonders if something happened over the summer before fourth year. Because come autumn, Malfoy seems... changed. Not in any grand, redemptive way. Just enough to make her wonder if she’s imagining it.

It starts at the Quidditch World Cup, where he throws a warning at Harry and Ron, with that same superior drawl:

“*If you think they can’t shoot a Mudblood, stay where you are.*”

It’s not even close to concern. But it’s a departure from second year, when he expressly wished her dead.

He still uses the slur, but more like a habit. But there’s less bite to it now, as if it’s

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both hands and heads outside, her heart pounding faster with every step.

She sees him standing in the courtyard. Waiting, it seems. Or waiting for her. And maybe he is.

Her fingers curl tighter around the wrapped parcel in her hands, the softest smile breaking across her lips. The timing couldn't be more perfect. It could be the start of something. She almost calls his name.

But then he lifts his head and sees her.

His lips curl and in one second, the fragile hope she'd been holding shatters.

The world tilts.

She doesn't see what spell he casts, but the ground vanishes beneath her feet. She falls, head first into something cold and viscous.

Mud clings to her lashes, her hair, her robes. Her hands sting. Something sharp is pressing into her palms.

She sits up, gasping for air, soaked through, her hands trembling in the mess. She wipes at her eyes blindly and as she blinks through the mess, he's the first thing she sees. Draco Malfoy, crouched a few feet away, watching her with satisfaction. She follows his gaze to her hands.

Her hands are bleeding. The gift—her gift, the one she had picked with care, the one she wanted him to love—is nothing but fragments, unrecognizable. She must have held it too tightly as she fell. Her palms are sliced open, blood blooming across her skin. "How fitting," Draco murmurs, eyes lingering on her bloodied hands. He glances at his friends, Crabbe and Goyle chuckling behind him. "We found the mud, and you found the blood."

He smiles as if he's proud of the line, like he couldn't have wished for a better scenario.

She opens her mouth, but the only thing that comes out is a cough. Mud runs from her nose.

"Mudblood."

He stands. The smirk deepens, twisting into revulsion. "A perfect *Mudblood*." The word means nothing to her yet. Although, she guesses it's not a compliment. The way it cuts. The way people pause. Even the laughter falters. She doesn't need a dictionary to understand it's meant to wound.

Harry and Ron are in the crowd. She sees them, but they don't move. Whether it's shock or hesitation, she doesn't know. It doesn't matter. No one helps her. Later, Madame Pomfrey will explain the slur. She will patch up Hermione's hands with gentle fingers and a soft voice. And Hermione will sit very still, as if healing physically will stop the ache that's taken root somewhere deeper.

She intends to never speak to him again.

And when Harry tells her what Draco said in the dungeons while Polyjuiced—how he hoped she would die next—she only nods.

She tells herself she doesn't care. That it's over. That she misjudged him.

But that night, she cries. Quietly, into her pillow, where no one can see her. She cries

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"No. Absolutely not," he says, stepping back like it might lunge at him. He gestures toward the street with solemn finality. "We're taking a taxi."

He's still smug about the new muggle word he learned yesterday. So yes, any occasion is a good one to show off: *Taxi*.

Granger stops, turns, and without hesitation, shoves him by the shoulders toward the van. For the second time in twenty-four hours, someone manhandles him like a princess. She opens the passenger door and gestures to the seat.

"Stop being a crybaby," she says, ushering him in.

He's still grumbling when she yanks open a compartment in front of his knees and starts rifling through papers. He has to breathe deeply—slowly—because she's now leaning over his legs, her hair brushing the edge of his trousers, and the proximity is driving him halfway mad.

As she stands, her breast grazes his knee, and he swallows a sharp gasp before it can escape. She always has this effect on him—reducing him to a bloody teenager instead of the snarling, seductive bachelor he's become. One whose bed is rarely empty, yet somehow never quite feels full.

"Here," she announces, unfolding a ridiculously large sheet of paper. It takes him a second to realize it's a map. "You're in charge of directions."

She taps a spot. "We're here." Her finger glides across the paper—and across his thigh. His eyes snap shut.

"And we need to go here—Ste. Mary's cemetery." She jabs the destination with unnecessary force which makes him open his eyes. *Enough*, relax.

"You think you can manage that?"

"I can manage a map," he says, insulted, trying to get a grip. "The real question is whether *you* can drive us without killing us."

They both manage, somehow. And also absolutely don't.

It begins with Granger knocking over the mailbox while trying to back down the driveway. She claims it's her first time driving something so big, and Draco—despite his better judgment—can't resist the innuendo. He grins to himself, then promptly regrets it when she slams the brakes just to make him lurch.

As for him, he *technically* gets them to the cemetery. If you overlook the two-hour detour, three wrong exits, and the fact that he might have confused his left with his right multiple times.

By the fifth time she yells at him, he starts getting self-conscious. Somewhere after the sixth, he spends twenty whole minutes debating how to tell her they've missed the turn—again.

The screaming escalates. Hexes are threatened. Trust is eroded.

But they get there.

Eventually.

Granger is still in a foul mood when she slams the campervan door shut. But as they cross the quiet street toward the cemetery gates, her temper starts to ease, replaced by

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discomfort.

She slows, then halts altogether, doubt creeping into her features, like she's second-guessing everything now that they're here.

But she needs this. A proper goodbye. And he's not letting her walk away from it.

From the corner of his eye, he spots a flower vendor nestled just beside the gates. He almost scoffs aloud. The audacity of it—profiting off grief with cheerful little bouquets.

He mentally applauds the man's shamelessness at the location he chose for his business.

Still, he gently nudges Granger's elbow. "What were their favorite flowers?"

Her eyes drift across the offered bouquets, pausing on a soft cluster of warm pinks, corals, and buttery yellows—fluffy blooms tucked into craft paper. Her fingers brush the petals, her voice quiet.

"Dahlias," she says, a small smile ghosting her lips. Something fond. Like she's holding a memory between her hands.

<https://florelic.com.au/products/dahlia-bunch-berry>

Draco pulls out his wallet and offers a yellow banknote without flinching.

The vendor lights up. "Thank you, sir—"

But Granger gapes. "Draco, that's fifty dollars!" she hisses. "The bouquet's only thirty!"

Even Draco blinks. "Is it?" he mutters, mildly offended at his own lack of muggle currency skills.

The vendor fumbles through a silver tin for change. "Here, I'll get you—"

"No need," Draco says, already sliding his wallet back into his coat. Not worth the trouble.

The man beams. "At least pick something for the young lady," he adds, pointing to a basket near Draco's feet.

Draco doesn't wait for Hermione to object. He crouches, picks out a bouquet of white freesia, and holds them out to her.

She takes them slowly, brows lifting, lips parting just slightly.

"Those are my favorite," she murmurs, burying her nose in the blooms.

"I know," he replies simply.

He remembers.

After that, he started noticing them everywhere. Or maybe just on her. The delicate scent of freesia clung to her hair like sunshine—clean, fresh, impossible to ignore. Must be her shampoo, he once thought. But he liked it. He liked it on her.

They walk in silence toward her parents' grave, a gentle breeze stirring the leaves above them. Despite the usual heaviness that hangs over places like this, the morning sun casts a quiet light, making the cemetery feel unexpectedly peaceful—almost serene.

When they reach the headstone and read the inscription, Draco barely has time to catch her before her legs give way. She crumples to the ground, her body shaking with sobs. He holds her gently, letting her grief spill out, while silently fighting the tide of

She shifts uncomfortably as Mr. Malfoy glances at her, then her own father, eyes narrowing.

"Ah," he says with cool condescension. "So this isn't André Granger, the famous alchemist from France?"

Draco's eyes gleam. Father and son share a look.

Hermione swallows hard. She *should* have corrected him. On the train, when he'd asked. She'd just been flustered, so flattered by his attention that she hadn't thought it mattered. But it does. It really, really does.

"No, I'm afraid not. Richard Granger," her father says, clearly trying to keep the mood light. He offers a hand.

Neither Malfoy takes it.

Her father lowers his arm slowly, confused. Hermione wants to explain. To make it clear that none of this is his fault. It's hers. She should've told the truth.

"Come, Draco," his father says with a final glance in their direction. His chin lifts with disdain.

"Yes, Father," Draco echoes, a perfect replica of his father. Hermione's chest tightens. For a second, she doesn't recognize him at all.

She tries to laugh it off. Tries to assure her parents it's all a misunderstanding, that he isn't usually like this. But the doubt in their eyes is hard to ignore. Especially when they're both remembering the way she'd spoken of him all summer.

It stings.

But she tells herself she'll fix it.

As soon as she gets him alone, she'll explain everything.

But it turns out to be harder than she expected. He seems determined to ignore her, or worse, sneer whenever she's near. She backs off more than once, nerves winning each time. Any reasonable person would've let it go by now—he clearly wants nothing to do with her.

The trouble is, Hermione isn't all that reasonable when she's made up her mind. And she *had* decided. She would apologize. No matter how awkward it felt.

Besides, she'd found the perfect gift for him over the summer, and her lips curl into a smile every time she catches a glimpse of it tucked beneath her socks. Ever since she bought it—well, her parents did, technically—she's imagined his reaction, the way she hoped his grey eyes would light up.

They'd stopped at a roadside shop during a camping trip. The vendor was selling handmade glass bookstands, each etched with a constellation and its name. The craftsmanship was stunning. She almost missed it—but there it was, glinting just for her: *Draco*.

Now, with fifteen minutes before their next class, she carefully wraps the bookstand in craft paper. Professor McGonagall's lesson is being held outdoors today—something about practicing Transfiguration on natural elements—so she clutches the little gift in

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Another time, they both ended up serving detention in the Forbidden Forest—along with a few others. Hagrid asked them to split into two teams. Without hesitation, Draco picked her. *Her*.

She blinked. She never got picked. Not in gym class, not for teamwork, not anywhere. And just like that, he gave her something small and ridiculous—something she'd never admit mattered.

But it did.

When she returns home for the summer holidays, her mother offers a comforting smile and says, “You know, darling, boys your age often show they care in... strange ways.”

Hermione isn't sure she believes that. But it's enough to motivate her.

Come second year, she'll prove she's worthy of that famous Gryffindor courage and take the lead. No more waiting around, no more guessing. She'll show Draco Malfoy that she wants to be more than just mere acquaintances. She wants to be his friend. Maybe even—

No. Not yet.

First, conversation.

But the first time she sees him again, it doesn't go the way she imagined.

They're at Flourish and Blotts, and she spots the unmistakable glint of his white-blond hair descending the stairs. Her heart stutters. She must have lit up, because her mother follows her gaze and gives her a gentle nudge. Beside Draco is a man with the same pale hair, spine straight as a sword.

“Go on, princess,” her father murmurs. “Introduce us to your friend.” He winks at her mother, the two of them sharing a knowing smile.

Hermione flushes but she's already halfway to Draco before she can second-guess herself.

Only, the moment he sees her, something shifts within her. His face shows an expression she can't name. And suddenly her courage falters. If her parents weren't right behind her, she might've turned and fled.

Still, she pushes through.

“H-hello, Draco!” she says, her voice a little too bright. “I wanted to introduce you to my parents.” She bites her lip and gestures vaguely behind her as her father steps forward with warmth in his voice and kindness in his eyes.

“Nice to meet you, Draco,” he says cheerfully.

Draco doesn't reply. He just sneers.

“A new friend, son?” the older Malfoy drawls as he turns toward them, his eyes so pale that they might turn her into an icicle.

Hermione looks up at Draco, hopeful. But his expression isn't one she recognizes. Whatever she thought she'd find there—whatever she'd been waiting for all summer—is gone.

“This is Hermione Granger,” he says, like it's a disgusting concept to name.

tears rising in his own eyes. He can't make sense of the words carves in the headstone. Her parents are not supposed to remember she existed:

In Loving Memory of

Richard Granger and Jean Anderson

Loved and remembered by their daughter

Until We Meet Again, Our Darling Girl

“I—I don't know why I'm so surprised,” she mocks. “The lawyer told me they changed the tombstone according to their wishes. After retrieving the will they'd left in England.”

Ah. Mystery solved. Still, how tragic that a slab of rock remembers they had a daughter better than the people buried beneath it.

He keeps tracing slow, steady circles on her back. It's the only thing he can do, and he hopes it's helping—because eventually, she clears her throat and shifts slightly, putting a bit of distance between them.

“I don't know what to say to them,” she murmurs, her voice barely above a whisper. “Do you want me to go first?” he offers, though he has absolutely nothing prepared. Whatever comes out will likely be a disaster. But the way she looks at him—startled, then oddly trusting—leaves him no way out.

Here goes nothing

“Hello,” he starts, voice low and a bit awkward. His fingers tighten slightly around Granger's, and to his quiet relief, she doesn't let go.

“My name is Draco Malfoy. Remember me? I was the little prat the first time we met in Flourish and Blotts.” He huffs a short, humorless laugh, the memory so fresh in his mind that the shame hits him deep. “To be fair, I was a little prat. For many years after, too.”

He risks a glance at Hermione, and something about the way her eyes glisten but stay locked on the headstone steels him.

“But your daughter,” he continues, “has this maddening habit of never giving up on people. Especially when they don't deserve it. I should know....”

Her hand twitches in his, tightening, and he feels the quiet pull of her breath—like she's trying not to cry again.

“I don't think I have the words to thank you for raising someone like her. Brilliant. Stubborn. Soft-hearted in ways that sneak up on you.” He swallows, suddenly dry-mouthed. “If not for her, I'd still be the same smug, intolerant little menace you met that day in the bookstore.”

His thumb brushes hers as he adds, more quietly now, “I wish I'd had the chance to say this while you were still here. But wherever you are, I hope you know—your daughter isn't alone. I'm here. And I'll look after her. I promise.”

Hermione lets out a shaky breath, and when he finally turns to her, there are silent tears trailing down her cheeks. She doesn't bother to wipe them away—so he does it for her, gently brushing them with his knuckles.

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She blinks rapidly, then turns toward the headstone and kneels, hands folded in her lap with quiet reverence.

"Mum," she croaks. "Dad." The second word barely escapes her, trapped in the tightness of her throat.

Draco's eyebrows lift involuntarily as he blinks too fast—an utterly useless attempt to stop the sting in his own eyes. He doesn't want to ruin this for her.

"I—I'm so sorry," she cries, lips trembling around words she can't quite form. Her body folds in on itself as the grief overtakes her, and Draco pulls her between his knees, arms wrapping around her protectively.

She collapses against him, trembling. He tucks her head beneath his chin and rocks her slowly, breathing in the soft, clean scent of freesia that clings to her—like sunlight through a window.

Eventually, her sobs ease, breath evening out against his chest.

"Gosh," she half-laughes, summoning a handkerchief and sneezing into it. It's utterly ungraceful, and yet—damn him—she still manages to look adorable doing it.

"Good thing I wasn't there in person for the eulogy," she mutters, blowing her nose. "That would've been mortifying."

He chuckles, the sound low against her ear.

She leans back a little, slightly more composed now. "I'm sorry I erased your memories," she whispers. "I should've followed you. I said I would, remember? But I stayed behind. I thought it was the right thing, but..."

Her voice trails off, guilt lacing her features.

"But by staying," she says at last, "I think you would've been proud of me. I think—I helped. A little."

Draco scoffs softly, the sound caught somewhere between disbelief and admiration. "Not just a little," he echoes, leaning in until his chest presses gently to her back.

The war might still be going if not for her.

She doesn't argue, though she doesn't quite accept the praise either. Just nods once and continues.

"I hope that wherever you are, you're together. And even if you didn't remember me in the end..." She exhales shakily. "I'll remember enough for all of us."

Her fingers graze the final line etched into the stone and she whispers the same words "Until we meet again."

And this time, Draco loses the battle. A mortifying sound escapes him—a choked, almost pathetic whimper—and Hermione's head swivels toward him instantly.

"Are you crying?"

"No," he coughs, immediately waving a hand at the bouquet beside him. "Must be allergies."

She eyes him, skeptical, but lets it go. Maybe because he looks embarrassed enough. She reaches for the bouquet and lays it carefully at the foot of the grave. Then, pressing

"Twenty-Eight. Yes."

Her face goes hot. She hates getting things wrong.

"I gather you're not from here," he says, tilting his head. "Granger..." He taps his chin thoughtfully, eyes narrowing. Then they light up. "Wait. Is your father *the* André Granger? The famous French alchemist?"

She opens her mouth to correct him—her father doesn't even know what *alchemy* is—but the compartment door slides open again. Two boys step in.

"New friend, Malfoy?" one of them asks. He's dark-skinned, elegant, and already analyzing her like she's something interesting.

"She's new to England. Hermione Granger," Draco says, before she can speak or even corrects him.

The boy takes her hand and bows—*bows*—pressing a light kiss to her knuckles like a prince would.

"Blaise Zabini. I'm not from here either. I'm from Italy."

And for the second time that day, Hermione wonders if maybe, just *maybe*, the stories she clung to as a child weren't entirely wrong.

"If I'm Theodore Nott. You can call me Theo," the other boy adds with a small grin.

She nods, cheeks still burning.

Maybe she doesn't belong yet.

But maybe she's getting closer.

Her first year at Hogwarts passes in a blur of spells, late-night studying, and wide-eyed wonder. She's thrilled to be sorted into Gryffindor—but part of her heart sinks when Draco Malfoy is sent to Slytherin.

Apparently, being in separate houses doesn't come with automatic friendship. Especially when Draco Malfoy is surprisingly competitive, and a little sharper around the edges than she expected.

Still, she counts herself lucky. He doesn't treat her the way he treats Harry and Ron—two boys from the train she ended up befriending after all. They're not that bad, just endlessly teasing, especially about how "bookish" she can be.

Then again, they aren't friends either. Not by any stretch of the word.

But they're not enemies. So that must count for something.

Once, during their first flying lesson, her broom refused to lift from the ground. He came over and showed her how to summon it differently. His hands never touched hers, but she still felt the warmth of it all day.

Then, ten minutes later, he was back to strutting and laughing at poor Neville and throwing around his Remembrall, and she reminded herself not to get too soft about him.

Still. The way he moved, the way the broom obeyed him so effortlessly—it made her chest ache a little. She didn't even know what for.

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lines of his face and the cool confidence in the way he moves makes her breath catch.

For the tiniest second, she wonders if Prince Charming might actually exist. Not in her world of fairy tales and paperbacks—but here. In this magical world. Seeing how goblins and elves roamed around Diagon Alley, maybe Prince Charming isn't so far-fetched.

She places a hand over her chest. Her heartbeat flutters oddly beneath her palm. “Oh, seems like our princess might have a little crush,” her mother singsongs from behind, and Hermione's face burns.

“Wh-what? No!” she stammers.

She *knows* what a crush feels like. That had been David. Beautiful, perfect David. It's *not* a crush.

The boy who made her stammer and giggle—until her accidental magic lit his shoelace on fire when she tried to give him a heart-shaped lollipop.

He called her a freak after that.

He never spoke to her again.

No, this wasn't a crush. Not like that. But why did the way the blond boy moved—like he belonged everywhere—send goosebumps dancing down her arms?

She's just... curious.

An hour into the train ride, she finally finds the compartment he's in.

He's alone.

Thank Merlin.

Her last attempt at making friends had ended in laughter—at her. That boy, Harry Potter (apparently a *legumus*?), and the red-haired one named Ron had snickered when she asked if they'd manage to finish reading all their textbooks, because she only completed 80% of them.

Apparently that was a stupid question.

She gathers her courage, breathes in deeply, and slides the door open.

He turns. Hypnotic grey eyes meet hers.

“Yes?” he says, and his voice—oh. It's unfair. His voice sounds like it was meant just for her.

She's blushing already. She *knows* she is. But she lifts her chin and channels a air of confidence as best she can.

“Hi. I'm Hermione Granger.”

He blinks. Then smiles. Just a little. It's the kind of smile that makes her stomach flutter.

“I'm Draco Malfoy.”

Malfoy. The name rings a bell.

“Oh, I remember seeing your name in a book this summer... um... *Sacred Thirty-Eighth*”

He laughs, a soft, real laugh—and her heart practically sings. Beside her parents, no one really laughed that genuinely in her presence.

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two fingers to her lips, she kisses them and brushes them gently over their names carved in stone. He thinks he hears her whisper goodbye.

The walk back to the campervan is quiet, but it's not hollow. It's thick with unspoken thoughts—hers, mostly.

“Thank you,” she says at last. “For pushing me to come.”

“Well, I thought I'd return the favor,” he grins. “Between the two of us, you're usually the one bossing me around.”

She laughs—not quite fully, but it's real enough. He can already sense a small weight lifted from her shoulders.

They walk a few more paces before she speaks again, quieter this time. “Did you mean it? That I helped change your beliefs?”

He stops.

It's such a simple question, and yet he feels the weight of it. Another thing he's failed to communicate clearly. To him, it was always obvious. But for someone like Granger, who constantly questions if she's done enough, been enough, he should have spelled it out.

“Yes,” he says, with no hesitation.

Her brows lift in surprise.

“It was slow,” he admits. “But after a while, every time my father went on about blood status, it just stopped landing. Especially the summer before fifth year. He kept repeating the same garbage, but I wasn't listening anymore.”

He rakes a hand through his hair, exhaling. “Because nothing he said lined up with who you are.”

He doesn't add that he started arguing, quietly at first, then not so quietly. That he started avoiding meals, started slipping away from the Manor more often, just to breathe without choking on their version of the world.

Silence falls over them again as she looks at him, her gaze steady, searching—probably weighing the truth of his words. He hopes he got it right this time. And judging by the way her eyes glimmer—brighter than the midday sun overhead—he thinks maybe he did.

Drawn to her like always, Draco takes a step closer. Her lips part slightly, and there's something in her expression that feels... inviting.

Then his stomach growl in a grotesque way. Like ten mountain trolls roaring in unison.

She bursts out laughing, and somehow, that's even better.

“I saw a burger place about fifteen minutes from here,” she says, still grinning. “Let's go.”

The day slips by faster than either of them expects—must be the company.

They devour greasy, delicious burgers on a sunlit terrace, and at some point, Draco has the brilliant (if slightly mad) idea to hold an Irish-style wake. Granger, apparently on board with anything now that she's full and fed, starts recounting stories about her

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parents—sweet, strange, deeply human anecdotes that Draco finds oddly fascinating. He soaks in every word, not just about them, but about the Muggle world too.

As the afternoon drifts on, her stories grow more chaotic and incoherent. Their laughter bubble up at nothing, fueled by the growing collection of empty beer bottles on their table.

Eventually, they declare it safer to delay driving and wander down the street to what Granger calls a “mini golf” course—a concept Draco finds both baffling and mildly insulting. He considers himself athletic, after all.

And the fact that he’s spectacularly bad at it only proves there’s nothing remotely athletic about the whole concept.

Granger beats him. By so many points that they stop counting. And when she sinks a hole-in-one on the final round—earning them a free replay—she’s insufferable. He doesn’t even mind.

By the time they sober up, the sun is already brushing the horizon. They scramble to the campervan. Granger suddenly anxious about driving at night.

Unfortunately for her, Draco still hasn’t mastered the map, or, apparently, the difference between left and right. They get lost again. She’s on the verge of yelling at him when, without warning, she slams on the brakes.

“Oh. My. God,” she breathes, flinging open the door.

She steps out, mesmerized—frozen in place by whatever has caught her attention.

Draco follows, heart in his throat.

She stares at the sight before them, wind whipping through her long hair, eyes wide in awe, lips parted. Draco has to physically tear his gaze from her to see what she’s seeing.

The view is... breathtaking.

The ocean stretches out endlessly before them, golden light spilling across the waves as the sun sinks low on the horizon. Jagged rock formations rise from the water, the waves crashing against them in rhythmic thunder.

Granger dives into her bag—enchanted with an extension charm, no doubt—and Draco is momentarily distracted by the memory of her little box of memories. She rifles through it with shaking fingers until she pulls out a thick envelope.

She sifts through them carefully, then stills.

With trembling hands, she draws out a thick rectangular card attached to a static Muggle photograph. Her fingers cover her mouth.

“It’s here. They were here,” she breathes, eyes shining as she turns the photograph toward him. “The Twelve Apostles. My parents sent me photos from places they visited while traveling through the country.”

She clutches the postcard like it’s something sacred, her smile wobbly but radiant.

There’s no way to get the angle just right, between the picture and what she sees, but still she tries—stepping forward, glancing down at the ground as if imagining her

Chapter 4

Hermione shifts from foot to foot in an eager rhythm, giddy anticipation crackling through her body. Her eyes dart everywhere, desperate to take in every detail of this strange, wonderful place. All around her, children just like her are boarding the train that will carry her into a new life.

A life that won’t cast her aside for being different.

She’s a witch, after all—just like Professor McGonagall told her over the summer. It explained everything. The invisible force simmering under her skin. The strange accidents. The way the air would crackle when she cried too hard or wanted too much.

She had always known it was something magnificent. Even if it caused nothing but trouble.

It had been a vicious circle. Hermione felt different, and the other kids could tell. They teased her, isolated her, chipped away at her until her magic broke loose in unpredictable bursts. That only confirmed what they already believed: she was a freak. And so, eventually, she believed it too.

But the truth—the terrible, wonderful truth—was that she *was* different. Just not in the way they thought.

Her difference was magic. *Is* magic. And as she watches the train whistle puff into the air, and hears laughter all around her, something inside her settles.

For the first time in her life, Hermione Granger feels like she might finally belong. Her parents seem just as excited as she is—maybe even relieved. Their daughter, not a weirdo after all.

Her father animatedly recounts the details Mr. Ollivander gave them about wand wood and cores, and tries to guess what are the wands of the wizards and witches around him. Hermione listens with half an ear, her heart still soaring.

And then, she sees *him*.

At first, she thinks it’s a trick of the light. The way his white-blond hair catches the sun—it seems to glow just for her. He turns slightly, and something about the sharp

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But more than the sound of her laughter, what truly warms him is knowing she finally let him in. In accepting to share one of her darkest memories with him.

He holds onto that hope : that whenever she needs to, she can lean on him and he'll be there to catch her every time.

Chapter 7

Draco wakes up in a state—sweaty, irritable, the sun blaring through the campervan window. The tiny fan in the corner whirs uselessly, doing a pathetic job to stop the place from turning into a bloody furnace.

But then—laughter. Granger's.

It slips through the cracked window, soft and bright, and for a moment, it lulls him. He almost lets himself drift back under.

Wait. Why the hell is she laughing? Alone?

He bolts upright, squinting out the side window toward the sound. And yes. There she is.

And with her—some tall, muscled, tan, dark-haired man who stands *too* close to her, demanding her attention. The bastard is grinning at her, saying something that apparently counts as funny, because she laughs again. A laugh Draco assumed, until now, was reserved for him.

He doesn't even get to appreciate the new swimsuit she's wearing—a white one-piece exposing entirely her back, with delicate straps crisscrossing her spine. No. Because he's too busy watching this walking jester try to charm her.

And...she's letting him.

Well, Joke's on her. Draco can be just as handsome—more, in the right setting.

He jumps over the bed and rifles through his suitcase, digging out the swim trunks. *The pair*: Black, cut just short enough to show off his thighs—one of his best features, if the endless compliments by women were anything to go by. And snug enough to sculpt his arse into two perfect buns.

Not that he cares what these women think. He only cares about one opinion.

He drops to the floor and does a few quick sit-ups, then push-ups—just enough to add a touch of definition and an inspiring sheen of sweat. At least, the campervan is an oven.

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Then he slips out the door opposite the beach to avoid being seen and starts to jog Casually. As if this were a normal part of his morning.

He approaches the beach at a steady pace, never glancing in her direction. Stretches by the water, choosing the poses that flex his shoulders and show off the line of his thighs. Arch here. Turn there. Slight snap of hips. He hopes she's watching.

Then, in one smooth motion, he dives into the water.

When he emerges, hair soaked, hand slicking it back, droplets gliding down his chest—he knows exactly what he looks like. A Witch Weekly centerfold. He strides out of the waves and heads straight for her.

Granger is staring.

Mouth parted.

Mr. Tall, Tan, and Triesome has clearly lost her attention.

Excellent.

Draco leans over her, just enough to make her breath catch, and plucks the towel off the back of her chair.

"Sorry," he says, flashing her a grin. "Forgot mine."

"Y-you jog?" she manages, eyes still wide.

"I do," he says smoothly, before turning to the other bloke. "You made a new friend, love?"

The endearment lands exactly where he wants it—hovering between innocent and *very much not*.

Hermione inhales, blinking rapidly. "Uh. Yes—This is Cameron." She says, a touch too high-pitched. "He invited us to a beach party tonight."

Cameron extends a hand. "Nice to meet you, mate."

Draco shakes it, cool and firm, the faintest glint of threat in his eyes. "Likewise. Where is it?"

"Overthere," He points. "Same beach, just a kilometer that way. Starts at nine." "Great," Draco says, dropping into the chair beside Hermione. He casually drags it closer and fishes out a bottle of water from the cooler underneath her chair.

He takes a long sip and lets himself enjoy it—her flushed cheeks, the way her eyes haven't stopped flicking over him.

Probably realizing he's been outplayed, Cameron gives Granger a faint wave and retreats without a fight.

"Since when you jog?" she asks, clearly not ready to drop the subject. Draco ignores the question. Mostly because "*Tidy*" doesn't feel like the kind of answer that would go with the vibe he's going for.

Instead, he shrugs. "So. What's the plan for today?"

She blinks, once, twice—then clears her throat like she's trying to shake something off. He knows exactly what. And he barks in it.

After a pause, she turns to the sea instead of his abs. Her loss.

"Uh," she says, fiddling with her fingers, "despite what I said yesterday, I'd really like

"I took your hand," he whispers. Her eyes meet his. "Yes."

Her knees are tucked sideways over his lap, her body folded into him like it was always meant to fit there. One of his arms hooks beneath her knees, holding her gathered close, while the other wraps around her waist. Possessive, without meaning to be, that's just how he is with pretty things. His fingers drift, tracing the damp red strings tied at her hip. The bow shifts under his touch, taunting him.

He nearly does it. To tug it loose, just to feel her gasp. But he doesn't. Barely. She doesn't flinch. Maybe she hasn't noticed. Or maybe she has. Either way, she breathes unevenly against him, heat blooming behind her eyes.

The tension is rising between them in waves—salt, skin and history. The hand that cradles her knees slides higher, as if hypnotized, until his fingers slip into her curls. He cups her jaw gently, thumb swiping a single tear from her cheek. She makes a soft sound—barely a breath—and her head leans into his palm like she's falling but knows he will catch her. Always.

"Hermione..." he murmurs, his voice low, like her name's something precious. He leans in, lips a breath from hers. She parts them—Salazar, that's all it takes—*Smack*. Her forehead crashes into his nose with painful precision, and his entire world goes white for a second.

"Oh—sorry!" a voice yells, distant and utterly unwelcome. They both turn. A ball—Quaffle-sized, but shaped oddly, like it couldn't choose between being round or not—rolls lazily to their feet, the obvious weapon. At least his hand tangled in her hair took the worst of the blow. Small mercies.

Draco rises slowly, promising rampage. Grabs the ball. Launches it back. A bit too aggressively. The guy fumbles and nearly falls. Serves him right.

"You okay?" the Aussie jogs over, hands raised, apologetic. "Can't you just be fucking careful?" Draco snaps.

"Draco!" Granger admonishes, like a mother scolding a child, not the absolute temptress who had him ready to lose his mind thirty seconds ago. But he listens all the same and bites back whatever growl he was about to release.

"We're fine," she assures the guy with a smile, and he walks off, clutching his stupid ball.

"You're bleeding." She's in front of him again, gentle now. Her thumb brushes along his lip and comes back stained red.

"Brilliant," he teases. "Knew all that cleverness had to weigh something. Your brain is literally a weapon."

Her laugh breaks free, light and unexpected, and for a moment, he almost forgets how close he was to kissing her. Almost.

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She blinks at him, puzzled—either by the venom in his tone or how their chairs are now practically fused. He gestures for her to go on.

"Right." She clears her throat. "Then Cedric showed up, took Cho. I heard him tell Harry there was one minute left. But Harry just hovered there. Krum and Fleur still hadn't come."

Both were out of the task by then. Draco knew how it ended—Potter and Granger surfacing together—so clearly, he'd decided to save her at some point. But why had it taken him so bloody long to make that decision?

"Harry raised his wand," she says slowly, "and for a second I thought—God, I really thought he'd take me. That he'd get Ron and me both. But he took Gabrielle."

What?

The complete shithead. Picked the kid he didn't know over the girl who would've died for him. Draco feels something crack. Might be a tooth, judging by the way his jaw is locked.

"What the fuck possessed him to decide that?" he snaps.

"He said afterwards he was afraid I'd be too *heavy*," she mutters.

A pause.

Draco blinks.

Too *heavy*? Did it stick with her all these years?

He looks at her now—slender limbs, delicate and just as small—and feels a pulse of something bitter slide down his throat.

Merlin. Was it that idiot's offhand comment that did it? Potter, the hero, planting lifelong complexes with the same ease he botched nearly everything else. Figures.

He says nothing, but his hand shifts just slightly on her leg—thumb brushing the inside of her knee.

"Said he'd come back. If he had time."

But he didn't.

Her voice softens, grows distant. "When the potion wore off, I could move again. But I couldn't breathe. No wand, no air, and I still didn't know how to swim." She laughs—hollow. "So I tried. Kicked up, clawed at the water, but the surface was so far. After fifteen hours of nearly drowning...I thought that was it."

Draco's heart is hammering. His chest aches with helpless fury. He sees her again—not as she is now, but young, frantic, lost in black water. He wants to scream. Instead, he grips her tighter.

"Then I saw Harry drifting. Barely conscious. I grabbed his wand and *Accio*'d both of ourselves up. That's when..."

She stops. Looks down.

"Well, you know the rest," she says softly. "You were the one who pulled me from the water."

He hadn't realized how much they'd moved until now—her chair has vanished from beneath her, and she's now curled in his lap, face inches from his.

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if you could keep teaching me how to swim. If you don't mind."

If only she knew he'd sign up for *any* activity involving his hands on her. Especially in that white swimsuit, hugging every inch of her in a mouthwatering way.

"Not at all," he smirks. "Actually, the floating child over there gave me an idea."

He nods toward a kid bobbing in the waves, strapped into a sort of balloons armbands.

"I know a spell that'll make you float. Could help with the basics if you do not have to worry about staying afloat." He pulls his wand from where it's tucked under his trunks—and catches the way her eyes flick there, linger a half-second too long.

"Shall I?" he murmurs.

She nods.

Fluctuo

A faint shimmer spreads across her skin, showing the spell worked. He remembers his own swimming instructor casting it when he was a kid. Not that he needed it for long. Natural talent, etc.

Granger, predictably, turns out to be the complete opposite of natural. Not that he's complaining. Her grip on him is downright feral, clinging tightly to his arms even though the floating charm keeps her perfectly buoyant. If she needs an excuse to keep touching him, who is he to deny her?

Still, with time—and a *lot* of coaxing—she gets the hang of it. She learns to kick properly, coordinates her arms, even manage a bit of grace. As proud as he is of her progress, his hands are already mourning the loss of their favorite armful.

"Right," he says, all professional-like, remembering her jab yesterday. "Something useful to know: your body naturally floats, thanks to the air in your lungs." He leans in, "So, Miss Granger: we'll try the starfish position."

Her breath catches. Excellent.

"Start in an X shape," he says, guiding her into place—one hand beneath her knees, the other at her shoulder blades. Her body stretches out atop the water, golden and weightless.

"I'm going to remove the *Fluctuo* charm so you can see that you float just fine without it."

She nods, no fear in her eyes. Brave little cub.

He draws his wand. "*Tinile Incantem*."

The shimmer vanishes—but instead of her usual unblemished, silky skin, he's met with something else entirely.

No. That can't be right.

He must have botched the spell. That's the only explanation. *Fuck, what did I do?* His hands tremble against her body.

"Granger, uh—" He panics, "I don't know what I did wrong."

She immediately straightens, the water only waist-deep this close to shore. Her eyes scan the parts of her body she can see—and his stomach lurches when she stills, taking

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in the grotesque patterns marring her skin. Green, purple, sickly yellow, all blending in bruised, blooming clusters.

He did that.

No. No, no. He *knew*; he said *Fluctuo*. He's certain the wand movement was correct. Or did he botch the *Finite Incantatem*? That would be mortifying—embarrassing enough for a wizard past fourteen, but right now, it's the least of his concerns. His throat tightens, dread crawling up like poison ivy.

"I—I'm sorry, let me—"

"It's not you," she cuts in sharply, raising a hand to stop him. "It's—It's..." She falters, the words drying up on her tongue. Then she turns and heads toward the beach, leaving him frozen in the water.

Two seconds. That's all he needs to figure it out.

Fucking Weasley.

The rage hits him so fast, so violently, it knocks the air from his lungs. He surges forward, the resistance of the water barely slowing him down. He *knew*. After the memories, after what he saw—he *knew* Weasley was violent. But this? *This* many times. This is worse than he ever imagined.

And it's fresh. Still healing.

He catches up to her easily—she's not a strong swimmer yet—and moves to block her path, careful not to touch her. It would be hard to find one single spot of unbruised skin.

"It's Weasley, isn't it?" he says, voice low and controlled, but barely. "He did that to you?"

She meets his eyes for only a second. "No."

Then she brushes past him, wading to the beach.

Stubborn witch.

If he has to come clean about the memories just to get her to admit it—then fine. He will. Damn it, he will.

"Granger!" He calls, catching up easily. "I *know*. You don't have to deny it."

She stops, meters away from the van. He stares at her back, a map inked in bruises and dark trails showing exactly where Weasley had grabbed her, shoved her, kicked her. His stomach clenches, bile rising.

"And why would you know?" she asks, spinning to face him, arms folded across her chest like armor.

Because I saw everything and nothing, he thinks.

And maybe, maybe if he were a better man, he'd tell her now. That he saw her memories. Or better yet—he'd have told her back in Melbourne. But Draco Malfoy still has a fatal flaw for picking the worst possible option.

"I saw how aggressive he was with you. Back at St. Mungo's. The few times I saw him." And it's not even a lie. "It just... makes sense now."

She gives a dry, bitter laugh and sinks into the nearest chair with a huff. "Yeah.

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"The potion," she says. "The one they gave us the night before. To knock us out during the task and let us breathe underwater."

He nods, though her voice already tells him where this is going, and he hates it.

"It didn't work on me. Not fully." She lets out a bitter little laugh. "They figured it out after—turns out, they didn't account for how it would interact with my muggleborn blood."

His stomach sinks.

"I woke up at the bottom of the lake. Paralyzed. Fully conscious. I could breathe, sort of, but not fully. So I spent the whole night—" she swallows, her voice trembling, "—in this weird, half-drowning state. Trapped."

Draco's hands still, holding her gently now, like she might break. And for the first time in a long time, he doesn't have a single clever thing to say.

"Fuck, Granger."

Draco's hands clench on her thighs, jaw tight. He can barely breathe past the image of her—fifteen years old, terrified, drowning over and over while he was curled in silk sheets back in the castle. He wants to go back in time just to hex whoever brewed that useless potion.

"It was pitch black at first," she says quietly. "I spent half the night thinking I was alone." A shiver runs through her. "Funny how the dark was my worst fear, until that night. Water took over pretty quickly, let me tell you."

"But then, as the sun rose, I could see the others—Ron, Cho, Gabrielle—just barely, from the corner of my eyes." She lets out a breath of a laugh, brittle and humorless. "I was so relieved. But then I realized... they were unconscious. All of them."

Draco's throat closes. She was the only one awake. Trapped and paralyzed, barely alive from the night.

"And then Harry arrived." Her voice dips, shoulders folding in like she's trying to disappear. "Went straight for Ron. Didn't even look at me."

"The professors told us who we were 'paired with,'" she continues, voice acidic, "but still, part of me hoped he'd choose me. Just once."

She swallows hard. "Just once, I wanted to be picked first."

Draco leans forward without thinking, as if he can physically shield her from the memory. The rage that boils in him isn't new. He's seen it before, how Potter always chose Weasley over her. But this time is new low. This time, she could have died.

"I mean—" she scoffs, pushing her curls back with a shaky hand, "it made no sense that Viktor would come for *me*. We barely spoke. Danced, maybe snogged a few times. That's it."

Draco flinches. Lovely. That mental image will fester all day. Although... it's his hands on her thighs now. He's the one holding her. Call him petty, but he shifts forward, knees spreading just enough, tugging her chair closer. Better.

"What a savior," he snickers. "Didn't he get disqualified for using semi-dark spells on the merpeople?"

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while wearing *that* swimsuit. He clears his throat.

“Right. Um. Next, we’ll work on breathing.”

He starts to show her—but his grip slips for a fraction of a second and she freezes. He grabs her hands again before she can panic.

“I’ve got you, Granger. Still not letting go.” He smiles, soft and sure. “Take a deep breath in, lower your head into the water, breathe out, then come back up.”

He demonstrates and surfaces with a slick of water dripping from his hair. She nods.

“You can do that?”

“Obviously.” She rolls her eyes like a true Gryffindor, then inhales, ducks under—and resurfaces fast, breath ragged, terror blooming in her wide eyes.

“Granger, breathe—”

But she’s already lunging forward, arms locking around his neck, legs wrapping tight around his waist as if the sea beneath her might pull her in. She buries her face into the crook of his neck, voice muffled and frantic.

“Get me out. Please get me out.” Over and over.

Her panic is so raw it thrums through him, loud and vibrating, eclipsing every other sense—except, unfortunately, the very unfortunate fact that his hands have instinctively landed on her ase. Not ideal. But he’s too focused on keeping her above water to correct it. He’ll spiral about that later, in privacy, with shame.

Right now, he carries her back, cradling her as if the sea might reach out again and try to take her. He sets her down gently in one of their camping chairs, crouches to grab her water bottle, and presses it into her trembling hands.

He should give her space. Let her breathe. But the need to soothe her with his touch—wins out. He pulls his own chair close, knees brushing hers, and rests his palms lightly on her thighs. Warm, reassuring pressure. Nothing else.

“This isn’t just about not knowing how to swim,” he says, voice low, steady. His thumbs move in slow circles against her skin. “Talk to me, Granger.”

Tell me everything, he wants to add. Let me carry it with you.

But that sounds too needy. Too much.

Her eyes squeeze shut.

“It brought me back,” she says, breath shaking, “to the second task of the tournament.

Fourth year.”

His gut twists. How had he not come to this conclusion himself? Not just because he’d seen that memory in her office a few weeks ago, but because the image of her bursting from the lake, flailing and wild-eyed, had haunted him long after. He remembers the way she’d thrashed toward the platform, Potter beside her, panic pouring off her in waves. Even back then, before he’d admitted to giving a damn, his hand had moved to grab hers before his brain caught up.

“I’m listening,” he says softly.

She opens her eyes, locks onto him. For a moment, there’s a kind of quiet battle in her gaze. Then she looks away—toward the glittering sea—and shuts her eyes again.

You’re right.”

The admission feels like a punch to the ribs.

He knew. He’d seen it, in the pensive. Still, hearing her say it aloud—that Weasley hurt her—makes Draco burn.

To think he could have killed the sorry excuse of a wizard weeks ago—when he had his hands around his throat. But no. It’s only now, standing half a world away with Granger bruised and glaring in front of him, that Draco realizes he’s developed a taste for blood.

Except there’s no way he’s leaving Granger alone, even for revenge. Fine. Plan B. He’ll owl Blaise. There must be at least one hitwizard willing to do it for the right amount of gold. Great, now all there’s left to—

“See?” she barks, waving her hand in his face, snapping him out of his spiraling thoughts. “That’s why I hid them with a glamour charm. You’re looking at me like I’m weak and pathetic for staying with someone who hits me.”

He blinks at her. Is she serious?

“You? Weak?” He lets out a dry laugh. “Don’t insult both our intelligences.”

She softens. Just a little.

Draco drops to one knee, scanning the bruises, just wanting them *gone* asap.

“What did you use?” he asks quietly.

“You know there’s no potion for bruises,” she mutters. “Only cuts and open wounds.”

Technically true.

“Right,” he says, wagging a finger mockingly. “Good thing I’m exceptional at potions and brought one of my latest inventions.” He rises. “Stay put.”

He’s back in under a minute, potion kit tucked under his arm—carefully brewed by himself, with only the finest ingredients and a few that are, well, vaguely legal.

He selects a silver tin, unscrews the lid, a faint spell of mint coming through, and gently takes her wrist. There, clear as day, are three distinct marks where that bastard must’ve grabbed her. With a featherlight touch, he dabs the balm on her skin and watches, not without a little smug satisfaction, but mostly with relief, as the bruise fades instantly.

Her eyes go wide. Good. She should be impressed.

“This is amazing,” she breathes, turning her wrist in disbelief. “Why aren’t you selling this? We could use it at St. Mungo’s—Dittany and Murtlap essence only go so far.”

“Because it requires eggs from a Golden Snidget,” he says, calmly moving on to her arm. He already knows what’s coming. Three, two, one—

“Draco!” she shrieks, bolting upright. He couldn’t have timed it better; now he has access to her legs. He reaches down, but the moment his fingers brush her ankle, she yelps and dives behind the nearest camping chair like it offers any protection.

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"They're a protected species! How did you even get your hands on that?"

He lifts a brow. "Relax. I know someone at the Edinburgh Snidget Sanctuary. He sold me unfertilized ones. No baby Snidgets died in the making of this miracle, promise."

"Still, it's against Decree no. 3967, forbidding use of by-products of protected species!"

"Which is why I don't sell this potion," he says, like she's half-draft—which she isn't, obviously, but the protect-the-precious-creatures act is dangerously cute. "Just for personal use. And those I care about."

He kneels on the camping chair, casting a long shadow over her.

"I already broke the law," he murmurs, tipping her chin with a soft touch to study the bruising on her throat. "Be a shame to waste it."

He swallows hard while analyzing the bruises. He remembers the memory, the one where Weasley had his hands wrapped around her throat in her living room.

"I'm going to murder him," he says. Apparently out loud, because Granger gives him a look that could set his hair on fire.

She snatches the tin from his hands. "If you don't see me as helpless," she snaps, "don't treat me like I am. I can do it myself."

She storms to the van and starts applying the balm using the side mirror. He trails after her and leans against the van to supervise what he'll call quality control.

"How do you even know the decree number? That was disturbingly specific."

She catches his gaze in the mirror while dabbing her neck. "Becoming a healer was never my first choice," she says, voice lighter now, and something flickers in her eyes. "Magical Creatures have always fascinated me."

Her fingers skim down her collarbone, erasing another blooming bruise. Then lower, near the general chest area. Draco pointedly stares at the sea. Because he might have constantly inappropriate thoughts about her, but now is not the time. Not while she's healing bruises of her past.

"Actually," she chirps, enthusiasm bubbling, "there's a sub-species near here—Pearl Snidgets. Can you believe it?"

He perks up. "Really? I heard one feather brewed with asphodel might permanently cure hangovers."

Truly revolutionary. The things he could accomplish without vomiting half his liver after a night out and not resorting to the hangover potion for peasants—

"Ow!" He yelps. She's punched his shoulder. Hard.

"They're also protected!" she scolds. "Sanctuary nearby, not for your sticky little fingers! The magical government here barely funds those places as it is."

Gods, she's beautiful when she's furious.

"Alright, alright, no need to get on your high Threstral," he says, grinning. He actually listens when she talks. He got the whole lecture on Everything-in-Australia-Will-Kill-You. Sure, there are actual wild animals—deadly spiders, venomous

KITTYBLUSH

Draco's itching to dive in the refreshing water; preferably in the company of a certain witch. But just when he's ready to run into the sea, Granger cracks open a book and says she's perfectly fine reading. Absolutely not. The sea is calm, no threatening waves in sight. So he cajoles, mocks, even bribes. Finally, entering the water, he turns and calls her a coward. That, apparently, does it. She mutters curses under her breath, marches to the van, and emerges in a swimsuit that short-circuits his brain. He was not prepared. Then again, he doubts anything could've prepared him for the bombshell that is Granger in next to nothing.

She wears a ruby-red two-piece that would be illegal in the wizarding world. The color is sharp against her sun-kissed skin, all glinting gold and impossible smoothness, like she's been sculpted from summer itself. The top clings just enough to distract him entirely. Draco clamps his jaw shut before it can unhinge entirely and sink to the bottom of the ocean. Brilliant. Now she's caught him staring directly at her breasts—round, high, and perfect. He immediately pretends to be interested in a passing seagull. With any luck, she's nearsighted. Or generous enough to pretend she didn't notice him ogling like a fourth-year with a crush.

But she doesn't seem to notice him staring. She's watching the waves instead—small, rhythmic curls lapping at her feet like they've come to meet her personally. He steps closer.

She glares at him. Then, slowly, she walks in. Waist-deep, breath held. But that's as far as she goes. Her arms are tight at her sides, her whole body trembling.

"Hey," Draco says gently, guilt prickling under his skin. He's been pushing, not knowing what he was really pushing against. "You don't have to—" "I don't know how to swim," she blurts out, voice low, eyes fixed on the water like it's an enemy coming for revenge. Embarrassment colors her cheeks.

Ah. That tracks. Not everyone grew up with a bloody lake in their backyard like he did.

"I can teach you," he offers. He reaches for her hands and she gives them, just like that, a small, hesitant smile tugging at her lips. He steps backward, drawing her in with him, inch by inch.

The moment her toes lift from the sand, she stiffens. Her breath catches sharp in her throat.

"I'm not letting go," he says quickly, steadying his grip. "Just try kicking your feet. Keep them up."

She does. It's clumsy at first—her fingers crush his—but then, slowly, the panic subsides. Her legs move with a bit more rhythm. Her hands start to loosen. He can feel the shift.

"See?" he says, smiling. "Not that hard."

She grins, sun catching on her lashes. "Ready for the next step?"

He swallows. Hard. For the love of Salazar, she should not be saying things like that.

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Draco can thank the freezing mountain night for the mercy that follows. He wakes in the dark, teeth chattering, blanket doing absolutely nothing against the bite of high-altitude air. He's shivering so badly he feels it in his bones—except for one small, suspiciously warm spot right in the middle of his back.

He rolls on himself—and ends up practically crushing Granger.

She's curled so close to him, it takes him a second to understand the warmth had been her hands, bundled together and pressed against him in search of heat.

Her eyes fly open, wide and guilty, just as she starts to pull away.

He doesn't let her.

In one swift movement, he wraps an arm around her and hauls her back into his chest, trapping them both under the blanket. If they're going to freeze to death, they'll freeze *together*.

He tucks her head under his chin, his breath fogging above her curls.

"I would've noticed," he murmurs. "I would've cared."

That earns him a pause. Then, slowly, her arms tighten around his waist.

Apology accepted.

Thank Merlin.

He almost feared that she might put him back on probation after his careless reaction about Weasley.

It must've worked, because when morning comes and the campervan rattles back to life, Granger is in the driver's seat—no sulking, no silence.

Their next stop is Sydney, where they're on a mission to find the exact spot her parents once posed in front of a gigantic stack of white seashells—which turns out to be laughably easy, considering the entire population seems to converge toward the Opera House. Supposedly one of the most famous buildings in the Muggle world. Still, the way her face lights up when they find the right angle makes the stop worth it. That night, they park by the shore and fall asleep to the hush of waves and the low hum of their fan. It's almost romantic—until she steals all the blankets and kicks him in her sleep.

By Brisbane, he's sunburnt and bitter about it. Tragic, really, especially next to Granger, whose skin glows like she's been airbrushed by the sun itself. When people glance their way, Draco looks like an anemic cave dweller who's just discovered the concept of sunscreen—because, in fairness, he had. He applies it now with a devout fervor—every 90 minutes. What gets to him more, though, is that Granger won't go near the ocean. Sometimes a toe, but never more. He, of course, tries to prove how harmless it is and promptly gets flung underwater by a rogue wave and nearly drowns himself. He coughs salt water for two days and vows revenge.

After one week, they reach Whitehaven Beach. It's unreal. Sand like sugar, turquoise water stretching into forever. They set up the awning and drag out two chairs, the view so beautiful it silences them both. It's relatively quiet, aside from a few people swimming nearby and playing on the beach.

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snakes, all that. But mixed into that charming mess are magical creatures the magical government can't seem to track or can't Obliviate out of Muggle memory fast enough. It took decades of wizarding lobbying to get any real funding for sanctuaries, and even then, only for the species most hunted on the black market. So the stories spread—one panicked encounter at a time—until the entire country ends up with a reputation for being unlivable. Some of the creatures disappear into folklore. Others, like the platypus and Tasmanian devil, the Ministry simply gave up trying to explain. Let the Muggles think they're odd little non-magical beasts.

Platypus. Honestly. It's a walking fever dream. A mix between a duck, an otter, and a beaver. You cannot get more Greek mythology than that. Honestly, a centaur makes more sense. And a platypus glows in the dark. It *gloes*.

Are Muggles complete idiots?

Draco glances over. Granger appears to be attempting an advanced form of human origami—or more likely, she just can't reach her shoulder blade. Judging by her growing exasperated sighs, he goes with the latter and snatches the tin back from her. "Let me do your back," he mutters, already shifting behind her. "It doesn't make you helpless. Just not elastic."

She huffs, but doesn't protest as he gathers her hair and drapes it over one shoulder, baring her spine.

He can almost imagine they're one of those couples he saw on the beach yesterday, where the husband was rubbing sunscreen on his sunburnt wife while she smiles at the horizon like nothing bad's ever happened.

He could try to pretend.

But the bruises ruin it. Blues, greens, angry purples blooming along her vertebrae like some cruel watercolor. His fingers tremble as he dabs the balm over it.

And he isn't even enjoying having his hands on her for once—on her warm, silky skin—so that's saying something.

His voice comes quieter, more raw. "Why does the world always seem so determined to hurt you?"

He meets her gaze through the side mirror. She sees him.

"Don't get all dramatic, Draco," she says, soft laughter in her voice. "It doesn't suit you."

But he's not laughing. His chest's gone hollow. How can she act so casual about it? He doesn't look away. "Do I look like I'm joking?"

There's nothing in his tone but bone-deep fury. Not at her. At himself. At everything. "I should've seen it. I did see it. And I still—" He stops. Sways under his breath.

He didn't mean to say that. Didn't mean to hint at the memories he shouldn't have seen. Maybe she'll think he means the times he saw them fight in person. That would be easier.

Because truthfully, he had seen it. A lot of it.

WHY NO ONE WILL MISS ME

Yes, there was that time on the stairs at St. Mungo's, when Weasley yanked her up by the wrist.

But more too now that he thinks about it.

Raises voices behind her office door. Weasley storming away, leaving a pale Granger behind.

The limp she brushed off like it was nothing, claiming she'd tripped somewhere she never quite specified.

Weasley showing up drunk and unannounced on her shift.

When Draco, a few tables away, watched Weasley took her sandwich without asking at the pub. But Draco knew she hadn't eaten all day.

The way she'd flinched every time a person would touch her.

Fuck. He was supposed to be clever. Supposed to notice things. But it took a pensieve to spell it out for him.

He ends up on the ground somehow, back against the van tire. And then she's there too, beside him, hand on his knee like *he*'s the one who needs comforting.

He feels sick. And pathetic.

"Draco," she says gently. "You couldn't have known. Even Harry didn't."

He almost laughs. *Harry?*

Does she know Potter wouldn't recognize emotional damage if it hexed him in the face?

Does she know he's the worst possible friend—always siding with his mate and never her?

Draco slides his hand over hers, weaving their fingers together. Hers are cold. His are shaking.

"This isn't me calling you weak," he says quietly. "But... why did you stay with Weasley?"

He's never understood it. Not even with the memories. She hesitates. Could go either way—fold into herself or let him in. He holds his breath.

But ever since yesterday, she's been talking. Really talking. And Draco's greedy for every word she offers.

"I always knew we weren't right together," she says at last. "Even in the beginning, it was obvious. He was selfish, controlling, quick-tempered—same as he was at Hogwarts."

Thank Merlin. At least he wasn't the only one who'd noticed.

"I tried to break it off," she continues. "I was ready. And then... the quidditch accident happened."

Draco doesn't need her to explain. He already knows.

"You felt guilty," he says.

She nods. "He needed help. I stayed. And then it just... got worse. Until one day, he hit me."

Draco winces and his jaw clenches.

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She gives a short laugh. Draco's certain there's nothing funny about it.

"Runes and Arithmancy overlapped, but I took both," she continues, matter of fact. "They were both fascinating, so I couldn't choose and ended turning back in time for each course. And I was paired with Harry in Arithmancy, Ron in Runes. One morning over breakfast, both of them asked how our projects were going and—"

"Wait," Draco cuts in. "Why didn't they know? It was group work."

"Yes, in theory. But Harry was so wrapped up in the whole Sirius thing, and Ron was... well, Ron. He was mad at me for most of that year, so I just took both projects on myself."

"Granger—"

"It wasn't a problem." She waves him off. "So they asked, and I could see it in Ron's eyes—he couldn't figure out how I was also in Arithmancy with Harry. But..."

Draco leans in.

"He didn't ask questions. Just nodded, happy enough that I'd nearly finished the Rune project. Thank Merlin."

She sounds relieved. *Relieved*.

The bloody redhead probably *knew*—and was just taking advantage of the situation. Of her.

Draco could've said a million things. Supportive things. Clever things. Literally anything else.

So naturally, he goes with the one comment guaranteed to piss her off.

"He knew. How could he not? He just didn't care—"

"Don't!" She stands, snarling. Well. He's fucked it now. "You have no right to judge—"

Her hand jerks, snapping her twig in the fire and the marshmallow plummets straight into the flames. For one idiotic second, she lunges for it but he grabs her wrist before she can burn herself.

"Are you okay?" he asks, not sure whether her skin got scorched or if all the danger is coming from her glare.

Judging by her eyes, the fire beside him is the least of his concerns.

"I'm going to bed," she snaps, yanking her hand free and stomping toward the campervan.

Draco is left alone with the dying fire, and the sinking realization that, of all the things he could've said, he chose *that*—chose to throw in her face that no one had ever cared enough to notice her.

Brilliant.

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tunefless under her breath, summoning wood from who-knows-where and piling it into her arms with purpose.

"Let's make a fire, shall we?" she sing-songs, practically glowing.

He doesn't want to ruin it. He really doesn't. But the guilt is heavy and growing.

Incendio on the pile of wood. The crackling fire is the only sound in the hushed valley, shielded from the wind by towering, snow-dusted peaks. It's picturesque. Warm. A moment suspended in peace.

Which means, of course, it's the perfect time to ruin it.

"Granger?"

"Mmm?" she answers, handing him a branch, after skewering a marshmallow on her own.

But he's never been good at letting things sit. And tonight, it's burning.

"About Buckbeak..." he starts, voice a bit rougher than intended. "I'm sorry."

She looks up from the fire, blinking in surprise.

"For the role I played in his execution." He swallows. "You liked him."

Her expression softens, though he doesn't know why. He certainly doesn't deserve it.

"Thank you," she says simply. "You *were* awful. But you should know, Buckbeak's still alive."

His confusion must be obvious, because she quickly adds—while somehow also not explaining anything at all—

"Long story. I saved him."

"Well, lucky for you, we've got nothing but time." He gestures at the pile of wood she expertly ignited while he stood around looking decorative.

"Fine." She pulls her marshmallow out of the fire and hands it to him, snatching away his stick like she's just decided he's hopeless and has taken over as Fire Cook in Chief.

"I had a Time-Turner in third year."

"Yaa—*whu*—" He chokes mid-bite, both from shock and the scalding blob that just seared his tongue.

She launches into the story—Illegal time travel, Lupin, Sirius Black, how the Ministry executed a *pumpkin*, not a hippogriff.

He's listening, sort of, but another thought won't stop nagging at him—especially as he scorches his fourth marshmallow and gets an eye-roll for it.

"But how come nobody noticed? You had twice the course load. Surely someone—"

And that's when he sees it. Her shoulders slump slightly, and she starts drawing slow, pointless shapes in the dirt with her stick.

Oh.

It might be the moment. The moment she lets something crack open.

"No," she murmurs. "Although... I thought Ron might have suspected something at one point."

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"There was no coming back from that. I packed my bags."

He squeezes her fingers gently. "But you didn't leave. What happened?"

Her hand twitches in his. She's silent for a second too long.

"You."

His breath catches.

Wait. Is this it? The moment she finally admits she's had feelings for him in Hogwarts?

She looks up at him, eyes soft. His heart stumbles.

"For your potions skills," she says flatly.

Merlin's left tit.

That is *not* where he thought she was going with that.

"My focus was always my parents and reversing the spell," she continues, like she hasn't just shattered his fragile hopes. "When I heard St. Mungo's brought on a new potioneer—someone brilliant they said—I thought I'd stay a bit longer. Give it one last shot."

Well. That hurts more than it should.

"And I failed you," he says, his voice low.

"No." She doesn't even let him finish. "We've been over this. You didn't fail. You created a counter-potion for an irreversible spell. In less than eight months. That's..."

She trails off, eyes shining.

"That's unheard of," she says, wonder in her voice.

Draco swallows hard. The ache in his throat is irritating. He doesn't deserve her praise—not really—but sod it, he'll take it. No point pretending he's above compliments when they come from her.

Just one more question. It's been burning a hole through his brain ever since he caught sight of her scribbling that letter. The one he pretended not to notice.

"And... back at the house. In Melbourne." His voice comes out casual. Too casual.

"What did you write to Weasley?"

She could say it. That she still loves Weasley. That this is just a temporary break. It might kill him, if he's being over dramatic. Or at least, gut him. He needs to know.

"That I wasn't coming back to him this time," she says. "Or ever."

He freezes.

She's looking at him. Not flinching. Resolute.

He stares at her.

She stares back.

He stares harder.

Then he bolts upright and claps his hands together like someone's flipped a switch inside his chest.

"Brilliant!" he announces, spinning on his heel. "Pasta for dinner, then?"

He strides to the stove, flinging open cabinets like a man reborn. He grabs a box of rigatoni, the only thing he can cook without burning the place down.

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He grabs a cauldron and starts filling it with water.

"The beach party's in two hours, so chop chop, Granger. Go pick a wine and put on something pretty."

He meant to say *less* pretty, because her white swimsuit might be the prettiest thing he ever laid eyes on.

She laughs, soft and bright. "Alright. I'll grab the good bottle." So. One bottle of wine became two.

Which turns out to be both a catastrophic mistake and the best decision of the night.

A mistake, because they manage to walk a full kilometre in the wrong direction before realizing they can't Apparate—too much alcohol, not enough coordination—so they walk a grand total of three kilometres. Draco is exhausted just thinking about it, especially after his short morning jog (i.e. barely fifteen seconds).

But mostly, a blessing.

Because drunk Granger is unsteady Granger, and supporting her becomes a noble task he's more than happy to take on. She misses her footing more than once, and he's not always quick enough to catch her, so they both end up in the sand, laughing and accusing each other of sabotage.

By the time they arrive, the party's in full swing—and, thankfully, they're not the only ones a little tipsy.

"Oh!" Granger gasps, hands over her mouth like she's discovered a new moon. "It's a Christmas beach party!"

Figures. They are in the middle of December.

Draco's never partaken in this particular Muggle tradition, although it feels suspiciously similar to Yule.

Fake pine trees are scattered across the sand, dusted in glitter that clings to his shirt. One of them blinks with string lights shaped like snowflakes, even though it's twenty-seven bloody degrees. A bonfire crackles near the sea. Paper lanterns in red and green sway from string lights knotted between surfboards.

Red and green.

Their houses color.

Him and her.

He's not sentimental, but he might be starting to like this ridiculous Muggle custom.

What he doesn't like is the way every bloke at this party seems to notice Granger. Apparently sun-kissed, windswept Hermione in "jean" muggle shorts and wine-flushed cheeks is everyone's type.

"You made it!"

Morning Muscle Man appears. He hugs Granger—too long, in Draco's opinion—so Draco slips an arm around her waist and tucks her to his right side.

Purely preventative. She tripped at least three times on the way here.

"Great to see you, Crampton," Draco says smoothly, offering his left hand—the only one not currently occupied with Hermione, which makes one vaguely awkward

wraps his torso around her, pinning her safely to the hippogriff's back.

Not because it feels nice. No. Call it aerodynamics. He did play Quidditch, after all.

And now that he thinks about it, with her pressed to his chest, his arms around her, it's almost like that moment in the Room of Requirement—when all hell broke loose and Potter and Weasley left her behind.

Again.

When his eyes had locked on her, he couldn't understand—he was *certain* he'd just seen the two soaring out of the room of Requirement. Leaving *him* behind was one thing. Expected, really. But *her*?

Granger?

And when she fell—when he saw her drop—his heart had slammed so violently against his ribs he thought it might crack them. That's when he knew. There was no version of reality where Draco Malfoy left her to burn.

"How the fuck are you enjoying this?" he shouts, barely audible over the wind, her laughter ringing out in reply.

His eyes are clamped shut, forehead pressed to the back of her head like that might keep him alive. She's giddy. Actually *giggling*.

"How can you not? Look around!" she says breathlessly.

He cracks one eye open. Then the other.

And damn it all—he gets it.

Below them, the mountain range stretches endlessly, a chain of jagged peaks cut through by luscious valleys, small lakes and flowing rivers. The snow glows pink in the fading light, the sun slipping behind the highest mountain like it's being swallowed whole.

It's almost enough to make him forget that the only thing keeping him from plummeting into the void is a glorified slag rug with wings.

Almost.

The flight ends in silence, both of them watching as the sky shifts from gold to rose, then deepens into navy. One by one, the stars flicker to life, mirrored in the lakes beneath their feet.

Eventually, the hippogriff deposits them neatly beside the campervan. Draco doesn't miss the fact that the magical beast has better directional sense than he does.

Granger strokes its head with a kind of reverence, murmurs a soft goodbye like she's parting with an old friend.

It hits him then—how much joy she's found in this moment. And how much he's forgotten.

He saw so much of her pain, rifled through too many of her memories, all grief and shattered things. But this—her connection to another hippogriff—one he personally helped sentence to death—it had slipped through the cracks.

Huck.

The stars glitter above them, reflected in her wide, excited eyes as she hums something

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Then comes the flutter of wings.

Draco instinctively tenses. Granger spent the better part of the drive rambling about Australia's charming habit of housing the most ridiculous fauna—both magical and Muggle. Some of which could apparently kill you with a blink.

His eyes narrow as a white blur cuts through the sky, gliding straight toward them.

Oh, brilliant. Just his luck.

"A Snowfur Hippogriff!" Granger squeals, flapping her arms with far too much excitement for someone facing a beast with giant talons.

He watches her with genuine concern—for her safety, but also for her sanity. Honestly, how do Gryffindors survive past childhood with instincts like these?

The Hippogriff lands with a heavy thud, snow scattering around its hulking form. It's larger than Buckbeak, the only other Hippogriff Draco's had the misfortune of meeting. Same beak, same judgmental stare—but this one's covered in white fur, a perfect outfit to camouflage himself in the mountains.

Granger steps forward like the complete insane woman that she is. At least, it accepts her immediately when she bows.

He exhales, relieved for half a second.

Then she swings herself up onto the creature's back and looks over her shoulder. "Come on! Don't be scared."

"I'm not scared," he snaps, taking a discreet step back and doing his best impersonation of someone totally unfazed by the idea of flying on a hairy, winged death machine.

She raises one brow. Daring him. Challenging him. Infuriating woman.

"Suit yourself," she says, turning away like she didn't just stab him in the pride.

Damn it.

He might be terrified of climbing on that beast, but the thought of her venturing off alone? Not a chance.

"Wait," he mutters, already regretting what he's about to do. He squares his shoulders, takes a breath, and bows.

There's a solid three seconds where the beast locks eyes with him, and Draco is *almost* certain it's plotting to trample him. But then Granger strokes its neck and murmurs, "It's okay, he's my friend."

Ah.

So *that's* why she looks so cheery every time he used the word. He's practically simpering now. Pathetic.

Thankfully—or tragically, because that means he's about to be airborne—the Hippogriff bows. Great. He's been accepted.

Granger holds out her small hand like she's offering to hoist a log. He takes it, naturally, but doesn't dare put his full weight into the pull. Pride.

The beast doesn't even have the decency to wait until he's seated before it rears up and launches into the sky at a near-vertical angle. Granger slides back into him, and he

handshake, but no less menacing.

"Ah, it's Cameron," the man replies, still smiling.

"Right, my mistake. Clapton."

He steers Granger away before she notices the insult. She doesn't. She's too tipsy to register Draco's petty territorial streak—and frankly, he's not that sorry about it.

The night winds on in a blur of dancing, drinking, and the occasional attempt on Draco's part to pester Granger into revealing the location of the Pearl Snidget Sanctuary. His stash of hangover potion is back in the camper; but he's already imagining a life without having to rely on those with only one feather. He could drink to his heart content.

Luckily, the Muggle drinking games help him recover some semblance of sobriety. Because, as with everything in life, Draco Malfoy excels. He rarely has to drink. Granger? Not so much.

At this point, it's a vicious circle: she loses, so she drinks. She drinks, so she loses harder. She is, without a doubt, on a steep slope toward complete and glorious oblivion. And drunk Granger is also a wandering Granger. This is the fourth time tonight she's disappeared on him. When he finally spots her again, she's perched on top of a metal barrel, feet flailing in the air; a plastic tube jammed in her mouth while a crowd chants, "*Chug chug chug!*". Two blokes are holding her legs steady. Their hands wrapped around her thighs.

Draco is not pleased.

He's halfway to marching over and pulling her down by the hips when a hand lands on his shoulder. A woman. Another one.

This has been happening all night—overly enthusiastic women throwing themselves at him, hands everywhere. Back in London—*his old life*, as he's starting to think of it—he might have enjoyed the attention. Might have even leaned into it. But now? They're all missing something. One essential thing. Hermione-shaped size.

Also, he's on a mission, can't they see? And every time one of them touches him, Granger seems to vanish like smoke. His patience is wearing thin.

"What's your name, handsome?" the woman purrs, heavy accent, definitely a tourist. Her fingers are already reaching for his hair.

"I'm sorry," he says, catching her wrist mid-air. That hair is strictly off-limits. He could allow only one person, and she's currently upside down on a barrel. "I have to go."

He turns back and—

She's gone.

Again.

Fifth disappearance. He's practically a search party at this point.

Although... does it really count as *evading* if the evadee doesn't know she's being followed? Semantics.

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He weaves through the crowd, considering—only half-joking—whether to recruit a few volunteers for the Great Granger Search. But just as he's about to give up, he spots her.

She's walking away. Or trying to.

He jogs after her, catching up with ease. His lungs beg to differ. Too much work-out for today.

"Wh—" He wheezes. Merlin, that's humiliating. "Where are you going?"

"Back to the van," she says, surprisingly steady; considering her legs are wobbling like a newborn giraffe's. "You can stay. I'm sure one of your lady friends will graciously offer to *lau* you."

What?

"Granger," he deadpans, "that's the sea."

She squeals as a wave snatches one of her flip-flops and vanishes it into the ocean.

"Ughhhh," she groans, collapsing into the sand with her head between her knees like she's trying to fold herself out of existence.

Draco dumps out his sad beer and casts a quick *Agamenti* into the paper cup, checking to make sure no one's watching. They aren't. Everyone's too drunk or distracted.

"Here." He hands her the water.

She gulps it down, and he plops down beside her.

"Seriously," she mutters, chin tipping toward the party, a distant blur of sound and glittering lights. "I can sleep alone tonight. What, it's been—what—three weeks? Must be new record for you."

She purses her lips in a way that's both judgmental and oddly cute.

Huh. Drunk Granger is also Bitchy Granger. Noted.

Not that it stings. Because, yes—factually, three weeks without sex is a record for him. But it's not the point.

"What is this about?" he asks calmly.

"Forget it."

And she's up again. For Merlin's sake.

Evasion Number Six.

At least she's heading in the right direction now—while missing one shoe.

Oh—scratch that. The second sandal snaps and disappears into the sand. She glares at it for a moment, offended, then abandons and keeps marching forward barefoot, her path toward the van as chaotic as ever.

Draco sighs, picks up the discarded sandal, casts a quick *Reparo*, then *Geminio*. He jogs after her and kneels in front of her path.

"Foot," he says.

She scoffs but steadies herself with her hands on his shoulders—quite firmly, not that he minds. Fitting the sandals proves trickier than expected, mostly because Granger's sways like they're on a boat in high seas.

"These are two left sandals," she points out.

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Then, as if nothing happened, her pink tongue darts out to lick a Muggle envelope, sealing it with precision. He almost misses the name written on the front, too busy watching her mouth.

Ronald Weasley.

His stomach knots. Whatever she's writing, he hopes it's full of insults. But he doesn't ask.

He just prays it's a message indicating that she has no intention of going back to him.

It's Draco's first road trip, and despite the absence of five-star accommodations—not that he's complaining, Granger explicitly banned whining—he's surprisingly content. Or maybe it's just the company. With anyone else, this might have gone up in flames. But with her... it works. Effortlessly.

He's wary at first of the van's minimal Muggle kitchen, but it's Granger's first time using those appliances too, so they fumble through it together. He only *almost* burned off one of her eyebrows *once*, and honestly, that was her fault.

She'd told him to light the burner. She should have specified that *Incendio* was off the table.

Apparently, handing him *The Lighter*—a strange little wand with a flickering flame—was supposed to be instruction enough. Miscommunication, really. It happens.

Still, the *almost* singed-eyebrow incident can't have been too traumatic, because by the third day, she officially declares his probation over. Unless he commits some gross act of negligence, he's earned his badge as certified travel companion.

They talk—a lot. She teaches him odd facts about the Muggle world, they exchange theories from what they learn on the job, and shamelessly gossip about their coworkers. But never anything deeper. Not for lack of trying on his part.

When they reach the Australian Alps—the first landmark Stephen circled on the map—they find the exact spot her parents stood in the old photo. He recognizes it instantly, not because of the view, but because of the way she looks at it.

Despite the cold, she lowers herself to the ground, breath clouding in the air, eyes wide with the same quiet awe back near the coast when she noticed the view from the first postcard. Her fingers graze the rocky snow-dusted earth, as if trying to feel the memory of her parents, just for a second.

If only he had a camera to capture her expression. He doesn't care much for the view—rocks, snowy sky, whatever—but the way *she* looks at it, like it's the most sacred thing she's ever seen, now *that* deserves to be photographed.

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far more efficient, in his opinion.

With the new map and their improvised navigation code, things run surprisingly smoothly. Draco is now convinced that he is crucial to the survival of this road trip.

During the two-hour drive back to the city, they also go over what they'll need to pack. It becomes painfully clear that, aside from his wand, his wallet, and the clothes he's been wearing for the past two days—thank Merlin for *Souzify*—he has absolutely nothing to contribute. He casually suggests she drop him off at the Portkey Terminal so he can pop back home, grab a suitcase with his summer wardrobe, and return.

Granger instantly dismisses the idea. Says it's a waste of money. But he doesn't miss the flicker of panic in her eyes when he says *leave*—even if it's just for a few hours. Maybe she worries he won't come back.

So he doesn't leave. That's settled.

What's *not* settled is the absolute lack of taste her father had. Back at the house, she opens his old wardrobe and waves a hand toward it. Draco stares at a row of short-sleeved horrors and beige cargo shorts and wonders what crime he committed in a past life to deserve this.

"Take whatever you want," she says brightly. "You can alter the fit."

He very neatly casts *Inverudo* on the entire rack. Fortunately, he's decent at Transfiguration spells.

Once the campervan is packed, Granger—ever the responsible one—suggests they should write someone back home, if only to assure the world they're not missing.

Draco agrees, though the whole thing feels unnecessarily formal. He scribbles short notes to Theo, Blaise, and his mother, informing them he's on holiday, return date unknown. It's not the first time he's gone off the grid; he doubts they'll even blink.

Then Granger, in her classic overthinking fashion, brings up the topic of St. Mungo's. She's planning to send in her resignation, but worries it might raise suspicion, especially since it coincides with his sudden departure as well. People might talk, she says. Connect dots that aren't there.

To which he replies, "Let them talk. I don't care."

The smile she gives him in return might be his favorite yet. Her lips barely move, but her eyes widen, glimmering with the quiet force of ten full smiles. And he remembers, too clearly, the way she used to wither every time he ignored her in public during fifth year.

He hadn't known how to be her friend back then. It had felt too strange, too out of step with the life he'd been raised for. He wasn't ready. But he should never have hidden it.

Hermione Granger is not someone meant for the shadows.

He won't hide this time.

And just to make sure his point gets across, he teases, "England can think we're on our honeymoon for all I care."

She scoffs, but her cheeks betray her—flushed and adorable.

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"I was hoping you were too drunk to notice." He stands, brushing sand off his palms.

"So. Any particular reason you decided to call me a slut tonight?"

She folds her arms, lower lip jutting, nearly stomps like a child. Honestly? Adorable.

"I'm not shit-shaming you," she snaps. "I'm saying—" She pauses, looking at her fingers, probably to count. "I don't think I have enough fingers to count the number of times I've watched you leave the pub *without* someone new."

Oh.

She noticed?

Something shifts in his chest at the idea of her paying that much attention. That twist of satisfaction is joined by something sharper—regret. He plays it off with a smirk.

"Jealous?"

"N-no!" she stammers, like he's just said the most idiotic thing. But her cheeks flush, just enough to make him entertain the ridiculous idea that she might actually be jealous.

"I mean... you basically dated all of St. Mungo's. Well—almost. Except..."

"Except?"

He asks because he genuinely has no clue where she's going with this. And, for the record, he didn't date all of St. Mungo's. Technically, he doesn't *date*.

"Except..."

"Except who, Granger?"

"Me!"

Her answer slams into the quiet like a punch. He just stares at her—mouth open, probably wide enough to catch one of those Australian insects the size of a bloody bird. Her? As in, she *wanted* him to ask her out and now she's angry she didn't make the list? The idea of her lumping herself in with that parade of shallow, forgettable flings makes something in him twist.

She's right—she is an exception. Just not for the reasons she probably thinks.

And then she bolts—again. Back toward the van, fumbling with the lock. He follows.

"You were taken," he says, once they're inside. It comes out more angrily than he meant it to.

But—did she conveniently forget she was engaged to Weasley the whole time they were working together?

Sure, there was a window. A few months after the trial, after she stood up for him in front of the Wizengamot. They were Witch Weekly's favorite and most eligible singles, week after week.

But back then, he was just a shell—waiting for the other shoe to drop. Lazy about everything. Convinced they'd find something else to pin on him, lock him up again. Or that something darker would rise from the ashes.

So he distracted himself with women who meant nothing to him. He could say goodbye the next morning and never see again. And plus, he was certain he didn't deserve someone like *her*. Not after everything.

And when she finally walked into his lab on his first day—when she smiled at him

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like they were something more than shared trauma—he'd been ready to give it all up for just one date. One chance.

But she was taken.

And he'd thought she was happy with the Weasel. How spectacularly wrong he'd been. Her distress was so obvious now, all she was missing were flashing signs and a howler addressed to idiots like him.

"That never stopped you before." She huffs, rummaging under the seat for the handle in order to turn the trifold sofa into a bed—or least, that's what he assumes she's doing. Otherwise, he has no idea why she'd be kneeling on the floor.

"Oh, Merlin. This reputation of mine has *got* to stop." He mumbles.

Then, unsure—scared of the answer.

"Would you have said yes?"
He doesn't even know why he asked—she's drunk, thoroughly impaired, probably won't remember any of this. Her answer shouldn't mean anything. But it does.

Because what if it's true? What if he could've had her, all those months ago, just by asking? Alow, sour regret coils in his stomach.

She continues to fumble with the handle, fails, and lets out an exaggerated sigh like it's the most demanding task in the world. After a huff of frustration, she gives up and sits on the floor, staring up at him.

There's a glint of...something he can't quite place in her eyes.

"I would have," she says, lips quirking into a smile people often wear right before doing something stupid.

Ah.

Something utterly stupid—like wrecking him with temptation alone.

She unfolds her legs and kneels in front of him, those big, doe-brown eyes daring him to say no.

Every muscle in his body locks up.

She rises onto her knees, steadies herself on his thighs, and licks her lip like some wild lioness who knows exactly what she's after.

Apparently, Drunk Granger is also Bold-as-hell Granger. He swallows hard.

"Did you know..." she says, captivating him. "That I used to have this little crush on you at Hogwarts?"

His body reaches the decision to shut down and short-circuit.

Sober Granger would *never* say any of this, which means he needs to stop her. Immediately.

...Just as soon as he sees where this is going.

Because the dishonorable part of him—the one currently holding court at the front of his trousers—intends to give her all his undivided attention.

"Even when you were a complete arse," she adds with a breathy laugh, fingers warm and wandering, pausing exactly where they shouldn't. "All I wanted was to be your friend."

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himself not to think about how perfect she feels, curled up like this. He fails.

She burrows in, nose brushing his throat. "I'm sure the blankets are in the garage. We'll look tomorrow."

"You could just say it, you know."

"Say what?"

"Wow, *Mafija*, I'm so lucky that you agreed to stay. Without you, I'd be a frozen corpse by now."

"You're such a brat."

Her fingers sneak under his shirt, just for warmth. Presumably. Their first official travel day couldn't have started better, Draco thinks.

Maybe it's because he's just had one of the best night's sleep in years, with Granger tucked against him, breathing soft little huffs of air against his neck like some enchanted halloway.

Or.

Maybe it's the fact that, against all odds, he's not completely abysmal at navigation. Stephen at the visitor centre says so himself.

Granted, that comes *after* Draco tells her to take a turn onto what turns out to be a rather convincing mirage of a road and was in fact a ditch. She yells at him again—which concerns him more than he'd like to admit—especially since she's just declared their trial night a success and officially put him on *probation*. He cannot afford to lose his travel companion privileges this early in the trip.

In the end, she follows a sign with a tiny italic *i*, like that has more authority than his suave navigational voice. Ego: bruised. Mildly.

But it leads them to the visitor centre, so the *i* won over him.

"You've been getting around with *that map*?" the man at the desk—Stephen, according to his nametag—lets out a laugh so loud it echoes through the whole building. "This thing's older than me! And I'm bloody sixty!"

Hermione, red to the ears, stammers something about it probably being the one that came with the campervan and not the one her parents used. She even glances at Draco with something that could almost be mistaken for remorse. *Almost*. He plans to extract a proper apology once they're back in the car.

As she gives him the pictures of her postcards, Stephen whips out a proper, updated map and starts circling destinations with delight, matching the places from her parents' pictures.

"There ya go," he says, tapping the paper. "This'll keep you two lovebirds outta the bush. Hopefully."

Draco's smirk lingers the whole way back to the van.

On the way back to Melbourne, they quickly realize that Draco will never, under any circumstances, get the hang of this left-and-right nonsense. So they concoct a system: he knocks on his window for left, and anywhere near Granger for right. It could be the dashboard—*The Dashboard*, as she insists—but Draco often prefers to tap her thigh. It's

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The buckle gives a quiet *click*. Salazar help him.

He should be rewarded for what he's about to do. A standing ovation. His own chocolate frog card. Something to mark the restraint currently battling against every urge he's got.

But not like this.

Not when she's drunk, and slurring confessions like they're nothing. Not when he wants it to *matter*.

So he stops her.

He grabs her wrist, stands, and hauls her up to steer her firmly onto the couch before she can make another disastrous decision. Which, frankly, seems likely.

She flops there with a pout, limbs loose, hair wild.

"You don't want me?" she whines.

Oh, for the love of—

He exhales sharply through his nose. And if the universe is keeping score, he'd like it noted that this is *not* easy.

He scrubs a hand through his hair. He's never hated himself more.

"Too damn much," he mutters, summoning two hangover potions with a flick of his wand. "Here. Drink this."

He downns his in one go and hands her the other.

"I'll be outside." He stands, voice even but strained. "If you'd rather pretend this never happened, just turn off the lights and go to bed. I won't bring it up. Ever."

And with that, he turns before he changes his mind. Because if he stays, he's not sure he'll keep making the right decisions.

He's outside gulping in the cool night air, trying to calm down. Or rather, trying to talk down his cock, which is still raging over his last-minute moral intervention.

He paces their little lounging area, a nervous finger dragging across his lips.

He could've asked her out ages ago—and she would've said yes. He could've spared her some of that mess with Weasley. Merlin, what a coward he'd been.

It's easy now, with all the information her memories gave him, to feel confident in hindsight. But back then? He never imagined she'd even consider him. Still... did she mean it? Or was she just drunk and rambling? Maybe she won't remember any of it tomorrow. Maybe she'll pretend not to and go to sleep. Just like he told her she could.

The lights in the van switch off.
Right.

Something invisible curls around his heart and holds tight.

His hand closes around a small plastic shape in his pocket—a leftover decoration he'd swiped from the beach party, half as a joke, half on impulse. He turns it over in his fingers, thinking maybe—just maybe—he'd show it to her and hope that—

Wishful thinking. Ridiculous, really.

He's seconds away from stalking off for a cold dip in the ocean just to kill the heat

Chapter 6

Draco wonders if the job description of *ideal travel companion* includes making sure Granger doesn't freeze to death. He suspects it might.

"Granger?"

"What?" she snaps without turning around, her voice sharp and shivery. He can hear her teeth clattering, and her shoulders tremble under the baggy hoodie she dug out earlier from under the mattress, the only useful thing besides the thin sheet covering it. Her father's, apparently. Not much help; not when those infuriatingly short Muggle things keep riding up her thighs like that.

He eyes her legs. Goosebumps rise over the skin. Smooth, bare skin. He debates, briefly, whether running his palms over them in the name of heat transfer would be appropriate travel-companion behavior. Probably not.

He'd seen her cast a warming charm earlier, but those only lasted an hour at best. Troublesome to get a proper night's sleep.

"Come here," he says.

Her shivering falters for a beat—suspicion, maybe surprise. He expects a lecture. A scoff. But she turns. And the glare she pins him with makes it seem like it's his fault she's freezing.

"You look like you're about to murder me," he mutters, lifting the edge of her hood to tuck her wild hair inside. The curls fight him, of course.

"I don't want to be strangled in my sleep by your hair," he adds, cinching the drawstrings tight under her chin. Only her eyes remain visible—furious, unamused, and glittering.

"Better."

He doesn't wait. One hand finds her hip, steadying her, and the other slips under her neck, curling her body against him. His legs tangle with hers, blanketing the cold skin with the coarse warmth of his trousers. He tells himself it's strictly practical. He tells

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still crawling under his skin when the van's door slides open behind him.

She steps out.

The moon hits her like it's trying to show her off. She looks steady now. Clear-eyed. And unfairly beautiful.

She walks straight up to him without breaking eye contact. Gryffindor bravery on full display—he can spot it a mile off—and this one is blazing.

"I stand by what I said," she says, voice steady. "I liked you in school. And..." She falters, just a beat, then lifts her chin, sure again. "I'm not sure I ever really stopped."

He blinks. For a second, all he can do is stare.

She likes him. Still?

The memories had shown enough of her feelings during Hogwarts, sure—but nothing past that. He never hoped. Never dared to assume. She was with Weasley, for Merlin's sake.

His mouth hangs open, open wide, and the silence must stretch too long, because she starts fidgeting.

"Anyway, I don't regret telling you," she says quickly, though her voice turns brittle. "But if it makes you uncomfortable..." She backpedals a step, nervous, and he's still standing there like a complete idiot. Say something. Anything.

"If you want to leave, I'd understand."

Fuck.

Does she really think this is one-sided? That he's staying for another reason than her company?

He moves forward. She shifts back. He reaches for her chin, tilts it up, and her pretty eyes flicker with nerves.

"I'm not going anywhere," he says, voice low. "I'm exactly where I want to be."

He slides a hand into his pocket, draws the object out, and casts the levitation charm. It rises slowly, hovering over their heads.

"Look what I stole."

She glances up. Her eyes go wide at the sight of the plastic mistletoe.

"I won't walk away this time," he says, cradling her face in both hands.

"You remember?" she breathes.

"Regrets are hard to forget."

Her mouth parts in a soft, stunned 'oh'—and he takes it as permission. Maybe even an invitation.

He leans in, and she melts against him like she's been waiting for this as long as he has. Technically, she had, but he's been waiting in a far more intense, absolutely deranged kind of way. His arms wrap around her in a tight grip and when their lips meet—it's not some romanticized spark. No. It's a fucking implosion. Like their bodies had been held at a structural limit and finally collapsed inward from sheer prolonged emotional pressure.

And Merlin, why—why had they waited so long, if happiness could be summoned

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He stands, dusts himself off, and offers his hand to pull her up.

"So... is that a yes?"

She shifts her weight, eyes flicking from the darkening sky to the campervan behind him. There's calculation in her gaze.

"I'll tell you what," she says, and there's a challenge sharpening her voice. He narrows his eyes slightly, intrigued. "I'm not driving back in the dark—especially not with you navigating. You'd probably lead us into the sea."

He lifts a brow but doesn't argue. She's right, unfortunately.

"We'll sleep here tonight," she declares, with a pointed wag of her finger. "Call it a trial run."

He grins. "Deal."

He'll be the picture of a flawless travel companion. She won't have a single reason to leave him behind tomorrow.

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He examines a greenish, smoothed-out rock. It's pretty.

"It's sea glass," she says, watching him. "Bits of broken bottles, worn down by the ocean and the shore."

He recoils and tosses it, disgusted to have an ancient beer bottle in his hands. "I like them," she goes on, unfazed. "It started off as something plain, but by being thrown around for years and battered by the sea, it came out looking almost like a gem."

Sometimes it takes being shattered to become something worth keeping."

Draco pauses. Then shifts through the stones again, finds another one—rounded, pretty, green—and holds it out to her.

For him, she's already an emerald. Maybe she always was. He only wishes the ocean hadn't had to crush her so mercilessly for her to see it too.

"I think you're right." He places it in her open palm, then folds her fingers around it. She swallows hard.

"So," he smirks, "I'll ask again. Can I join you on your grand adventure? Or is this strictly a solo journey?"

Her hesitation is shorter this time.

"But what about your work?" she asks, voice gender now.

"If St. Mungo's most famous mind healer can vanish, I think the hospital can survive without one useless potioneer."

The truth is, he never took the job seriously. Theo and Blaise were right; he gets bored very easily. He only stayed for one reason. If that reason's no longer there, there's nothing keeping him.

"But—" Granger sighs. "It's simple. Do you want to be alone or not?"

She bites her lip, clearly waging war inside that brilliant brain.

For him, it's simple. He won't leave her behind—not again, not like he did at Hogwarts. Maybe this is way of making it right. He'll stay for as long as she lets him. "It's not exactly one your champagne-sipping, five-star getaways, Malfoy."

"I know."

"I don't want to hear you whine."

"I won't."

"You *have* to learn your left from your right."

"I will."

Her eyes flick to the campervan behind them. Her cheeks turn pink.

"There's only one bed!"

Perfect. He has no idea why she thought that would be a problem.

"We'll manage."

"You're freakishly tall."

"Good thing you're goblin-sized, then."

She shoves his shoulder, scandalized. "You are *not* hoarding all the space just because you're taller—we'll share it *equally!*"

with something as simple as a kiss?

He wishes she still had that bloody Time Turner. He'd steal it, wind it back to sixth year, to the exact moment he left her standing alone under the mistletoe. Just so he could slap his sixteen-year-old self for being so dumb. Then go back even further—to the train ride in first year. Accept her friendship, truly accept it. Not that façade of politeness he offered her.

Keep Potter and the Weasel far away. Shield her from the loneliness, the cruelty, the years of being overlooked.

Maybe then, maybe, friendship would have blossomed in something more.

And Salazar, to kiss her in the Great Hall, or in the library stacks, or in some secluded corridor—how magnificent that would've been.

But he has her now, right in his arms. And this? This is everything.

Her mouth opens slowly under his coaxing, and his tongue slips past, seeking hers. His hand tangles in her curls. She gasps, wild and breathless against him, and he can't help the noise that catches in his throat—half lust, half wonder.

Her pillowowy lips are impossibly soft, her breath intoxicating and uneven, and his fingers tighten in her hair like he's terrified she might vanish.

Their height difference is starting to become a problem—her on her tiptoes, him bent halfway to the ground—but he can't stop kissing her. Won't. He'd do it for eternity.

He shifts, angling his head to deepen the kiss, but his neck starts to ache and, frankly, eternity is beginning to feel physiologically impractical.

So he nudges her backward, walking her toward the picnic table. She hits the edge and gasps softly, but doesn't pull away. Instead, she reaches for him—fingers curling in his collar—and he lifts her, just enough to sit her on the tabletop.

Perfect height.

His hands part her legs to ease in closer, palms grazing up her thighs. Her skin prickles with goosebumps, despite the warmth of the night air. He finds her waist and draws her in, holding her tight. Their mouths part and find each other again—soft, hungry, aching—until she breaks the kiss and pulls back.

His eyes immediately search hers in panic. Too much? Too fast? Idiot.

But then she asks, breathless, a hint of worry in her voice. "You're really not going to leave?"

He exhales shakily, hating that she has to ask—but he gets it. He's the reason she does. Always walking out. Always proving her right to expect the worst of him.

"As long as you want me, I'm staying."

She lets out this tiny sound—like a laugh tangled up in relief—and before he can say anything else, she pulls him in again.

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They barely slept. Most of the night was spent talking, mostly him, about why he left her standing under the mistletoe all those years ago. How he thought it best to keep his distance, to sever whatever fragile thread had started between them. How he believed—and still does, if he's honest—that getting close to him back then would've only made her a target.

The few hours they did manage to sleep, they did so wrapped around each other. And not just for body heat this time.

So when a soft tap pulls him from unconsciousness, with Granger still curled tight at his side, his first instinct is to curse out whoever dares.

10 a.m., according to the tempus charm he casts one-eyed.

How the hell they'd managed to sleep that long in this metal oven of a van, he doesn't know. Except—ah. A quick glance out the window explains it. Cloudy. Blessedly cool.

And in the same glance, he registers what woke him in the first place.

A heart-shaped face and a pair of sharp black eyes glare at him through the window, insistent and unimpressed.

An owl.

An Eastern Grass Owl, Granger would correct him later. He should've acted faster—shooed the bloody thing off the second he woke.

Because in its beak, the owl carries a letter. Addressed to her.

And when she cracks the seal and unfolds it, Draco catches just enough of the last line to know he should've burned the damn thing. The letter. Not the bird, mind you.

So all of that to ask you...can we meet and talk?

I miss you.

Ron—xxx—

parents once walked this same stretch of sand. Draco trails behind, watching her quietly.

"Now I know," she says at last, addressing the wind more than him.

She turns and meets his eyes, something settled in hers now.

"Before they died, my plan was always to come in Australia, restore their memories, and then travel with them. Just like we were meant to—if I hadn't stayed behind for the war."

Her gaze drops to the postcard in her hand, thumb brushing over its edges.

"I want to see the same places they saw. I want to travel. With the campervan, just like they did." She smiles faintly. "Even if I'm alone... it'll feel like they're with me."

At the word *alone*, he tenses. There are a thousand things he wants to say—but one question claws its way forward.

"You never planned to come back, did you?" he asks, and it lands heavy in his chest, like a rock slipping down his ribs.

She doesn't answer. She doesn't have to. One foot rubs nervously against the rocky ground. Her eyes dart away.

"I'll need to stop at the house," she murmurs, fussing with the envelope. "Pack some things, a few clothes... I'll drop you at the Portkey terminal. Did you already have your return portkey?"

So that was it. She hadn't intended to say goodbye. If he hadn't broken into her office, found that memory box, he might never have seen her again.

She rambles on about logistics, preparing her departure, and all he can hear is the rust in his ears.

But he's not ready for this to end.

"Can your travel plans fit one more person?" he asks, cutting her off.

She blinks. "Draco—"

"I want to come."

"You have a life. You can't just—"

"And so do you!" he snaps. She flinches, and regret flares in his chest, but the idea of going back—back to routine, back to St. Mungo's, back to work *without her*—makes him feel sick.

He drops to the ground, legs stretched out, staring at the sea like it might offer clarity. She sinks beside him.

"There's nothing left for me in England," she says softly.

He understands. But he can't let her know *how much* he understands—not without giving everything away.

Still, he needs to hear it from her lips.

"You and Weasley...you're over, right?"

She eyes him, confused. "How did you know?"

He picks up a handful of stones, tossing a few off the edge, keeping the ones with strange shapes. Like a child in a sandbox.

"I had a feeling. Saw how you acted when he came to the hospital."

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rebel at the thought of having seawater and sand lodged in every crevice of his body. Unsexy. Absolutely not.

"That wasn't a favor," he says, cupping her jaw. "That was an apology. Am I forgiven love?"

Please say yes. *Please.*

"Not sure," she purrs. Evil witch. "Might take several more *apologies*."

Draco stands, hauling her up with him, water cascading off their skin. "I can *apologize* all night, Granger," he growls, throwing her double-entendre right back at her.

He doesn't bother with his clothes, abandoned in a pile a mere five steps away, which frankly feels like a trek when he's got a very wet Granger in his arms. In every possible sense of the word.

Just wraps his arms more tightly around her and Apparates them straight to the van. He's wasted enough time. Years of it. Years without her warmth pressed to his chest, without her mouth teasing his, without the maddening, glorious thrill of wanting her and being wanted right back.

No more waiting.

Chapter 10

When they Apparate outside the van, Draco mutters a curse under his breath. Why couldn't he have spared five minutes to prep the bed before he running off in the woods to chase her? He could have done both—worry and do chores. But no. Once again, he proves every woman that men *can't* multitask.

Fine. This will have to do.

Hermione doesn't seem to mind. In fact, she looks downright enthusiastic. She pushes him backward the second he slides the door open, and he barely registers the soft clunk of his back hitting the bench before she's straddling him.

"Impatient, are we?" he breathes, not quite managing to sound snug as his hands find her hips.

"Not you?" she counters sweetly, then rolls her hips with devious precision, proving that his erection is still very present, making him the most impatient between the two. He groans. Loudly. She smiles like it's a win. He's not even sure he cares anymore who's winning, as long as this never stops.

She leans in, kissing him with a kind of soft urgency that turns his brain to fog. His fingers slide under the clingy hem of her shirt, not exactly subtle about his intentions. She gets the message.

Leaning back just enough, she peels the wet fabric over her head, and Draco very nearly lets out a sound he's fairly certain hasn't left his mouth since he was twelve. A squeak. Of pure, unfiltered ecstasy.

He's seen her in a swimsuit, yes—but this? This is something else entirely. A blushing pink bra, delicate and damp, clinging to every curve. Her hair is dripping down her torso, not even close to the filthiest fantasy his mind could have conjured.

He swallows. Loudly.

"Beautiful," he groans, reaching out like he's not fully convinced she's real. His finger traces the scalloped edge of the lace that cups her breasts and goosebumps bloom across

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her skin. Whether it's from his touch or the chill of wet clothes, he doesn't know—but Draco Malfoy is nothing if not practical.

His hands move around to the band of her bra, meeting in the middle. He raises his brows, expression openly hopeful, bordering on desperate.

"Off," she says, smiling like she knows exactly what he needs. He doesn't need to be told twice. The clasp comes undone with barely any coordination or control on his part. Merlin, it's as if he's never seen a naked woman before.

Well. In his defense, he's never seen *her* naked before.

She's a piece of art. Sculpted just for him.

"Draco?"

Shit. He's been staring. Mouth open, no less. He shuts it with a snap. Idiot.

And just when he's about to explain himself—*sorry, darling, you might be the most beautiful thing I've ever laid eyes on and I think my brain short-circuited*—she starts to cover herself. For what reason, he doesn't know.

"No." He bats her hands away, firmly placing them on her thighs. "Don't you dare."

She flinches slightly, tries to smile it off. "I'm sure I look different from your model conquests." She avoids his eyes. "Ron always made comments about—well, you know how small they look, not enough that—there's apparently a charm, but I—"

She's rambling now, babbling through the same insecurities he saw buried in her memories. And he lets her. For all of five seconds.

"Hermione."

It's the first time he says her name out loud like this. Or maybe the second. He might've shouted it earlier tonight when she was floating—not floating—in the bloody sea. She startles, eyes wide, lips parted.

He grabs her hips and shifts her forward until her center slides against him, perfectly.

Both of them gasp.

"Feel that?" he murmurs. He rocks her against him. "That's how hard you make me. And you're not even fully naked."

One hand comes up to cup her breast, his thumb brushing across her nipple with reverence. It pebbles instantly under his touch.

"So don't ever compare yourself," he says lowly, eyes locked on hers. "Because no one stands a chance against you."

She draws in a shaky breath, and it breaks him that a witch like her has trouble accepting even one compliment. From now on, he swears, he'll praise her daily to build her confidence back up. He wraps an arm around her back, drawing her breast toward his mouth.

"Beautiful isn't even the start of it."

Then he takes her in his mouth. And *fuck*.

She tastes like salt and skin and some addictive sweetness he can't place. Like the most delectable lollipop in the candy shop. He licks, sucks, worships, and the sounds she makes are the kind that carve themselves into memory.

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"Sav'it," he urges, knuckles brushing heat.

"Yes," she whispers, her voice trembling. "Draco, yes."

His hand slides fully between her thighs, fingers slipping through her folds. Salazar, she feels exquisite beneath his fingers. He presses her harder into the rock, desperate to melt into her, to lose himself in the shape and sound of her.

She lets her head fall back against his shoulder, body arching as he circles her slowly—coaxing, sure. The water laps gently around them. Their breaths sound absurdly loud in the silence of the sea.

"You're doing so good," he praises against her temple. "Let go of the rock. There's nothing to be afraid of."

One hand snaps behind his neck, the other clutches the arm wrapped tight around her stomach.

She's folded against him, her bum grinding softly into his concealed, aching length. One more swing and he might humiliate himself without ever being inside her.

He walks them backward until he can sink into the sand, pulling her down with him. The water rolls around their waists. She fits perfectly between his legs, his body curving around hers, one hand resting gently at her throat.

He slips a finger deeper, his palm pressing firmly over her clit.

"Oh, gosh," she mewls.

This sound nearly ruins him. Sweet and wrecked and meant for him.

Mercifully, her hand claws at his bent knee, distracting him just long enough to not succumb.

And then her hips push back, her breath breaks into a curse and her mouth falls open, as his fingers draw her to the edge with urgency.

Merlin, she's perfect. And this moment—so stupidly perfect it almost hurts.

He regrets not going for her sooner. Not finding the courage, not wanting her loudly enough when he should've.

Because compared to the force of nature that is Hermione Granger, every other woman he's ever...

No—scratch that. There's no comparison to make.

She's it. The beginning and the end.

Hm.

He doesn't deserve her. But he doesn't give a fuck. He's far too gone for her to entertain some noble idea about stepping aside so someone "better" can have her. What a joke.

She shifts, kneels back, eyes dark and wicked as her tongue flicks across her lips. Her gaze drops to where his cock breaks the surface, half-obscured by water.

"Let me return the favor," she grins, hands bracing on either side of her hips as she leans in.

Fuck.

As much as he wants her—desperately, violently—his posh, self-respecting instincts

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She leans back, searching his face. There's awe in her eyes. And something unsure. She rises on her knees, her chest level with his face, and like the prat that he is, he licks his lips at the sight. But she doesn't let him linger long. Her fingers sink into the ends of his hair and she tilts his head up, gaze sharp with challenge.

"You'll have to work for it."

Her smile is wicked.

"I fully intend to."

She crashes into him again, mouth hot against his, and the way her hips roll against his lap nearly drives him insane. Her center grazes his length, and for a dizzy second, he seriously considers taking her right here—on a rock, in the sea, under the moon.

"Wait," he pants. "Not on something that's about to be swallowed by the bloody tide."

He slides his hands to her hips and pushes her back just enough to jump into the water with a splash, looking up at her with a grin.

"Come here," he says, arms ready to collect her, "I got you."

And she does, dives into him like she belongs there. Her legs wrap tight around his waist as he catches her; her breath warm at his neck.

He starts to swim toward shore, but she feels too good against him to rush. He adjusts his grip and hums low in his throat.

"I might have a theory."

Her arms tighten around him. "About what?"

He continues swimming until his feet can touch sand. He grins against her skin.

"About how to cure your fear of swimming."

He surprises even himself with his ability to invent new excuses to get his hands on her.

Another rock breaks the surface. Round and steady-looking. Perfect.

She tilts her head, just puzzled enough for him to spin her easily in the water until her back presses against his chest, his erection nestled against the curve of her bum.

"Hold on to the rock," he murmurs.

Her hands snap up, gripping the edge. His fingers trace the front of her shorts, teasing the soft skin just beneath the waistband. "My theory," he whispers, lips brushing her ear, "is that if I give you enough pleasure, that brilliant brain of yours might redirect on something else. Making you forget what's driving your fear, including the water all around you."

He nips her earlobe, slowly, and she shudders.

"Think you're brave enough to test it?"

His hand dips lower, in an agonizing and slow way, giving her every chance to stop him. But she doesn't. Her hips shift back, pressing against him, wordlessly asking for more.

"Still with me?" he murmurs against the side of her neck.

She nods, but it's not enough. He wants to hear it.

His mouth trails up her chest, along her throat, to the delicate line of her jaw. He nips gently at her ear.

"I wish you could borrow my eyes just once," he whispers, tilting her head so he can see those eyes that somehow still don't believe. "Just to see you the way I do."

She blinks. Once. Twice. And it's all he needs. He rises to his feet, taking her up with him like she's a feather. He sets her down on the narrow kitchen table, spreading her out like a gift he's about to unwrap. His fingers find the band of her shorts, his gaze locked on hers as if daring her to argue. She doesn't. Good. Because she's done hiding from him.

Shorts discarded, he finds her in matching blush panties—soaked through. That's gone in the next second. Patience isn't exactly his strength tonight. Not with her spread out like this. On the damn kitchen table where they eat.

His mouth waters at the sight of her fully bare. Of course, her legs start to close. He doesn't even sigh—just gently pushes them open again. The Weasel really did a number on her.

He drops to his knees. Just as he's about to taste her, she jolts up on her elbows, squeaking.

"W-wait," she gasps. "You don't have to. I was told it was gross."

And why exactly did he let the gingerfick walk away? Because he wasn't capable of murder? He's starting to feel the aptitude return—with a vengeance.

"Let me guess," he mutters, already leaning in. "Weasley?"

Her blush answers for her.

He doesn't dignify it with a response. Just presses his mouth to her; tongue sliding between her folds, and nearly groans at the taste.

"Exquisite," he growls against her. "Gingergrit clearly has no palate."

He proves his point thoroughly, licking, teasing, sucking, while her hips buck against his grip. He teases her clit with the flat of his tongue, then sucks hard enough to make her cry out, her hips jerking helplessly against his grip.

When he slides a finger in, curling just right, he's rewarded with a moan so needy and adorable that he almost forgets how to breathe. Then he sucks on her clit and her whole body seizes, her thighs shaking around his shoulders and she fails apart in his hands.

Her cries echo through the van, and Merlin, he can't wait another bloody second. He pulls her toward him, her body limp, still trembling, and eases her down onto the bench seat, the cushions soft beneath her back.

"Ready for me?" he murmurs, grinning like a man entirely undone.

She nods, eyes glazed, lips parted. Utterly wrecked and wanting more.

And more, he can give.

He kicks off his boxers, still damp from the sea, and doesn't miss the sharp inhale she makes. Yes, it always has that effect on the ladies. Gifted, lucky, well-endowed—he's heard every version whispered or gasped. But somehow, tonight, only one reaction

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matters.

She shifts, starting to sit up—probably to get a better look—but he presses her gently back into the cushions, catching both wrists in one hand and pinning them above her head.

Then he slides into her in a single, careful thrust. Slow but deep.

“Oh... God.” Her voice is a gasp.

Granger had already explained the concept of *religion*. One of the most perplexing Muggle inventions, in his opinion. An elaborate belief system built around things no one can see, dictated by books no one can verify, enforced by rules no one agrees on, starting wars and political chaos—all in the hope of impressing an invisible, all-powerful being.

And that’s the first name that falls from her lips?

Seems fitting.

Because whatever force is gripping him now—tight and absolute—he can’t explain it either. But if this is faith, if *this* is worship, then he finally understands the appeal. It’s like something wrapping around him. An invisible force pulling him down, rooting him here, whispering that this—*her*—is exactly where he belongs.

He doesn’t move at first. His arms are shaking. Not from strain, because he is bloody fit—but from something else entirely. He won’t realize it until later. It’s the first time he’s had sex with someone he actually, painfully, cares about.

Blaise once tried explaining the concept of *making love* to a witch he was courting

Draco had rolled his eyes, completely lost.

But now? Now, he understands. It’s a connection. A revelation. A fucking earthquake. He starts to move, slow at first, letting his mouth wander across every inch of skin he can taste, finding the spots that make her gasp, make her hips buck up against his in a way that nearly ruins him.

His arms give out miserably. He collapses onto her breasts with zero grace. Plays it off like it’s intentional. Props himself on his forearms, nose brushing her cheek.

“You’re...” he tries, voice hoarse. “Perfect.”

How original. Still, it’s the only word he’s capable of. Everything else is lost.

His thrusts grow harder; deeper; desperate. His hips slap against hers and the pressure coils in his spine, intense and inescapable. But he knows he’s not alone—he can feel her tightening around him, breath stuttering.

The windows are completely fogged, the air thick with steam from their wet clothes and everything else.

“Look at me, love,” he pants, forehead pressed to hers.

She does. And it wrecks him.

He watches her fall apart—her mouth open in a broken cry, eyes dark and shining, her body trembling beneath his. Her walls clench around him, and that’s all it takes. His orgasm hits with violent force, and the sound he makes is more of a cry than a groan. Embarrassing. But he doesn’t care. He’s never felt anything like this.

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when it could all vanish overnight?”

The way she wears empathy—telling and open—it hits him square in the chest. Lovely, gentle soul, this witch.

“But then you walked into my office at St. Mungo’s.” She perks up slightly at that. “And I started to believe in something again. In caring.” He chuckles. “Mostly about you.”

He pinches her hip lightly, teasing, and the blush that colors her cheeks is worth everything he’s said so far.

“So congratulations,” he murmurs. His arms loop around her waist, anchoring her close. “You’ve saved me twice now. First from Azkaban... then from the walls I’d built around myself.”

Merlin, how disgustingly poetic. He’d make fun of himself if it weren’t actually true. But Hermione Granger loves words. And if there’s one person he can afford to get a little sentimental for, it’s her.

“All that to say,” he breathes, fingertips settling beneath her ears. “I’d miss you. Because I’d miss the slightly less awful version of myself that only exists when you’re near.”

Her fingers drift over his thighs, feather-light, and he barely resists the urge to purr. “What about all those women I saw you with?” she asks, trying for lightness but not quite managing. Her teeth sink into her bottom lip. “None of them caught the attention of this new and improved you?”

He smirks. Two can play.

His hands drop to her bum and he pulls her flush against him, both of them gasping.

“They were distractions,” he says darkly.

“From what?”

“You.” His voice is rough, mouth brushing hers. “Because I couldn’t have you then.”

She shifts, just enough to tilt her hips—and he swears under his breath. Wicked, wicked witch.

“Will you let me?” he whispers. “Have you?”

He forces his eyes to stay open, dreading her answer. A no from her might go down as the first recorded death by rejection in wizarding history.

Her eyes search his, and his heart stumbles. Just to make sure she understands—just to say it, finally.

“Because I’m in lo—”

She cuts him off with her mouth, crashing into him like the tide.

Merlin, he almost said it.

He’s in love with her. Has been, for far too long.

His fingers curl into her hair, guiding her head gently to the side as his lips trail along the line of her jaw.

“You liked a version of me that didn’t deserve it back then,” he whispers. “Let me love you now, and earn it, while you find your way back to me.”

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Her eyes widen—and then her breath stutters out, shoulders slumping like his words have erased something heavy she's been carrying for years. He doesn't want to presume, but if he had to guess, she probably hasn't had many chances to hear someone care about her. His chest tightens, remembering all the ways she's been discarded in the past.

She presses the heels of her hands to her eyes, trying to hide what he's sure are tears, especially with the way her shoulders start to tremble.

His fingers graze her shoulder, but without warning, she folds into him, forehead colliding with his chest. He gathers her in his lap, arms circling her tightly. Every tremble of her body vibrates through him.

He rocks her slowly, murmuring apologies into her hair, as the tide brushes gently against the rock beneath them.

Eventually, her crying fades into quiet breaths.

"Where's the box, Draco?"

Right. That.

Now probably wasn't the moment to mention he'd absolutely *demolished* her office looking for it—shredded the drawer so thoroughly the wards wouldn't even latch back on. And then, as predicted, the ginger menace had come sniffing around. Thankfully found nothing because of Draco's wit.

"Safe. Back at my flat," he says, still stroking her hair. "In case you ever need proof against Weasley... or Potter."

Or me, he thinks, because he can't help being dramatic even in moments like these.

She melts into him, humming like she's relieved.

Then she murmurs against his chest. The accidental friction reminds him, rather cruelly, that he's only in boxers—and thin cotton does absolutely nothing against *her*.

"What?" he manages, already halfway gone.

"You said you could fill a whole box of reasons you'd have missed me," she says, quiet and sly. "How about just one?"

"Ah," he breathes. Then, with a crooked smile she can't see. "You changed me."

She pulls back just enough to look up at him, questioning.

"Without you," he says, brushing a damp strand of hair from her forehead, "I'd probably go right back to being the shallow, miserable posh man I was before you walked into my lab."

"Why?"

"During the war," he says, a little too brightly for the weight of it, "I was convinced each day could be my last."

Granger's brow draws in like it's instinctual. She shifts slightly on his lap, sitting up straighter, like she's bracing for the rest.

"That feeling never really left," he goes on, quieter now. "I lived like it didn't matter. Like nothing lasted anyway." He huffs, irritated by how deeply that indifference had rooted itself. "Didn't care much about anything. Career, people, plans. What's the point

If's raw. It's overwhelming.
And it's hers.

At some point, they move to the bed, taking barely five minutes to unfold it, to hurriedly arrange the blankets that soon end up at the far end of the bed, collateral to the night they keep giving each other.

They can't stop touching. Can't stop seeking. Every time he thinks he's given her everything, spent in every sense of the word, her hands find him again and it's like she breathes him back to life.

They lose track of time. Of how many times. The only thing that exists is skin and heat and the quiet sound of her whispering his name. Plus the occasional '*Gud*', though he's fairly certain he deserves most of the credit.

By the time the first strands of light stretch across the ocean, passion gives way to something slower. Gentler. Her fingers trace along his spine. His hips press affectionately to her collarbone.

He finds the blankets again and cloaks them both into the warmth of it, into each other.

Outside, the waves hush against the shore. Inside, her breathing against his neck is the only sound that matters.

Sleep comes slowly, then all at once. Dreamless for him. Because nothing his mind could conjure would ever rival this—Hermione Granger, enveloped lovingly in his arms.

"I'm tempted to make you swear an Unbreakable Vow," Hermione glares at him, arms crossed, foot tapping.

"It was a joke," he snickers, grabbing her hand—because he can now, and he's absolutely abusing that privilege—as they head toward the boat. "I solemnly swear not to touch any Pearl Snidget." He even crosses his heart.

She exhales, unconvinced.

Granger woke up today with what could only describe as *a mission*. Which, tragically, did not include being naked on the beach. Or staying tangled up in the van. Or him being inside her in any way, shape, or position.

To be fair, they'd already been parked on the same beach for three days. The same beach that bore witness to their first—and second, third, and who's counting—round of very enthusiastic shagging. She really had picked a perfect, private spot. Frankly, they should buy the land.

This morning, however, she'd rolled away from him and announced they should get back on the road.

He'd countered with a compelling argument: pushing her into the bed and reminding her what else they could be doing instead.

She counter-countered with an equally persuasive shove and a productive plan for their day.

He should probably work on his negotiation strategy.

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So off they went—to the far side of Townsville, where a boat would take them to Magnetic Island.

According to Granger, Muggles had never dared approach the place, which made it an ideal location for the Pearl Snidget Sanctuary. Once a military base during World War II, the island had since been decommissioned. Rumors of nuclear testing had spread like wildfire. The founders of the Sanctuary, clearly not above opportunism, had seized on the myth and elaborated it, insisting even the soil was contaminated.

Now, aboard the boat with a handful of other magical folks—each of them practically glowing with the same eager, wide-eyed expression Hermione wore—Draco finds his hand resting on her thigh. Again. He's not even pretending to stop himself anymore.

Because ever since *that* night, the one that rewrote every synapse in his brain, he's made a troubling discovery about himself: he is, apparently, affectionate.

Revoltingly so.

He's never been like this. Not once. But Granger, of course, is the exception.

Even now, tugging her closer under the thin shade of the boat's canopy, he notes how odd it feels to be openly touching someone in public. They spent the morning walking through the magical quarter of Townsville—shops, streets, busy witches and wizards who didn't know who Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy were. Didn't bat an eye as an ex-Death Eater strolled hand in hand with Britain's golden girl.

And Draco decides he likes it. All of it. The anonymity. The hand on her leg. The soft weight of her leaning into him, eyes trained on the horizon.

They've built a small bubble around themselves and he doesn't want to pop it.

But alas, just when he thinks England can't possibly reach him, he hears it—that crisp, polished drawl of the motherland.

"Wasn't she with... oh, what was his name, darling?" a woman murmurs, in a voice meant to be discreet but carrying far too well.

Draco doesn't need to look; Hermione's body stiffens in his arms.

"He had an extremely forgettable name," the husband answers. "Arnold, maybe?"

"No, Donald?"

"Roland?"

Draco internally laughs at how Weasley is easily discarded out of the Golden *Trio* narrative.

"*Mum. Dad.*" A teenage girl beside them groans, clearly mortified. "You're embarrassing." Before she adds "And *FBI*, his name is *Ronald*."

"Ah, yes, Ronald," the mother nods sagely, scooting closer to her daughter, but still failing at the whispering thing. "Did you know they broke up?"

Hermione flinches ever so slightly but keeps her gaze fixed on the horizon, pretending to study the fast-approaching island.

"No," the teenager mutters.

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Fighting trained Death Eaters like it was nothing."

His smile fades slightly, thinking that his own father had a part in this.

"I pretended a friend had been admitted to St. Mungo's. Just so I could walk the corridor and maybe—maybe—see her."

She inhales sharply. "Really?"

He doesn't answer. Just turns to face her, one knee folded on the rock, the other dangling into the sea.

"And truly, the pinnacle of embarrassment," he says dryly, "was when she saw something in me worth testifying for. After being released from the Ministry, the first thing I did was run after her—only to have Potter tell me she'd gone to see her parents."

He exhales, eyes fixed on the water.

"I must have written ten letters. All versions of the same mess—half apology for being a shit, half thank-you for her testimony. And maybe—maybe—a vague invitation to coffee. Hoping it could be something more."

She stares, breath caught.

"But I burned them all."

"Why?" she breathes.

He turns toward her, not quite meeting her eyes. "Because none of them were good enough."

A pause. "Because I wasn't good enough."

"Draco, no—" she starts.

But he cuts her off, gentle but firm. "All this to say that I'm not sorry I saw your memories."

"Because without them, I would've never found you. That was the whole reason I broke into your office. I would've paid anything to get one hint of where you went."

He waits, chest tight, unsure if she's about to scream, cry, or push him down into the water.

"And when I found your box—" He continues, a sharp pang cutting through his chest. "When I read the note on it, I genuinely thought the worst."

A shiver runs down his spine, and he blames the fact that he's practically naked—not the chill of remembering her handwriting, that line that gutted him.

"No one will miss you, Granger?" he echoes, voice low. With a deliberate slowness, giving her every chance to pull away, he lifts a hand and gently touches her cheek, angling her face toward his. "Really?"

She draws in a small, shaky inhale.

"I don't regret it," he whispers. "Watching your memories. Because they led me to you."

His voice softens further, threading through the salt-heavy air. "And in case you're still wondering why I'm here, let me make it simple."

She barely blinks. Hanging on every word.

"I would have missed you. And I could give you an entire box of reasons why."

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"Put yourself in my shoes," she says, enunciating every word. "How would *you* feel if you'd been obsessing over a girl, only for *her* to be the one watching you pine like an idiot?"

He arches a brow, grin curling slow. "Is *that* the problem?"

His mind flickers with a half-formed idea. "If I were to disclose my own humiliating moments of moping over a certain girl... would that even be the score?"

She narrows her eyes, probably not believing he will go through with it. "Yes."

"Well then. I have *lads*," he says, kicking gently at the water before hauling himself onto the rock beside her. "Might as well get comfortable."

He pushes his wet hair back, adopting his most tragic storyteller expression.

"So. There was this girl. First year. I was instantly fascinated when she barged into my train compartment. From that moment on, all I wanted was to be her friend. But naturally, she got sorted into Gryffindor, our mortal enemies. Or so I was told. So instead of befriending her, I just... watched from afar."

Her brows draw together. She's probably wondering if he's talking about another girl—a Gryffindor she's never heard of. Consequences of years of distrust, if he had to guess.

"Nothing grand. Just small things. Like always sitting behind her in every shared class so I could watch her bounce in her seat whenever she knew the answer."

Her eyes widen a little, growing more suspicious.

"Come summer, I begged my parents to vacation in Marseille. Because the famous André Granger was rumored to live there."

She gasps, now fully confident that the girl is her. Good.

"I somehow blurted out that I wanted to run into his daughter on the street."

He shrugs, unapologetic.

"My father informed me, quite coldly, that Monsieur Granger had two sons. Then, I proceeded to destroy my bedroom in the most dramatic tantrum since being a toddler."

She drops her head, looking shameful. As if it was ever her fault—he's the one who jumped to conclusions, acted like a prat.

He leans back on his hands, squinting at the horizon.

"Fourth year. I was *done* with all that blood status crap. I had this elaborate plan to ask her to the Yule Ball—"

She gasps as color blooms across her cheekbones. He grins.

"—with a card I'd enchanted myself. Tap it and it would light up green for yes. It was *awful*."

"I found her in the library, card in hand... and some Bulgarian fuckwit was already kissing her hand and thanking her for saying yes."

She lets out a breathless laugh, one hand covering her mouth. He's glad she's amused because he remembers trashing his dorm that same night. Must be a pattern.

He keeps going. Because her laughter's worth the humiliation.

"Fifth year," he says, voice softer now, "I found out she got hurt at the Ministry."

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"That's Draco Malfoy, isn't it?" the father adds, and Draco finally turns to look at them.

His glare is enough to make them all sit back in their seats, suddenly remembering what subtle means.

"In the flesh," he drawls, voice silky.

"Sorry for prying," the mother says quickly, cheeks flushed with embarrassment—but her eyes sparkle with barely contained excitement. "It's not every day we meet celebrities from home."

The teen slumps in her seat, burying her face in her hands.

"Ronald," the teenager hisses without looking up.

"Right. Ronald."

He doesn't need a mirror to know what he must look like—smug grin, chest puffed, the proudest peacock in the flock. He can feel it settling across his face before he can stop it. And when Granger glances back at him, all she does is roll her eyes, clearly unimpressed by the show.

But he can't help it.

The first public mention of *them*—as a couple—has something light and fizzy bubbling up in his chest. Are they? Merlin, he hopes so. What if she doesn't see it the same way?

Then her fingers tighten around his in quiet reassurance, steadying his spiral before it even begins.

He's practically glowing with pride. As the boat lurches into dock, he slides his arm around her waist and presses a kiss to her hair; just because he can.

On the way off the boat, he tosses a glance over his shoulder at the nosy family.

"Thanks for noticing how lovely we look," he says, flashing a grin. "I also happen to agree that *Rufus* never deserved her."

"Ronald," the girl mutters under her breath as Draco and Hermione descend the ramp, leaving confusion in their wake. Hermione pinches his waist in silent criticism.

The small group of visitors gradually disperses, each choosing one of the winding paths branching into the sanctuary. Silently, they take the scenic one, tracing the island's cliffside—dense, tangled greenery on one side and the glittering expanse of turquoise sea on the other sunlight dancing across the surface.

"So," Draco starts, feigning casualness and failing miserably. "What do you think of... us, as a couple?"

She stops. And for five unbearable seconds, she just looks at him—quiet, thoughtful—and his heart sinks straight to his feet. He's pathetic. Too eager.

Then that mischievous smile curls on her lips, and his heart climbs back up to his chest, right where it belongs.

She takes his hands and steps closer, her eyes shining in the sunlight.

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"Draco Malfoy," she says solemnly, though her cheeks flush with quiet embarrassment, "thereby promote you from travel companion to... boyfriend?"

He doesn't know why she winced at the term. It might be the best word in existence, now that it's coming from her. Unless, someday, "husband" tops it. Or "wife." Honestly, he'll take anything that defines *them*.

"I accept the position," he says, grinning. "And just so you know, there's no taking it back. I'll sue you for wrongful termination."

She laughs and he leans in to kiss her, fully prepared to make it the kind of kiss that leaves her toes curling in her shoes.

But she shoves him lightly, eyes wide with delight. "Oh, look!"

He stumbles a step back and turns. Perched delicately on a low branch just ahead is a round, glimmering bird, feathers glinting like polished pearls in the sun.

He squints. "You're surprised to see a Pearl Snidget. In the *Pearl Snidget Sanctuary*?"

Her arm shoots out to swat him, but she's too enchanted to follow through properly. He steps closer too, silently admitting—even as he teases—that the creature is...

Larger than the European Golden Snidget, this one glows like a diamond tiara, its silvery feathers catching the light with every tiny movement.

Draco finds himself awed, if only for the fact that no one here would ever dream of chasing it on a broom for sport. The barbarism of 12th-century Europe—chasing Snidgets until they were nearly extinct, a practice that evolved into Quidditch—feels impossibly far away now.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" A woman steps out of the bushes. Likely a site agent, if the laminated badge around her neck is anything to go by.

Hermione lights up instantly, seizing the opportunity for answers. She's all sunshine and curiosity as she launches into a stream of questions. Draco lingers beside her, nodding along when required, but mostly watching her. The way her eyes glow, the way she tucks her hair behind her ear while listening.

"Would you like to hold him?" the agent offers, extending the Pearl Snidget.

Hermione's eyes widen with delight as she carefully accepts the small, round bird into her palms. "His feathers are so soft," she murmurs, stroking its back. "It's such a shame your government doesn't invest more in sanctuaries like this."

The agent sighs. "Tell me about it. They cut funding every year. We're probably the country with the most magical creatures needing protection, and the Ministry only funds three sanctuaries. There are a few private initiatives, but they're barely ethical—if not outright illegal—smuggling creatures overseas to rich investors."

Hermione nods, visibly dejected. So naturally, Draco adopts a matching frown of concern, because her moods are now contagious.

"What if?"

An idea festers in his mind. Slowly.

After touring around all day, they take the boat back to the mainland, then hop into

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the way back. But added bonus: he doesn't miss the way her gaze lingers just a second too long.

He dives in and in a few clean strokes, he reaches the boulder. He props his arms up, resting his chin on them.

The angle of the moonlight sketches her face in soft silver, and for a moment it steals the air from his lungs.

He pretends it's from the swim.

"So," he says, breathless for more than one reason. "Care to explain?" She exhales hard. That perfect mix of annoyance and deep humiliation. This is already promising.

"I walked out to the peninsula," she mutters, pointing vaguely behind her. He glances over his shoulder, which shows nothing but endless black sea.

"But by the time I came back, the tide was rising. I got stuck out here and barely made it to this rock before the path disappeared. And I forgot my wand in the van..."

He could laugh, because objectively, the situation is funny. But the image of her out here, alone in the dark, water lapping at every side, reminds him too much of fourth year. Of her, chained at the bottom of the Black Lake.

"I'll help you," he says, inching closer; arms outstretched on either side of her legs. "On one condition—you let me explain."

"I'll allow one minute."

"Ten."

"Two."

"Five."

She glares at him, then rolls her eyes with theatrical disdain. Five minutes it is.

"I'm sorry," he begins.

She immediately opens her mouth, ready to cut him off. "My five minutes pause every time you interrupt," he says, tutting her gently. She goes quiet.

"I was going to say that I apologize," Draco repeats, "but not for the reason you think. I'm sorry I waited too long to tell you I viewed your memories. At some point, it just... stopped making sense to admit it. You were starting to open up, and I thought I'd rather hear your story from *you* than from those memories."

He shrugs, jaw tight. "But that doesn't excuse me not telling you."

She presses her lips into a thin, unimpressed line.

"What I'm *not* sorry for," he continues, "is watching them—"

"Draco!" Her voice is sharp, furious. He lifts a hand.

"Please, let me finish," he says, quieter now.

"No." She cuts him off, stabbing a finger in his direction. "Do you have any idea how *mortifying* it is that *you* of all people saw them?"

"Why especially me?"

She huffs, crossing her arms like he's being deliberately thick. Her glare sharpens.

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He flings his arms in the air dramatically, channeling whatever occult nonsense he can.

His left hand lights up. *Lights up.*

Oh, Salazar. Maybe he's a Seer. His mother always suspected her aunt to be one—though she also claimed the woman could talk to inanimate objects, so.

But alas, it's just moonlight peaking through the trees, illuminating his hand.

Still, he takes it as a sign and veers left. The path is rockier, steeper. More dangerous.

Of course she'd pick the dramatic route, must be the right way.

Eventually, it ends—abruptly, anticlimactically—right at the sea.

And there she is, stretched out over the water; unmoving.

Floating in the distance like a siren, silhouette haloed by moonlight.

A guttural scream rips from his chest, "HERMIONE!"

He drops to his knees, no sand to cushion his fall. Just sharp rocks cutting into him. He gags for air; chest tight, world spinning

Mm. Mm. Mm.

And then, she wakes up.

Bolts upright on what is not, in fact, open water, but a flat rock just barely sticking out of the sea. Okay. Maybe he *should* get his eyes checked.

Or maybe not—because even from here, he can see it.

That glare. The *how dare you invade my privacy again* glare. But beneath it—something else. Relief?

Is he seeing that right?

"What are you doing over there?" he calls out. Now that he thinks about it, it's unlike her to go swimming in the open sea. Days ago she'd clung to him like the ocean might attack her. And—wait—her clothes are dry. How is that even possible?

He squints, reassessing. She looks embarrassed. His eyesight is bloody perfect, thank you very much, so no clue why he thought she was a drowned corpse floating in the water.

She's not speaking. Still pissed, clearly. Should he... tease her? Seems like the mature thing to do.

"Right, well. Seems you're alive." He waves breezily. "I'll leave you to your privacy then. See you at the van."

"Wait!"

Got you.

"Are you perhaps... stuck?" he grins, already savoring this. She mutters something inaudible.

"Sorry, what was that?" He cups a hand around his ear. "*YES!*" she bites out, jaw clenched.

He considers tormenting her a bit longer—but she's had a rough day. Mostly because of him. No need to add fuel to the bonfire of her hatred.

He strips down to his boxers. That way, he'll swim better, and it leaves dry clothes for

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the van and begin the long drive into what is essentially a vast expanse of bush and sand. The map loosely labels it "*the Outback*"—a region that covers 80% of Australia. A week passes in a blur of red rock deserts, dense woodlands, and dry grass plains.

They spend their days hiking trails and stumbling across wildlife. Draco finally understands why Muggles are so wary of the Outback. Every day feels like a near-death experience. At least from his perspective. Granger, of course, calls him a crybaby.

At least they have wands. Without them, he'd be hopeless. Sure, he enjoys fine dining, and yes, he's fond of garlic crab. But when the crab in question is the size of a toddler and climbing up your leg? That's not dinner. That's trauma. He thanks Merlin for the stunning charm.

So naturally, nights had to be less emotionally scarring—he argued that several times. And, Salazar, they *are*. He doesn't like to play the whiner card, but honestly, the payoff is excellent. Hermione kissing his bruises, wrapping him in warmth and soft attentiveness. All it takes is pointing out a particularly gruesome snake bite (non-venomous, she reassured him five separate times) and she's cooing "*poor baby*" and kissing it better like he's just survived a warzone. He knows she's being sarcastic, but he'll take it nonetheless.

But for all his dramatics, he doesn't miss the stars in her eyes. Every time they stumble upon a new magical creature, she lights up—not just with wonder, but with something fiercer. Protective joy. That kind of tenderness that makes him think she was always meant to care for things that no one else understands.

So he finally asks what's been on his mind.

"Why don't you open a refuge here?"

He's entirely serious, even if they're bouncing down a road that feels increasingly theoretical. It's raining, the windshield is half mud, and visibility is down to about five meters.

Hermione lets out a laugh so deep she clutches her stomach. Draco grabs the steering wheel instinctively—even though he has no idea how to drive—surmising that turning it slightly to the left might spare them a crash with the oncoming oversized chicken.

"An emu," Hermione gasps, righting them and taking the wheel back.

"So?" Draco insists, watching the enormous turkey galloping indignantly into the bush.

"Oh, you're serious."

"Deadly." He tosses the map onto the dashboard and replaces it with the far more satisfying placement of his hand on her thigh—right after they pass a road sign that reads *Uluru*—confirming they are on the right path. It's been one week officially that they are a couple, and every excuse is good for Draco to ascertain his affection.

"You said being a Healer was never your dream job. You always wanted to work with magical creatures."

She glances at him, and her playful expression gives way to something more

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thoughtful. Quiet.

He can already see it: some remote but charming refuge in the middle of nowhere, wild creatures roaming the grounds, Hermione absolutely glowing as she nurses a sick kneazle back to health.

And him? Funding the whole thing, obviously.

And watching her; mostly. A noble, selfless contribution to the magical ecosystem.

"I'll think about it," she says, distracted, her voice quieter than before. But there's something else—something colder. If he were the dramatic type (which he is), he'd say the temperature dropped several degrees.

He thought it had been a good idea.

The next hour drags by in silence. She doesn't seem angry. Just... distant. Like she's pulled some part of herself away.

Prepared to clarify this sudden shift, he clears his throat. "Grang—"

The van jolts violently as they hit a deep pothole. The front veers left, skids, then slides off the road into thick mud.

His arm flies across her chest in a protective instinct, but the seatbelt does most of the work.

"You okay?" he asks, jaw tight.

"Y-yes. Sorry." She sounds stunned. She tries to reverse, but the wheels spin. Forward—same thing.

"Tires are stuck," she mutters. "I'll dig us out. Can you find something to help with traction? A mat, cardboard—anything?"

She's already out the door.

What?

He follows immediately, wand ready to float the whole damn van back on the road.

He finds her crouched behind the back tire, hands caked in mud.

"Granger," he calls over the rain. "Stop. Let's just levitate—"

She moves to the front tire, and in a blink, she slips and crashes face-first into the mud, landing right at his feet.

Mud clings to her lashes, her hair.

She sits up, gasping for air, soaked through, her hands trembling in the mess. She wipes at her eyes blindly and she blinks through the mess.

The memory hits him like a speeding train. Second year. Her bleeding hands. His sneer. The shattered gift she'd brought him.

He drops to his knees in the mud without thinking.

"Granger—"

But she scrambles back, feet slipping.

He doesn't follow. Just kneels there, watching her recoil like he's still that boy. Fingers twitch in front of him, useless. It hurts, more than he'll ever admit. But he understands. She remembers too.

And it kills him—to be that memory. That threat. That ghost of who he used to be.

Chapter 9

By the time the sun sets, she still hasn't come back.

Draco's done pretending he's not worried. Done pretending he doesn't care. Every minute spent pacing around the van, eyes darting to the edge of the woods, heart leaping at the shape of a branch or shadow—it all ends the same. No Granger. Just bloody trees.

The beach is dead quiet. Nothing to distract him from the mounting dread. Just waves, wind, and the sound of his own spiraling thoughts.

Allright. Fuck this.

It's been three hours. Three hours of respecting her privacy, and he's had enough.

He heads straight for the woods.

There's only one path. At least, it doesn't leave him multiple options.

He casts a *Lumos*, the last streaks of sunset barely piercing the dense canopy overhead. Every few steps, he stops and shouts a very irritated, "Granger!" Only to be answered by silence.

Where the fuck is she?

The only thing keeping him from full-blown panic is the flat, single path stretching through the woods. At least, there's no cliffs, no hidden drops. No obvious danger—unless she decided to veer off the only safe track just to spite him. Which, honestly, sounds exactly like something she'd do.

His heart pounds in his chest, and he doesn't know if it's from the thirty-minute walk-jog-spiral or the mental image of her, once again, alone and lost.

"GRANGER!"

Okay. That one sounded slightly unhinged.

Then—a fork. One path dips toward the sea, the other deeper into the forest. He closes his eyes, trying to summon some kind of sign. Maybe his ancestors guidance. Or some bullshit divination. Anything.

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exactly share his thrill at their current proximity.

"Can you please just let me explain?" he asks, and Merlin, he didn't mean to sound that vulnerable.

"Explain what?" she snaps. "How you broke into my office and rifled through my memories like they were yours to take? Did you see all the protective wards and just assume they were decorative?"

"No!" he bites back. "I was worried. You disappeared. I didn't know where you were—I was trying to understand."

She doesn't soften. If anything, she looks more furious.

"Did you enjoy it, then?" Her voice drops, sharp and cold. "Watching the worst, most humiliating parts of my life? Did it make you feel good, seeing me like that?"

He flinches. Pathetic? That's not what he saw. Not even close. The only pathetic ones were the people—him included—who hurt her.

"Of course not."

Her expression twists. "All this time, you knew how I felt about you. I guess you got a good laugh when I confessed the other night."

Her cheeks flush at the memory, clearly mortified. It makes him ache.

He exhales hard and reaches out, cupping her jaw gently, trying to ground her, to show her. "Yes, I knew. But that's not—"

"Then tell me, Malfoy," she cuts in, his last name bitter. "Why did you come find me?"

He hesitates. Is this a trick question? Again?

"To see for yourself?" she presses, voice trembling. "To mock the pitiful girl who spent her childhood pining after you? To give me hope, then walk away like you always do?"

God, she's infuriating. How does she still not see it?

"I'll tell you one last time," he says, every trace of humor gone. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Good."

With a flick of her wand, he's slammed backward into his seat, shoulder hitting the door.

"Then you stay here, not going anywhere." she says flatly. "I'm going for a walk."

She opens the door. He's already bracing to follow—until she turns back, arms crossed tight, fingers rubbing at the inside of her elbow like it hurts.

"I need some time alone," Her voice now brittle. "Please. This time, respect my privacy."

She grabs her bag, shoves in a water bottle, and storms into the woods. Her ponytail snaps with fury as she disappears down the path—Draco sees it all in the rearview mirror.

He slams his fist into the seat, a useless, petty outburst. Salazar, why the hell did he wait so long to tell her?

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He sinks onto his ass, right in the mud, and just looks at her. Eyes wide, expression open. No masks. No pride. Just: *I'm here. I'm not leaving*.

Something shifts in her. She blinks, then crawls closer. They sit together in the rain, soaked, shivering, ridiculous.

If a car passed by, they'd look like complete lunatics—two idiots having a picnic in a puddle.

"I want to," she whispers.

The rain is deafening, but he hears her.

"I want to open a refuge," she says again, louder.

Joy blooms—but so does confusion.

She's on her haunches now, trembling as her voice begins shaking.

"But I-I...don't want to lose you," she says, lips wobbling.

And just like that, he understands everything.

Was he not clear? Did she really think he was asking her to open a refuge *alone*?

Apparently, she did. Because life had conditioned her to believe she had to do everything herself. That people leave. That *he* might leave.

"Marry me."

Her mouth falls open, but no words come out. No words to help him dig himself out of the crater he just buried himself into.

Marry me?

What in Salazar's name is wrong with him? Of all the things he could've said, that's what came out? Not that he thought hadn't crossed his mind—fuck, it even built its own home in his brain. Ever since he saw that god-awful ring on her finger after Weasley's proposal. It didn't suit her. *He* didn't suit her.

Draco could offer her so much more. But of course, it had remained just that: a thought. Because courage, historically, wasn't one of his shining traits.

She stands quickly, and he stays on his knees, which—*brilliant*. Now it really looks like a proposal.

All he's missing is a bloody ring.

"W-what?" she stammers, taking a step back, head shaking like she's trying to make sense of his words, which absolutely don't make sense after *one* week of officially being a couple.

He knows why he said it, though.

He rises too, crowding her gently, hands finding her hips and easing her back until she's flush against the van.

"Because you don't *listen* when I talk," he murmurs, half-scolding, half-pleading. The rain has lightened to a drizzle, though they're still drenched. His hair is plastered to his forehead in what he hopes is a windswept and effortless aesthetic.

"But I'll say it again, and again, for as long as it takes." He leans in, nose brushing hers. "I. Am. Not. Leaving. You." A smile pulls at his mouth. "Ever."

Her eyes are impossibly wide, threaded with disbelief. And hope.

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"And if what it takes to convince you is a forever promise, then yes—I'll marry you, Hermione Granger."

Right on cue, the clouds break. A single ray of sunlight cuts through the gray.

A *sign*, if you will.

"But if I open a refuge here... if I build a life here... you'll stay?" she asks, brows drawn, like it still doesn't make sense that he'd choose this as a path for his life. This place. *Her*.

He almost laughs. If only she knew—he'll always choose whatever path she walks on.

"I will," he promises. "I'll fund every sanctuary your bleeding heart desires."

She rolls her eyes. *There* it is. The Granger Look™ that means *I would rather die than accept your money*. That's fine. He has time to win that one.

"What about your life back home?" she asks quietly.

"What life?" he scoffs—and it hits harder than he meant it to. "I was a shell, wasting time. All I have there is Blaise, Theo, my mother—that's it. The rest is noise."

"Won't you miss them?"

"No. They'll visit. They're a Portkey away."

She watches him, like she's searching for cracks. But there are none.

She exhales. And with it, he sweeps the weight of the whole world leaves her shoulders.

"Okay," she says softly, gaze dropping. But he sees it—the twitch of a smile she's trying to hide.

"Okay?" he repeats.

"Okay."

Silence.

Then she flushes—gorgeous, blushing pink—and waves a hand, flustered.

"*Okay to opening a refuge with you!* Not to your weird, muddy, *impulsive* proposal!" she squeals, mortified.

He laughs, properly this time.

"Noted," he says, stepping in close, their soaked clothes squelching embarrassingly as he presses against her. His nose grazes her neck. "We'll call it a test run. For the day I really ask you."

He whispers against her temple. "Because I will."

She gasps, but he swallows the sound as he kisses her, warm and full and absolutely sure.

He grabs her beneath the thighs and lifts her easily, her legs locking around his waist. He slams her back against the van, not hard, but just enough to feel everything she's willing to give him. She's shaking, a little, but not from the cold. He knows, because so is he.

His mouth finds her neck and she tips her head, giving him more, just as her fingers tangle in his hair, pulling just enough to make him groan against her throat. His tongue trails along the wet curve of her neck, tasting rain, skin, and—yes—a rather

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He's not a killer. He couldn't do it when the Dark Lord ordered him to kill Dumbledore. He doesn't have it in him—that switch, that coldness. Not even for this.

So he lets go. But not before spitting in his face.

"Stay the fuck away from her," he snarls. Then, sweeter, tapping his cheek, "And be a dear—pick up the tab, will you?"

He turns to Granger—one of the many reasons he won't let Azkaban have him. But she's gone.

He sees her across the street, walking fast, head down, already halfway to the van. He runs after her.

"Granger, stop!"

She does three seconds of stillness, her back to him.

Then she opens the driver's door and climbs into the van. For a moment, Draco thinks she might actually leave him there. Just drive off and be done with him.

His chest caves in at the thought.

He doesn't risk it. He hurries over and slips into the passenger seat, relieved the door wasn't locked. She could've locked it. Frankly, she probably should have.

The silence inside is suffocating.

Her hands are clamped on the steering wheel, knuckles white, jaw clenched.

"Granger, I—"

"We should go." Her voice is flat. "Find somewhere to park for the night."

She starts the engine, fingers trembling around the key. When she shifts gears, he reaches for her hand, just to stop her, just for a second.

"Okay, but first let me—"

She smacks his hand away without looking at him.

"If you don't want me to crash this van," she says, voice tight and harsh, "Do not talk while I drive."

Fair enough. Emotions are running high—best to shut up for the rest of the drive.

Still, he wishes she'd let him speak. Let him say how sorry he is. He's messed up so many times, he's practically becoming a professional at apologies.

He's just putting the final, polished touches on his apology in his head when the van lurches to a stop. They've barely driven ten minutes, yet somehow she's found another perfect camping spot—white sand, sea breeze, woodland just a few steps away.

All right. Parked. Safe. Time to shine.

He turns in his seat, ready to launch into it—but Granger's already halfway out, hand on the door handle, clearly planning to dodge whatever heartfelt rubbish he's about to say.

Oh no. Not this time.

In a spectacular display of athleticism, he vaults over and slams the door shut before she can escape. She freezes, boxed in between his arms, one on the handle, the other braced against the back of her seat. Judging by the way she scowls at him, she doesn't

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What the hell is he on about now? Scratch that. No brain cells. None.

"Are you having a stroke?" Draco asks, all wide-eyed faux concern.

Weasley ignores him and turns to Granger.

"Your so-called box of memories."

Oh.

Fuck.

Fuck fuck fuck.

How did the ginger actually outwit him? He has no plan for this. Beside punching Weasley into unconsciousness. In a feeble attempt to derail what's coming, he grabs her hand. It's shaking.

She doesn't even look at him. Her attention is locked on Weasley.

"According to him," Weasley says, nodding at Draco like he's something scraped off a boot, "it shows Harry and me at our worst. After this git barged into our house and blamed me for everything that's wrong with you—"

Draco's thumb rubs slow, steady circles on the back of her hand. *There's nothing wrong with you, he wants to say. You're brilliant. You're everything* But he just glares at Weasley and stays quiet.

"So I went to your office to see it for myself. And shockingly, it was gone." Weasley turns back to him. "Does it even exist? Or did you take it?"

She snaps her hand out of Draco's grasp, and he instantly wants to take it back. But the look she gives him roots him to his chair. Her mouth opens, then closes—opens again, searching for words and finding none. Not that she needs any. The betrayal and disgust in her eyes say everything.

He wants to drop to his knees and beg her to forgive him. But he knows it won't matter. Not now.

She stands suddenly.
"Ron," she hisses, voice low and shaking with fury. "Don't contact me again. The next time we speak, it'll be in front of the Wizengamot."

She turns to leave.

But Weasley can't help himself. One last pathetic attempt. His hand clamps around her upper arm to stop her.

Draco's on him in an instant. He shoves the ginger's hand away and lands a solid punch to his jaw.

The café goes dead silent. Chairs scrape, someone gasps. Eyes are on them again, but Draco doesn't care. Not this time.

Is this it? The moment he finally kills the bastard?

Should he use his wand—or his hands? The Muggle way might earn him a spot in their justice system instead of Azkaban. And he's fairly sure a Muggle prison beats a soul-sucking slab of stone in the middle of the sea.

He grabs Weasley by the collar and slams him back over the table.
Who is he kidding?

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unfortunate amount of mud. Not that he cares.

They're outrageously filthy. In every sense of the word.

Just when he thinks it's impossible to get wetter or muddier, a wave of brown water splashes up and seaks them both anew. A loud honk follows, along with a shout from a passing car: "*Indecent!*" "*Get a room!*" and other helpful suggestions from the prude driver by choir.

Granger bursts out laughing and wriggles free of his grip, and though he lets her go, it's against every instinct in his body. They rinse off quickly under the van's pathetic exterior showerhead, both whispering the filthiest promises for later, when they're dry, alone, and *not* at risk of public indecency charges.

Back on the road, van gliding smoothly now thanks to a bit of Levitation, she opens her mouth. And while he's still basking in her wicked grin and expecting another salacious request, she delivers something far more sobering.

"I want you to owl Theo, Blaise, and your mother when we get to the next town," she says, voice gentle but firm. "Just to let them know you're alright."

He opens his mouth to argue—instinct, really—but the words die when she adds simply, "Because family and friendship matter. And they should be cared for."

He swallows hard, then nods.

The truth is, he does miss them. Seeing Granger's past didn't just teach him a hundred new things about her—it handed him a few hard-earned lessons of his own. When you're lucky enough to have honest friendship, a mother who's alive—unlike hers—you don't take that for granted. Or at least, you shouldn't.

And who knows, maybe they'll bring news from outside their bubble.

He might come to regret that thought.

Because bubbles are not eternal. No matter how perfect, they always burst, with the outside world holding the needle.

Psh.

KITTYBLUSH

Is he *for fucking real*? Draco's fist burns to punch him.

"No."

"No?"

"I said it once and I'll say it again." She stands, slow and deliberate, casting a shadow over the table. "You and I are over. I'm not coming back. Not for you, and *definitely* not for whatever delusions of grandeur people have about Harry, you and me."

"Be reasonable."

"I am."

And fuck. Draco has to squint his eyes as much as she's shining. The sunlight hits her cheek just right, red with fury, and her hair catches in the wind. She's terrifying. And breathtaking. He doubts he could admire anyone more. Something stirs deep inside him, something probably wildly inappropriate to feel in this moment.

"And I might not be wearing any Muggle device," she adds, her voice steady, "but for once, the wizarding world is actually ahead in terms of witness testimony." She smiles then—in a way that's both frightening and insanely attractive. "You know, in case I ever decide to file a formal complaint for domestic violence. Care to apologize for that?"

Draco watches Weasley's so-called back muscles tense.

"It'll be your word against mine," he sneers.

"Oh, that's where you're wrong," she chirps. "All I have to do is submit my memories for the Aurors to authenticate. Good thing I started that process a while ago. Every time you beat me, screamed at me, made me feel small—it's all there. And it will—" Weasley's on his feet, lunging toward her, his hand inching toward her throat—but Draco's faster. Quicker in terms of instincts, but not intellectually this time he regrets. He can see now Hermione's hand inside her bag, holding her hidden wand, having the situation well under control without his overprotectiveness coming to the rescue.

"What is *he* doing here?!" Weasley yells.

Every head in the café turns. A sharp, collective inhale.

And just like that, the three of them reach some unspoken agreement to *dit it down*. Draco releases his wrist. Hermione waves them down like she's scolding her children, face flushed with embarrassment.

They sit.

With a pointedly sly smile, Draco leans closer to Granger, his arm sliding across the back of her chair.

"Why is he here?" Weasley hisses again, his whisper somehow both nasal and shrill. Completely intolerable sound.

Granger starts to answer, then shuts her mouth and glances at Draco instead, brows raised, as if to say *you handle that*.

"Because," Draco answers for her, leaning in further, voice lazy and venom-sweet, "unlike you, I was actually worried. You just came for your own self-serving reasons."

"Ah," the wanker says, clearly aiming for clever but falling short. Must be his solo brain cell, giving its only performance of the day. "So you took it?"

Chapter III

His mother is the first to reply. She probably paid extra for premium delivery, judging by the imposing eagle owl circling overhead just as he and Granger finish a bottle of wine, the late-afternoon sun setting. Uluru ablaze in the distance. When she'd said the eight-hour drive was to see a giant rock, he'd been skeptical. Now, watching the sandstone light up like fire in the middle of a silent desert, he can find the appeal.

The owl lands neatly by Granger's feet. She immediately spoils it with treats and praise, cooing over what a *good boy* it is. *Who's a good boy?* *You.* *Ies* you. No, Draco is not jealous of a bloody eagle.

The bird drops a small parcel and a letter in Narcissa's usual immaculate script, the kind that makes even mundane things look aristocratic. She could pen the filthiest gossip, and still no one would take offence.

Inside the parcel, he finds a jar of cream and a note tied to the lid with a silver ribbon.

Created by your ancestors. Protect your porcelain skin, my dear. —Mother

He stares at it, unimpressed. Pity she hadn't sent it the first week, before the Australian sun roasted him like a bloody tomato.

In her letter, she invites him and Granger to the Black Pacific Villa, in New Zealand, where she apparently spends every March. That's news to him. He didn't even know they owned property near Australia. Then again, Narcissa's always been a jet-setter enigma. Not like him and Granger, actual adventurers, travelling through dirt, heat, and wildlife magical creatures.

As vague as he'd kept the first letter from Melbourne, the second he sent a few days ago had been more direct. He'd finally admitted it that he was with Hermione in Australia. *Together*. It was direct, but he hopes his mother can read between the lines. And she did. Narcissa is simply *ecstatic*. She claims she's known since first year, when he came back from Hogwarts moon-eyed and pleading to go to France. Unlike his

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thinking the same thing Draco is: that this so-called apology is utter rubbish.

“Like what?”

“You won’t even acknowledge it?”

Silence. Draco can’t see his face from here, just his shoulders and one twitching hand clenched into a fist. Predictable. She pushes a little, and he gets angry. Draco shifts forward slightly, eyes narrowing, prepared to intervene if needed.

Then Weasley speaks, his voice colder. “Do you have some kind of recording device?” “You know,” Weasley adds, bitterly, “like in that Muggle film you made me watch—trying to force a confession?”

“N-no,” she replies, half-stammering, half-mocking, like she can’t believe he went there.

“Look, I apologized.” Oh, did he? That’s what that was? “I even got a job, like you said I should. I’m working with George now and—”

Draco misses the rest because the waiter picks the worst possible moment to arrive.

“Here’s your fairy bread,” the man announces flat too cheerily, like he knows that Draco, virile and manly as he is, couldn’t possibly have ordered that.

Fairy bread.

Draco stares at the plate—triangles of white bread smothered in rainbow sprinkles—and wishes to hide under the table. Across the street, a ten-year-old snickers and elbows his mother, like even *he* is too old to touch that.

But he picks up a piece, bites into it—and nearly moans. Sweet Salazar. It’s divine. He scarf s the rest of the slice and tures back in.

“Come on, we could go back to how things were. Please. Let’s just be *us* again. Like before. Besides...” He chuckles weakly. “The winter gala’s in January. You know we have to be there. How’s it going to look if I show up alone?” And there it is. This wasn’t about missing her or caring for her well-being. This was about his own damn pride. About saving face in front of the wizarding community.

Draco wipes sprinkle residue from his mouth and reaches instinctively for his wand. “So let me get this straight,” Granger snaps. “You want me to come back so I can play the role of your girlfriend—”

“‘Fiancée,’ he mutters. “—just to parade me around and pretend everything’s perfect? Not because you actually give a damn about me?”

Draco could kiss her. She’s come so far since unsure girl he’d seen in her Hogwarts memories. Not that she wasn’t fiery little witch then—but this confidence, this absolute self-assurance? It makes him stash the wand and enjoy the show as she crushes the Weasel under her shoes.

“*I do* care, but I mean—” Weasley flounders, and Draco has to grit his teeth through the second-hand embarrassment. How truly humiliating for him. What a good day to be alive. “You don’t know what it’s been like since you left! People are asking questions. About where you are, what happened, and—you need to end this pity party.”

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father, Narcissa lit a torch for Granger. She practically shoved him toward Hermione after the trial where she testified on his behalf.

As for Theo and Blaise, they’d sent one co-signed letter between them—cheap bastards—which arrived after what Granger had called an *unproductive* morning. Her word, not his. He thought any morning that began with enthusiastic shagging in the back of the van couldn’t possibly be classed as a waste.

The letter was as snug as expected. Theo said he’d known all along. The moment Draco had mentioned he was “*on holiday*” he’d guessed Hermione was involved—*whatever* she happened to be. Blaise had apparently confirmed it two weeks later, when he’d failed to spot her at some Ministry ceremony awarding Potter yet another bullshit medal for—

“What?” Granger shrieks, snatching the parchment out of his hands.

So much for peaceful mornings. Her head had been resting on his chest as he’d been reading the letter aloud, her fingers tracing idle circles on his ribs. Then Potter had ruined it, as usual.

“I was getting to that,” he says with a smirk. “If you’d let me finish.”

He reaches for the parchment, but she’s already sat up, scanning the letter anxiously. Her teeth catch on her thumb, as her guilt leaks in.

That won’t do.

He hooks an arm around her waist and pulls her back onto his lap, the parchment falling forgotten onto the bed.

“Harry found Dolohov,” she murmurs, eyes still fixed somewhere else. “He received this year’s Medal for Exceptional Capture.”

Draco scoffs. *Exceptional Capture?* What an absolute farce this is. The Ministry would give Potter a standing ovation for tying his shoelaces. Catching Death Eaters was literally in any Auror job’s description, why would he need an award for that?

“I should’ve been—”

He doesn’t let her finish. His fingers slip under her chin and tilt her face down to his. “No, you shouldn’t have,” he says, voice low.

“But—”

“I’ll let you in on a secret,” he cuts in, voice complicit. “Potter is bloody useless at his job. Half the time it’s Blaise or one of the other competent ones doing the real work, and Potter just swoops in at the end to make the arrests and be praised for it.”

“Really?” she asks, genuinely surprised.

The fact that she still values someone as inept as Potter makes him want to pin her down and list every single mission Blaise had ever complained about. One by one. “Yes,” he says flatly. His hand drifts along her bare thighs, the loose hem of her t-shirt barely skimming the tops. “Tell me this. When was the last time Potter showed up to one of *your* ceremonies?”

She hesitates.

“When you cracked the long-term effects of the Cruciatu s?” he presses. “Or when

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you invented that diagnostic spell—the one that lets Healers see through the skull to have an image of the brain?" He watches her face. "Exactly."

"I never saw him," Draco adds.

Her eyes flick to his, uncertain. "You were there?"
Hermione Granger.

And it was the simple truth.

Other Healers in St. Mungos had received honours—although far less than her, and much less prestigious—but he only ever showed up for hers. Always at the back, trying to go unnoticed.

He never wanted to miss her taking the stage, all awkward, accepting her medal or certificate with that same reserve. But then, as she climbed down the stains, her mouth would quirk up at the corners, just a little, like she'd finally allowed herself to feel proud. He showed up for that smile, subtle and unguarded. As if, just for a moment, she saw herself the way he sees her.

But now...she looks at him like *he* should be the one getting the bloody medal.

"It's basic decency, Granger," he says, voice dry. "That's what normal people do. They show up. They care."

Her eyes snap shut.

He hates this part. The reminder. That what she's lived through, what she's accepted as friendship, isn't normal.

"You deserved better than those two gits," he says, gently brushing his palm against her cheek. "And the fact that you still turned out to be *you*, brilliant, terrifying, kind, it's a miracle."

He watches her, thinking how long she's lived like this. Building her life out of scraps. Patching together safety out of people who didn't stay. Friends who were never truly there when it counted.

She built herself a house out of paper. Fragile, thin, never meant to hold up against the wind. And yet she stood inside it, year after year, shivering in the cold, still believing it was home.

No wonder she flinches at kindness. No wonder she never asks to be kept.
"I will build you a home made out of bricks," he murmurs. "To keep you warm from now on."

He's absurdly proud of that line.

In fact, he's practically *pinning* now. It's a bloody excellent metaphor.

But she doesn't swoon. Doesn't even blink.

Which is, frankly, rude—though in fairness, she wasn't *in his head* for the brilliant build-up, so maybe she didn't quite grasp the full impact of what just happened here.
Fine.

He sighs and shifts gears, resorting to simpler terms.
"You have me now," he adds plainly. "I'll stay by your side and hold your hand while

Now thoroughly incognito, he fast-walks to the café and slides into the table just behind them. From here, he gets a full view of Granger's pretty face and only the back of Weasley's oversized ginger head. Perfect.

His disguise must not have been as inconspicuous as he thought because the moment he sits down, she clocks him. Her eyes narrow. She rolls them in exasperation. Thankfully, it happens just as the waiter is taking Weasley's order; so the git doesn't notice their interaction.

"Uh—I'll have what she's having," Weasley mumbles, clearly defeated by the Muggle menu. What a complete idiot.

"An iced cappuccino, please," she says, voice polite, though the glare she shoots Weasley could freeze the entire café. Draco hopes she keeps that icy composure for the whole exchange. It's all the git deserves.

The waiter leaves, and immediately Weasley reaches for her hand. Draco's halfway out of his seat, chair legs shrieking against stone—apparently as subtle as his bucket intrepid hat—but Granger's eyes flick toward him and narrow severely: *Don't you dare*.

He sits back. Reluctantly. And is rewarded by the sight of her smacking Weasley's hands away.

"Ron, we're over," she snaps. "I don't think my letter could have been any clearer."

"Mione, please—"

Draco physically recoils. The nickname makes his skin crawl.
"I came all this way," the weasel continues, tone exuding entitlement. "The least you could do is listen."

What a self-centered moron.

"Spare me, Ronald," she scoffs. "You took a portkey for five minutes. Then a three-minute walk from the terminal. Let's not pretend you took an airplane." Weasley deflates, his shoulders sagging. Whether it's from annoyance or embarrassment, Draco doesn't care.

"Okay. You're right," he mutters. Defeat, then. "But please—just let me speak."

She waves her hand dismissively, as though granting an audience to a peasant on the street.

"During your absence, I...realized a few things."

What a revelation, Draco wasn't aware Weasley *could* realize things.

The waiter returns with their drinks and veers toward Draco. Caught off guard, Draco hides behind the menu like a twelve-year-old and points his finger at a random item. The waiter's eyes widen as if Draco ordered something unusual, then just shrugs, and scribbles the order without comment, before leaving.

"...I wasn't a good partner," The fuckwit is saying. "I was short-tempered because I lost my Quidditch career, and—I took it out on you. That wasn't fair. I'm sorry."

What a lackluster apology—if it even counts as one. Did he somehow miss the part where he apologizes for the *violence*?
"Is there anything else you want to apologize for?" Granger's tone confirms she's

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"Try me."

"I want him to know I could ruin him," she says quietly. "I want him to fear the possibility. Even if I never go through with it."

His grin is immediate and, frankly, idiotic.

"Keep talking."

"I'm not ready—not sure I ever will be—to drag it all to the Wizengamot. But I want him to *know* I could. At any time."

Brilliant, terrifying woman.

He wraps his arms around her bent legs and rests his chin on her knees, gazing up at her like she's the cleverest thing he's ever seen. Which, to be fair, she is.

"Letting him stew in the threat," he murmurs. "You vicious, wonderful woman."

She raises an eyebrow. It might actually work to his advantage. Saves him a trip and gives him a chance to murder the bastard. Or something slightly less illegal.

He grins. "I like it. Let him watch the axe dangle every day for the rest of his life. Might drive him mad faster than the bloody thing actually falling."

"Exactly."

So they've somehow compromised on Draco staying behind in the van. Well, not exactly a compromise per say. Draco suggested sitting right beside her at the café table. She ordered him to stay behind in the van.

Apparently, his presence would "only make things worse" if Weasley saw him. As if Weasley needed help being a flaming disaster.

They'd argued about it all the way to Townsville, the nearest city with an international Portkey terminal. Draco pointed out—repeatedly—that she was making this far too convenient for the Weasle. She didn't disagree, exactly. But she also pointed out that Townsville housed one of the largest wizarding communities in the country, and she'd always been curious to see it.

Plus, one of her parents had taken a photo here, once. So now here he is, sulking in the van like an abandoned puppy, while Granger crosses the street. At least she had the decency to crack a window for him.

He watches her enter the café and take a seat on the terrace—clever girl—choosing a table just in his line of sight.

If she thinks that means he won't storm out the second things look off, she clearly misjudged him.

Weasley shows up a few minutes later and takes the seat across from her. Draco squints, analyzing every twitch of the git's face for signs of menace and finds...none. Clearly because Draco's across the bloody street and can barely see anything.

That won't do. Sod the plan.

He rummages through the van until he finds a khaki bucket hat with an adjustable drawcord, which he knots beneath his chin. Must've belonged to her mother. The colour clashes horribly with his porcelain complexion, but it'll have to do.

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you realize that someone like you deserves everything."

Frankly, he doubted he'd ever hear those words come out of her mouth. He wished. Salazar, he *hoped*. But he knew better. People like her—people who'd been left behind, again and again—don't give their hearts away so easily. Not after learning how to pick up the pieces on their own.

So when she says it—

"I love you."

—he wishes, truly, that she'd given him some kind of warning. Just five seconds to fix his face or tilt his head into a more flattering angle. Because the expression he's making now? Absolutely does *not* do his bone structure justice.

He stares, jaw slack, every ounce of elegance gone.

"You mean that?" he croaks.

Salazar, could he sound more pathetic?

"It's not a sudden realization, Draco." Her smile is just teasing enough that he doesn't take it personally. "I've always known. I just couldn't admit it out loud. I was scared that..."

"I'd leave," he finishes for her, throat tight.

"But you didn't. You proved that, again and again." Her hands slide behind his neck, fingertips warm and careful as they stroke along the edge of his skin. "I love you. Since the first train ride. I tried everything to stop it, but I never could."

She'd admitted to liking him once. Maybe even hinted at never quite stopping. But *love?*

That word makes his entire chest contract. It makes every cruel thing he ever said to her feel more tragic. Like he'd been stomping through something delicate he didn't know was sacred.

But that's the past. And he'll spend the rest of his life undoing it, piece by piece.

He rises onto his knees, pulling her up with him, then gently presses her back down, pinning her beneath him, caging her in his embrace.

"Never stop," he whispers.

Then he kisses her, hungry. He swallows everything she gives him, every breathless moan, every desperate sound that trembles against his lips.

Everything except those three little words.

Damn him for being so disgustingly mushy, but he craves to hear them again. Needs them. Wants them.

He begs for them as he sinks into her, burying himself in her love. Her love for him, only for him.

And he doesn't stop saying them either. He tells her he loves her every chance he gets.

It's the first thing out of his mouth when they wake up.

When they're on the road, winding through the desert in their mobile home.

When she ticks off another location from the list of places her parents visited, her

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face lighting up as she holds a photograph next to the exact view in front of them.

But never so often that the words lose meaning. He guards them just enough to make them special every time. Still, it's an effort not to shout it from the bloody van's window every time she looks at him.

The *only* time he doesn't feel like saying it is during their charming run-ins with the local wildlife. Hermione insists on petting every magical creature that barrels their way, while ridiculing him for casting what he calls entirely reasonable protective spells.

And his feelings become equal parts deep affection and *absolutely not*, when she plants her hands on her hips, stares into the sun-scorched emptiness of the Outback, and declares:

"This is it. This is where we should build the refuge."

He stares at her.

He looks around at the literal nothing.

And he thinks: *I love you. I hate it here. But I love you.*

It's going to be hell.

He can't wait.

The next month turns out to be the hardest he's ever worked in his life. Not that it means much: his personal bar for effort is embarrassingly low.

Still, even Granger starts to look tired at one point, which is saying something. But the thrill of the project coming to life seems to act as some kind of magical stimulant. She's practically glowing from it. He doesn't even complain anymore when she shakes him awake in the middle of the night, eyes wild, to ramble about a new idea she just had to write down before it vanished.

She even agrees to let him fund the entire thing.

Technically, she thinks her modest deposit of galleons is enough to cover her half, because she insisted they be fifty-fifty partners. *Partners*. He's been hung up on that word ever since. A new term to define their relationship—maure, permanent, all grown-up sounding.

He blocked out the rest of the conversation. Something about joint ownership and equal financial contribution. She even made him sign a legal document. But fortunately for him, he'd grown up in a household where even tea preferences came with a confidentiality clause. He knows exactly how to make it *look* like he's complying. So when he suggests hiring the old family Magi-Architect—Mr. Shapino—to design the refuge, he *might* have implied that the man would offer them a heavily discounted rate, out of long-standing loyalty to the Malfoys.

Which is technically true. If you consider charging slightly less than *obscene* as a discount.

He also tells her they'll get materials at half-price through a Malfoy Ltd. subsidiary. That part is a complete lie. But if she's going to insist on splitting everything down the middle, the least he can do is cheat gracefully.

Chapter 8

"Absolutely not."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she snaps, rifling through her bag. "I didn't realize you were my keeper."

She slam a piece of parchment and a quill onto the dinner table in quiet frustration. Rain batters the van windows—fitting, really. The sky's having a breakdown right alongside him as Granger prepares to open a love letter to her abusive ex-boyfriend.

"After everything he did to you, the bruises, do you seriously think I'm going to let you schedule tea with him?" He pushes to his feet, promptly whacking his head on the van's cursedly low ceiling. He hisses through clenched teeth, then leans forward dramatically, both hands flat on the table like he's about to interrogate a criminal.

It does absolutely nothing.

She turns her glare on him. "*Let me!* I'm a grown witch, Draco. I can handle myself."

And just like that, the mouth that gave him the single greatest kiss of his life last night is now used solely for reprimanding him. Somehow, that doesn't stop it from being stupidly endearing.

Fine. New strategy.

He sits down beside her, gently curling his fingers around her writing hand. "You don't owe him anything," he says, his thumb tracing over her knuckles. With his other hand, he tucks a loose curl behind her ear.

That earns him a pause.

"I know."

"Then why?"

She exhales, eyes falling shut for a second. "Call it closure. I want to look him in the eye and say it's over. That I'm not coming back." She huffs a laugh, soft and bitter. "You're going to think it's ridiculous."

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How thick is he?

As she walks toward him, the herd of screaming goats finally goes quiet and her footsteps echo in the sudden silence.

Weasley tries to cling to whatever composure he has left, but the slight tremble in his hands, clutching at his trousers, gives him away. Potter, ever the clueless hero, is already on his feet, reaching for Granger in some vague attempt to—well, jury's out on that one. Draco has no idea what he's aiming for. But she smacks his hand aside without hesitation, and Potter flinches, startled.

"Can we talk?" Potter attempts once more, his voice barely audible to the general mass.

"I tried to reach you, but—" Granger's laugh rings through the Atrium.

"Did you?" Her voice carries more than his, showing no hint of shame at having their conversation heard by everyone. "Because I never got a single letter. Not one."

"You were on the other side of the globe, I couldn't—"

"But you didn't know that at first." She cuts in. "And owls are famously known to be able to travel long distances. They always find their recipient. So if you'd written, I would have gotten it. Simple maths."

Potter's mouth snaps shut, clearly unprepared for a rebuttal. He glances sheepishly at the audience.

Salazar. His witch is completely savage, Draco is completely enraptured by her every word. He wipes the corner of his mouth...is he *slobbering*?

Granger doesn't wait for more. Like she's done with Potter wasting her time.

She turns on her heel and walks toward her next target: Weasley.

"I told you once," she says, a finger pointed at the redhead, voice calm but laced with promising danger. "That if I ever filed a complaint against you, all I'd need to do was submit my memories to the Auror Department."

A collective gasp sucks the air from the room at the mere mention of the Aurors—because where there's an Auror, there's usually a culprit. Let's hope the herd can do 1+1=2.

"So, I did." Her voice drips with malice, and Draco sees the familiar purse of her lips, as she readies herself to launch in swot mode.

"And, as you might know, once authenticated and confirmed as legitimate by the Aurors, those memories become public record at the Registry. Like any other piece of evidence used before the Wizengamot."

"Unfortunate, really." She lifts her shoulders in a delicate shrug, all innocence and cool detachment. But then she leans in, just a breath away from Weasley, and Draco feels as much jealousy as much as he feels pride. He hates how close she is to him, but he loves the fire blazing in her eyes.

"Now the entire country gets to see what you did to me."

The herd goes crazy and mayhem once more surges through the Atrium, no shepherd

in sight.

It's hard to tell if the disarray is from Granger's revelation, or the arrival of five imposing figures striding into the room, Auror robes billowing behind them, just like their Potions professor used to.

At their head, Blaise steps onto the stage. He narrows in on Weasley, all business and no fun.

"Ronald Billius Weasley, you're under arrest for the following charges toward the person of Hermione Jean Granger: assault, aggravated assault, assault with a wand, assault causing bodily harm, unlawful use of offensive spells, and uttering death threats." Blaise lists, reading out from a small parchment. "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say—not already submitted via memory under the *Authentication Pergie Act for Better Justice*—may be used as evidence before the Wizengamot.

You have the right to refuse the administration of Veritaserum or be subjected to Legilimency.

Any attempt to flee or use magic will result in—"

The words keep spilling from Blaise's mouth while complete havoc brews in the background. But Draco only has eyes for his witch. His perfect, ferocious witch. She did it. She fucking did it.

Granger spins on her heel and beams at him. Not the small, polite smile she wore every time she accepted some award for being a mind-healer prodigy. No. This one is different. This one holds the pride of a woman who finally broke free of the weight she's been carrying for years.

That same weight—the dumb, infuriating, utterly brainless weight—that is now trying to hex her while her back is turned. Coward.

In a room full of Aurors.

Not on his watch. Not ever.

As Weasley raises his wand, Draco leaps onto the stage. In less than a second, he's dragging Granger behind him, shielding her from whatever curse the ginger twat has on his lips. His heart hunches.

That was completely unnecessary and a bit too dramatic, because Weasley is disarmed by the Aurors in the same breath—but that's beside the point. Now Draco gets to say the line he's always wanted to spit at him. And the whole world.

"Don't touch my *wife*," he snarls, still holding Granger behind him, just to make absolutely sure the threat is gone. And, if he's being honest, just to feel her body flush against his. Her warmth. Her breath. The solid proof that she's safe.

So close, he doesn't miss the hiss she lets out as she steps around him to glare.

Ah.

Right.

Technically *not* his wife. Not even his fiancée. Not yet.

Just a minor detail. No need to split hairs over it.

He just wanted to say it once.

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Once, in front of the people who exploited her brilliance and kindness.
In front of Potter, no longer a friend, who sits frozen, watching it all unfold with that same dazed expression he often wears.

Once, in front of her ex-fiancé, now being hauled away by Aurors, limbs flailing, dignity long gone.

Draco watches as the red-head disappears into the crowd, swallowed by a sea of snapping cameras and shouted questions.

Once, in front of the journalists and gawking nobodies, all of them turning back now, their attention shifting

To Draco.

To Hermione.

To the couple at the center of the storm, gazing at each other.

Draco gives her a smile. Apologetic. (But not really, because she *will* be his wife someday.)

She rolls her eyes—and kisses him anyway.

The flashes go off like fireworks.

That picture will be on every front page by morning.

But it doesn't matter. None of it matters.

Because he only needed to say it once, here—in Britain, before they go back.

Home.

To Australia.

The commotion in the Aurum builds, voices overlapping until only fragments jumble all together.

“It’s Hermione Granger!”

“Merlin, that’s *really* her!”

“She’s back.”

“If that’s her, is that...”

“Could it be?”

As if to clear up any remaining confusion—and not at all for the sake of pissing him off—Theo conjures a bucket out of thin air, casts *Agamenti*, and tips it neatly over Draco’s head.

Now he’s drenched. Fantastic.

Judging by the way his white shirt is turning a blotchy sort of grey-black, he assumes his hair’s reverted to its usual color too. Lovely.

“No, it isn’t him.”

“He looks like he’s been living on the streets.”

“Why does he look so...orange?”

Bloody Granger and her fake tanning cream.

Out of the corner of his eye, he catches the guilty witch stifling a grin as she casts a drying spell—and something else he doesn’t recognize, probably to wipe out the cream.

“Oh, it is *him!*”

“It’s Draco Malfoy!”

With the storm of camera flashes hitting him like thunder, he’s fairly certain he’s now returned to his default setting: irritatingly photogenic.

But this isn’t about him and his good looks.

This is about *her*. This is about her revenge.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Granger steps onto the stage—toward Weasley, who still hasn’t moved a bloody inch. Honestly. Not even a second escape attempt?

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Weasley gulps, as if he momentarily forgot about the real purpose of the memories. Apparently, once a coward, always a coward.

Because Weasley now bolts to his feet. An escape attempt so poorly executed it might just be the worst Draco’s ever witnessed.

The chair beside Draco scrapes back sharply as Hermione stands. In one motion, she trips off her glasses and her wig, and that glorious mess of curls he likes far too much cascades down her back.

“Don’t you *fucking* move, Ronald Weasley,” she snaps, wand pointed at the poor excuse of a man.

Fuck that bossy tone of hers. It always stirs something deep within him, so much so that Draco’s a bit piqued that it’s not directed at him this time.

The crowd explodes into chaos. Journalists shouting, cameras flashing, a full frenzy trying to capture the moment when the “fallen” expat Golden Girl makes her dramatic return.

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she did.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Theo says, pressing a hand to his chest with mock sincerity, "since the Registry Office holds public records, I thought it was widely known." A pause. "It's a box containing Hermione Granger's memories. Verified and authenticated."

Draco's eyes had already locked on Weasley, fully aware of what was coming. He watches with quiet satisfaction as the blood drains from the girl's face, even his freckles seeming to fade from panic.

Because even with the two braincells he possesses, he must know exactly what those memories entail and what they mean for him once they're out in the open.

"Just to name a few entries that suggest Mrs. Granger did *not*, in fact, play a secondary role," Theo begins, now pacing with his hands clasped behind his back. "I'll spare you the exhaustive list of times she saved Mr. Potter's life," Theo says with a dismissive wave of his hand—before diving in anyway. "Like that time in the Black Lake during the Triwizard Tournament, when she saved him from drowning... after he left her there to do exactly that, might I add."

A collective shudder moves through the crowd, contrasting with Granger's own aura of annoyance aimed at Theo for praising her heroism.

Potter stares at the floor, his eyes flicking side to side, as if searching the depths of his memory for a moment that clearly never registered. The time he left Granger in the middle of the Black Lake.

"No Potter. No victory," Theo sums up. "Because let's not forget that Potter *had* to survive until all other Horcruxes were gone. And that happened thanks to Mrs. Granger's intellect, as she was the *only* one who figured out how to destroy them in the first place."

He stops mid-step, cocking his head thoughtfully. A dramatic pause, entirely calculated.

"Oh! And half of said Horcruxes?" A smile. "Found by Granger herself, as evidenced in her memories."

Granger struggles to stay still beside him, visibly uncomfortable. The poor humble witch had refused to let them use her memories to highlight the truth she still can't quite accept. But no one could have predicted how far today's circus would go in reducing her to a footnote. So Draco's bloody grateful for Theo's tangent, even if he'll probably get an earful from her later.

"We found the other half!" Weasley barks suddenly, face blotchy. How humiliating for him.

"Yes, you did—what a *good boy*!" Theo praises, as he would acknowledge a Labrador fetching his newspaper. "I saw in the memories that you helped locate exactly *two* of the seven Horcruxes. Not bad. Not exactly 'half', but still—fetch well done."

Weasley's jaw snaps shut, lips flattening into a furious line.
"Although," Theo continues. "Since you're so eager to claim half-credit, do you know what else accounts for half of Mrs. Granger's memories?"

The sanctuary had been built in a day, more or less. Credit went to the Magic Architect's directions. Theo's creative flair, Blaise's stamina, Granger's tireless bossing, and Draco's general oversight—along with a steady stream of pragmatic remarks that were met with mild enthusiasm. A shame, really.

They had the skeleton of a functional sanctuary by sunset, with an empty house they'll call home someday, beside it. But it took additional months to bring both to life. Still, every bit of effort was worth it when Draco watched Hermione plant the new sign into the hard ground. The pride and joy on her face was something he knew he'd remember for a long time.

The Outback Haven for Magical Creatures

Since then, the Haven gradually expanded, mostly due to the growing number of magical creatures they were able to bring back, but also because of the human resources they eventually needed. As much as Granger was a smart ass, even she didn't know every detail about caring for some of the more exotic creatures they rescued. So, thanks to Draco's creative thinking and a lot of convincing, Hermione finally agreed to let him open his own potions lab onsite. But she made him promise to use only naturally harvested ingredients from their residents. *Self-replenishing*, if you will. Nothing that could hurt them.

Duh—he was not a sadist.

So that meant he was allowed to take Jean-Claude's eggs near the lagoon they'd magically built. Jean-Claude was their first resident at the Haven and probably Draco's favorite. Muggles knew him as the mythic Bunyip, supposedly a terrifying manatee-like monster; bulldog-headed that hunts mostly women and children. But Jean-Claude was anything but scary, and that's precisely how he ended up in their care. The poor fella couldn't hurt a soul if his life depended on it. So he was rejected by his more spooky and so-called friends. The ladies weren't fond of his whole non-threatening vibe, so Jean-Claude was unfortunately single without a mate. Sad for him, really. Although, for Draco, that meant he could collect his unfertilized eggs.

Because yes, Bunyip males were the ones producing eggs and females fertilizing them—a weird exception. Although...Jean-Claude might be Jeanne-Claudia? It would explain a lot.

Draco could also collect Sabrina's shed skin—the rainbow serpent resident—which allowed him to brew a far superior version of Polyjuice Potion. More long-lasting, tastier, and with an appealing colorful shimmering tint.

Chapter K

WHY NO ONE WILL MISS ME

Then there was Roger. The Drop Bear.

Yes. The same animal that was supposedly a hoax made up by Australian locals as a joke to scare tourists—said to only attack foreigners. A predatory and cannibalistic version of the koala.

Which was what Granger thought Roger was after finding him half-fried under a tree after a lightning strike. When she nursed him back to health, she naively thought she could pet him and bring him back where they'd found him. Too bad that he was actually what the Australian magical government had expressly told them to never release, under any circumstances, into the general population.

So yeah, Roger also became a permanent resident.

Lucky for Draco and his line of wit-sharpening potions, which required Roger's fallen fur. He was not stupid enough to pull it directly off the beast. He wasn't even brave enough to approach him a ten-foot pole.

So with those ingredients, his ethically sourced potions quickly became a hot commodity in the wizarding world, and with that money they were able to hire employees. Not that they needed the money, but at least, now that they had a steady influx of income, he no longer had to make creative accounting in the books to hide all the Galleons he'd invested in the business...

At some point, they even transferred all their Gringotts vaults to Australia which, thanks to the sheer size of the country compared to Britain, had been forced to modernize their banking system. Because, you see, they'd installed self-service cabins that allowed witches and wizards to withdraw money without a single goblin in sight. Honestly, genius. Magic really—

“It’s just an ATM, Draco!”

Granger had shouted it directly in his ear, inflamed, as he marveled inside the little cabana spitting out Galleons. Apparently, Muggles had figured this one out decades ago.

Aside from that first trip to Gringotts, they'd only returned to Britain twice. Not because travel was difficult, especially since they'd set up an International Floo connection, but simply because there was no good reason to go back.

The first reason had been mandatory: a summons from the Wizengamot. Honestly Draco had been looking forward to it. There was just something truly satisfying about watching Weasley squirm in the magically-bound chair at the centre of Courtroom Ten while the prosecutor walked the judges through every horrific detail pulled straight from Granger's memories.

The courtroom had been packed, and Draco felt an overdose of satisfaction each time the crowd reacted. As gasps and murmurs of outrage echoed against the dark walls of the room, all of it clearly on her side. Granger, beside him, had started to melt with relief the longer it went on, tension slowly bleeding out of her spine as the public voiced its rage on her behalf.

And once again, it gutted him—how unfamiliar support was to her. Such a basic and

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Draco starts to rise again, to hex the smirk off his hideous face, to bash his bloody head into the podium, but his legs don't move. Or rather, they can't. He glances down and then sideways—Hermione's hand is just retreating into her pantsuit pocket.

The witch stupefied him.

He glares, but she only laces her fingers through his, the simple touch disarming him more effectively than any spell. She's calm. Too calm. And then she trades a brief glance with Theo.

Right. The plan. They have to stick to the fucking plan.

A different reporter speaks up. “Mr. Potter, do you share that opinion?”

“Um...” Potter's voice wavers. Merlin, does he ever sound sure of anything? “It's always been a collective effort. No one should be seen as more important than the others.”

Theo steps up again, sonorous charm passed back to him by the coordinator.

“So how do you explain, then,” Theo asks, polite. “That in this painting, you're placed so prominently if no one should be seen as more important?”

“If—I had no control over the composition,” Potter stammers, red creeping up his neck. “It wasn't... I didn't ask for it—”

“Yes or no, Mr. Potter,” Theo presses, voice assertive. “*Would the Light have prevailed without Hermione Granger?*”

Weasley shoots him a look, clearly encouraging him to say yes. Potter hesitates. “Well, because everyone had a role—”

“Yes,” Theo interrupts, “or no.”

“Not one person—”

“Yes. Or no.”

“Yes!” Potter snaps, and Weasley grins like the idiot he is. “Yes, I don't think she made that much of a difference.”

A strained silence falls over the Atrium.

Theo tilts his head. “Mmnn. Interesting,” he drawls. “Because I have it on good authority that if not for Hermione Granger, we'd be commemorating a far darker milestone today.

Like the fifth anniversary of the Dark Lord's reign.”

The silence stretches. Potter goes even paler, and Weasley's jaw drops open like a stunned goldfish circling a bowl.

A high-pitched scrape of a chair against marble resonates.

“On whose authority?” Romilda Vane stands, speaking directly to Theo, entirely bypassing the press coordinator.

“The Registry Office,” Theo replies, as if it were the most obvious answer in the world. “A box was submitted earlier this morning.”

Yes. Yes, yes. This is finally it. The plan. With a few detours, maybe—but still their plan all along.

“What box?” Vane snaps, looking thoroughly pissed that someone got a scoop before

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Before he can speak, Kingsley steps forward, laying a firm hand on the man's shoulder and guiding him gently back into his seat.

"It's well known that Mrs. Granger has choose to move abroad," Kingsley answers instead, his tone slightly patronizing. "So, since she made herself unavailable, we declined to—"

"So you didn't even try?" Theo cuts in, calm but direct. "You didn't owl her. You didn't attempt contact at all?"

A low ripple of murmurs stirs through the crowd. Confusion, and something close to discontent. What a flock of cockatoos, really. Flashy, noisy, and incapable of original thought. They just mimic whatever tune is sung to them. Only now, as Theo leads them by the beak toward the truth, do they start to croak like something might be wrong.

Kingsley shifts his weight, both hands raised in a placating gesture. "Recent information has come to light," he says, voice carefully modulated. "Her contribution was supportive, but ultimately secondary to that of Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley."

Hermione's hand flies to her mouth, and Draco is too stunned to even pull it back onto his lap. Not stunned—no. More like slowly combusting with rage. Even with all the insight they had about what the ceremony was about, the message behind it was a surprise.

Draco nearly lunges to his feet. His whole body is vibrating. How many more times will this community find new ways to erase her? To take and twist and devalue the very years she gave them?

Theo leans forward again, mouth parting—but before he can speak, another voice rings out.

"Bianca Everlast, *With Weekly*." The journalist rises, flashing her credentials. "Minster, are you at liberty to disclose the name of the source who provided this 'recent' information?"

Kingsley casts a glance behind him, and by his expression alone, Draco knows exactly who gave the Ministry their so-called "recent information."

Potter and Weasley.

Of course. Because why the fuck not.

Weasley stands, taking the offer of Kingsley to explain what is certainly a moronic explanation. "As the media has shown over the last few months, Hermione isn't who she pretended to be." The gingerfuck shows not an ounce of discomfort—lying about the woman he once claimed to love. "And this goes all the way back to our time at Hogwarts. She lied to the public, to the press... about key moments leading to the victory, and about her role in it."

That's it. Draco is on the edge of his seat, a hex already formed deep in his throat. He's one second from burning the whole stage to the ground—until Theo subtly yanks him back, and Hermione shakes her head once, a warning. "And we've let her," Weasley continues. "Because she's our friend. But we can't support her choices anymore."

human thing.

Mercifully, Granger hadn't needed to testify. She just had to stand—something she did so beautifully and proudly—and swore the memories were true and unaltered. A simple streamlined process thanks to the *Authentication Pensive Act for Better Justice*.

Sadly, Weasley failed to comprehend the most basic things. The idiot was still whining about setups and tampered memories, even as the verdict was read and the Aurors dragged him out by the arms.

Guilty on all counts.

Seven years in Azkaban.

But, Draco would have locked him up for life, just for daring to touch his witch.

The other reason they had to go back was for the book signing of Theo's newest bestseller, *The True Heroine*. A revised account of their Hogwarts years—and beyond—but this time with the real story, and the true central character.

Granger hadn't been sure at first. Scratch that—she'd been vehemently opposed. But when the next step of their revenge plan required Blaise to review her memories in order to file a formal complaint against Weasley, she agreed that Theo could watch them too, because by this point, the three were friends so it was only fair she said.

But ever since Theo pulled his head out of the Pensieve, he'd been a dog with a bone. Claimed he'd never heard—well, *seen*—a more compelling narrative in his life. Told her the world deserved to know. Sending Weasley to Azkaban had only been half the long game. The other half was publishing her story—making everyone see the lie that was Potter and Weasley.

So, one evening—over a barbecue on their new patio, celebrating the final piece of furniture finally making their house livable—Theo read her the first chapter aloud. She'd been spellbound. Well-written words were basically Granger's version of foreplay, which worked out beautifully for two people that night. First, Theo, securing her blessing to write the story. And second, Draco, because Theo's prose had her bouncing eagerly on him all night in their brand-new sheets.

She was a bit less enthusiastic—read here, completely aghast—when she saw the book's title printed on the cover page: *The True Heroine*. Her modesty could truly be detrimental sometimes.

Unfortunately for her, Theo informed her the publisher wouldn't budge. Thank Salazar. Because, let's be honest, she was the true heroine.

And now here they are—Theo, Granger, and him—lined up at a table, people queuing around the store for autographs.

The signing is held at Flourish and Blotts and the place is packed. Not that it's remotely surprising since it has been a bestseller for weeks, especially after Theo handed out copies to every journalist at the now-infamous unveiling of the painting at the Ministry. Once Weasley's arrest made the front page, and people caught wind of Nott's new exposé on Granger, *The True Heroine* went backorder for weeks.

Still, despite the success, Granger hadn't warmed to the attention. Not fully. Theo

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practically got on his knees to convince her to show up to the signing. Said people would want her autograph too, since, you know, she was literally the subject of the bloody book. He couldn't show up without the *star*, now could he...
She kicked him in the shin.

But she agreed—on one condition. Draco has to sit beside her, since apparently, he is her “co-star”.

Because yes, Draco has his own section in there. The past where he terrorized his now girlfriend—he winces just thinking about it. Theo even offered to cut a few details “as a courtesy,” but Draco refused. Let it all be known. Let the world see how much of a real bully he used to be.

Because he doesn’t need to read the book to know that the “co-stars” got their happy ending. And frankly, he’d take any amount of public shaming if this is how the book ends.

Oddly enough, Draco didn’t become public enemy number one. This honor fell upon Potter and Weasley. Apparently, everyone loves an enemies-to-lovers story, so Granger and him became the darling couple of Britain.

So yeah, Draco agreed to be paraded around at the book signing, if that’s what it takes to get Granger there, soaking in the kind of love she should’ve had all along. What neither of them expects is the line of familiar faces. Former classmates, queuing up with books in hand and something like remorse in their eyes.

First is Longbottom, whose lingering gaze with Theo makes Draco call complete bullshit on the whole *we’re just friends now* story. Please. He *knows* this book; he’s an expert in it. Sure, it might have taken him several years to act on it, but still.

Then, there’s Lovegood, and a bunch of Gryffindors whose names he can’t remember. They all promise Granger to visit her at the Haven, something that Draco feels immediate resentment for. They have never been there for her and now they want to visit? Screw them, screw everyone who now suddenly remembers that Hermione Granger is worth their time.

But when she beams at them, genuinely excited, Draco can’t help it. He melts.

It reminds him of that memory, the one where five-year-old Hermione sat waiting at her birthday party.

Only this time, her friends actually show up.

But from now on, Draco’s watching and he makes it his personal mission to send a Howler to any of those so-called friends who should fail to show up at the Haven after promising it.

After hours of buzzing activity, the silence feels oddly weird once they sign the last book. It makes the soft chime of the door sound even louder as it closes, just in time for the last Gryffindor Draco ever expected to see here to walk in.

Because in non-fiction, the villain rarely makes an appearance at the bloody book signing, does he?

Harry Potter stands in the flesh, right in front of their table. Clearly, being the pariah

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And then, fading into the background, stands Hermione. Pushed back, nearly forgotten—her gaze fixed toward the boys. Watching them. Like they are the center of her universe, and she, just a supporting character in their story.

The contrast is stark—Potter and Weasley, alive and sentient in the painting, moving due to the enchantments—while she remains frozen. Still. Blended into the background like the rocks at her feet.

They shouldn’t be surprised. Theo had warned them. He’d even told them the exact dates Potter and Weasley had been asked to sit for their enchanted portraits, while she hadn’t even been contacted.

Not that she would’ve gone. But still. Now seeing it, painted in vivid colors, the oversight makes Draco’s blood simmer. She shouldn’t be background noise. Hermione Granger should be *the* scene. The center. The only thing that matters in this bloody painting.

The crowd is in a frenzy, journalists on their feet, cameras flashing, quills scribbling every heroic angle as Potter and Weasley pose proudly beside the painting. No one sees a problem with it.

And that’s what angers Draco. Not just the lies or the audacity to change history. It’s the ignorance that follows. The way the Atrium settles, reverent and eager, as the official question period begins. Which should really be renamed the Ministry’s Bootlicking Hour.

Freedom of the press, his arse. Every so-called journalist seems desperate for a quote about how this *work of art* truly captures the boldness of Potter and Weasley.

Then—thank Salazar—Theo winks.

He leans forward and whispers, “*Show time,*” before standing and flashing his press credentials to the media coordinator. The man gives a curt nod and gestures him to stand.

“Theodore Nott, *Daily Prophet*,” Theo announces smoothly. “My question is for Mr. Allister.” He smiles, picture of professionalism. “Of the three subjects depicted in your work, only two appear to be enchanted. Can you walk us through your decision-making process? Specifically, how you came to exclude Hermione Granger from having her portrait made sentient just like the two others?”

The painter stiffens. His eyes dart to Kingsley.

“Um—” He clears his throat, fumbling. “I was told Mrs. Granger declined to have her portrait taken...”

Draco feels her hand tighten around his, the tension radiating off her in waves of silent fury. He presses his thumb into slow, calming circles along her knuckles, though it does little for either of them.

“Who exactly gave you this information?” Theo follows up.

The painter looks down at him with an expression that hovers somewhere between arrogance and disdain. Clearly, Mr. Allister would have preferred a question about artistic technique—or any form of praise, really.

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Draco watched it happen with something dangerously close to pride. Real friendship, effortless and loud and loyal—what she always deserved. She fit with them. *She belonged.* Like she finally knew she mattered.

Hopefully, after today, the two niwiris currently stepping onto the stage to thunderous applause wouldn't even be worth a footnote in her story.

Potter gives a modest wave, all half-smile and faux humility. At least he has the decency to look vaguely uncomfortable with his own popularity.

Weasley, the absolute wanker that he is, does not. Both arms in the air like he's headlining the bloody event. What a tool.

Beside him, Granger lets out a subtle scoff. Draco reaches for her hand, lacing their fingers together. A silent reminder to breathe. To wait.

Let the fuckwit bask in it—all the applause, all the fame. He won't have it much longer. Not after today.

"Witches and Wizards, thank you for joining us!" Kingsley Shacklebolt's voice booms through the Atrium, bolstered by Sonorus.

Draco tunes out the rest, a dull retelling of the events that led to the fall of the Dark Lord's regime—and that, involuntary, had been his side. He tries not to think about that part.

His focus is on Granger, who's slowly having a meltdown beside him.

Her leg starts bouncing. He clamps a hand over her thigh. Then she's biting her nails, so he grabs that hand and plants it firmly on his lap. The other hand starts clawing at her wig. He sighs and catches that one too.

"Can you tell her I've got this under control?" Theo mutters beside him.

Draco slides his hand up to the back of her neck and leans in. "Love, you've got to relax."

She snaps her head toward him, eyes flashing. "When has telling someone to relax ever actually worked in the history of anything?"

He rolls his eyes. *Touché.*

"For the fifth anniversary, we believed it was long overdue to immortalize our young heroes," the Minister of Magic announces, voice booming with pride. "So, without further ado..." He gestures grandly toward the towering canvas hidden behind thick velvet fabric. "Let me present to you *Let the Light Prevail*, by Joshua Allister."

With a flick of his wand, the fabric drops.

The massive painting rises into the air, under the *Avwo's* and the *Olli's* of the crowd. It depicts the entrance to Hogwarts Castle, rubble scattered across the stone floor, smoke curling through the air. And there—front and center—stands Potter. Wand raised to the sky, chin tilted just so, all glory and bravery.

Beside him, Weasley. And for a moment, Draco almost didn't recognize him. Ah. Must be because he wasn't painted as the picture of cowardice he usually is, but instead in a nauseating heroic kind of way. The scrambled eggs he had for breakfast swirl in his stomach. This look doesn't suit someone like Weasley, *at all*.

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of British wizarding society hasn't done him any favor. He almost sincerely suggests that he borrows Granger's fake tan cream. Orange would suit him better than whatever vampire gaunt aesthetic he's going for right now.

Potter clutches a copy of *The True Hermione*, eyes fixed on the floor. For a second, Draco actually wonders if he's here for an autograph.

He clears his throat. Repeatedly. And the irritating sound only grows louder in the now silent shop.

"Can..." He bows his head, shifting from foot to foot. "Can we talk, Hermione?"

Then, as if just realizing that Theo and Draco were staring at him, with judgement and disgust on both of their faces, he adds, "Outside?"

Draco doesn't miss a beat.

"Here. Where I can see."

"Draco," Hermione snaps, clearly displeased. They often have this debate. Where she sees unbearable control issues (once eloquently phrased as *'stop behaving like a Neanderthal'*), he only sees kindhearted protectiveness. But he doesn't care for her sensibilities right now. There's no way he lets Potter drag her off somewhere. For all Draco knows, the prat is out for revenge.

"Where I can see you," he repeats firmly.

Still not well received, judging by the glare she shots him.

Maybe he should've tried that reverse psychology trick they use on some of the creatures at the refuge. *Oh yes, please, by all means, go have a heart-to-heart with the man whose fame you obliterated.*

"You're impossible," she mutters as she stands, Potter trailing after her.

Then she steps farther away, slipping between two stacks—but still within his line of sight.

Good girl.

Tonight, Draco will make sure she's properly rewarded for good behavior. Positive reinforcement, one of the more effective techniques they picked up at the sanctuary. Patricia the Eruptpent could be a real menace if left unchecked. One polite behavior earns her a treat.

And both of his girls have a particular fondness for whipped cream.

Where Patricia inhales the entire bowl the moment it touches the ground, Granger has no interest in even tasting it—leaving Draco the singular delight of licking it off her bare skin.

Bless them both.

Draco and Theo watch them like hawks, wands tight in hand. They don't even bother pretending not to eavesdrop. The conversation looks tense, though Draco doesn't catch anything overtly threatening in Potter's posture. If anything, if he really squints, there might even be a tear sliding down the git's face.

The audacity.

At least Granger doesn't offer him an ounce of comfort. Just crosses her arms in mild

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discomfort at this display of emotions.

A few minutes later, she walks back over and drops into the seat beside Draco without a word.

"You okay?" Draco asks, as Potter exits the shop with one last, lingering look over his shoulder.

She gives a short nod toward what used to be her friend—or thought so. A barely-there smile, but he sees it.

"Yes," she finally says. And he believes her. As much as she perfected the art of concealing emotion over years of emotional neglect, Draco now knows when she's bluffing.

"He apologized. Sincerely, apologized. Said the book made him realize things he never saw."

That's where Weasley and Potter are different. As much as Weasley was deliberately cruel, hurting her on purpose, Potter's flaws came from willful ignorance. His inability to really see the people around him. Maybe if he'd figured out sooner that the world doesn't revolve around him, he might've noticed her pain.

"So." Draco raises a brow. "Should we expect a visit from our remorseful ex-hero at the Haven any time soon?"

"No." She smiles, although her eyes are a bit glassy. "It's over."

Her answer is final. Like whatever story existed between Potter and her has reached its last word. No last page left to write. No sequel.

And as the years would prove, they wouldn't see each other again for a very long time.

Their story really was over.

Time to make a new one.

A few months later.

The place is as serene as it was the first time they visited, almost one year ago.

In Loving Memory of

Richard Granger and Jean Anderson

Loved and remembered by their daughter

Until We Meet Again, Our Darling Girl

Draco watches Granger from a distance as she kneels before the tombstone, chatting with her parents about something he can't quite make out. She's smiling, content, and that's all that matters.

She stands, flicks her wand, and a crown of dahlias settles gently atop the stone. When she walks back toward him, still snickering, it's like she's having some private joke between her and the dead.

"What's so funny?" he asks, sliding a single freesia behind her ear—the one he bought from the flower vendor by the cemetery gate.

"Just told them they'd never believe half the things I've talked you into since the last

so *beautifully*.

Especially when, just last night, she sat him down, snapped on a pair of gloves with terrifyingly sexy resolve, and began massaging the dye into his hair. Whatever retort he had ready promptly died on his tongue. Her fingers were moving *very* sinfully through his scalp, and every time she leaned forward to reach the back, her breasts pressed against his face. She could've dyed it neon pink, and he wouldn't have cared.

So now, Draco has raven-black hair that clashes *horribly* with the fake-tan-orange cream she also insisted on testing.

The things he wouldn't do for this woman.

"Mrs. and Mr. McFart," Theo greets as he drops into the seat beside them, not even trying to hide his smirk.

Not the nicknames they had agreed on. He'd explicitly told Theo : Mrs. and Mr. Black. A shameful attempt in pretending to be a married couple just for an hour, using his mother's name. The twat can't follow simple instructions.

As he glares at Theo, Draco feels bitter that he didn't need a disguise. Unlike them, he's not being hunted down by every journalist in the country. Probably because he is the media—freelancing now and then for the *Daily Prophet*, not to mention being the darling of Britain as a best-selling author.

Smug bastard.

Right on cue at 4 PM sharp, an irritating string melody begins to echo through the Ministry Aurum, signaling the start of what sounds like a highly pompous ceremony.

For the fifth anniversary marking the end of the Second Wizarding War, multiple events are being organized over the summer to celebrate the victory. And, as in all previous years, the Ministry's highly unsurprising PR strategy means yet another round of honoring the Golden Trio.

Draco has never been a fan of the ordeal, except for the curly'brunette part of the trio, which is the only reason he ever showed up to these things in the past. But this time, it's different.

Thanks to Theo and his talent for gossip, he owed them the moment he got wind of what the Ministry was planning for this event.

From that moment, a task force was created: Granger, Theo, Blaise, and himself. United by one noble purpose: getting revenge for *his* girl. Well, *their* girl. Because yes, Theo and Blaise felt particularly protective of the witch after hearing her story and, like every Slytherin, they had a strong urge to defend their own too.

As the months passed since the refuge was built, a proper friendship had taken root between the three of them. And ever since they installed an International Floo connection at the refuge—which, for the record, wasn't even that expensive if Granger ever got around to asking—his two best mates had become a near-permanent fixture as they prepared the refuge's opening. Laughing, teasing, conspiring with her as if they'd always been part of the same orbit.

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Meanwhile, as the summer starts in Britain.

Had London always looked so downright demoralizing? Or was Draco just used to living under the sun now?

He never considered himself the kind of person affected by weather, but here he is—scowling at the rain for the fifth day in a row, which also happens to be the total number of days they've been back to their native country.

If all goes to plan, he and Granger will be gone tomorrow, portkeyed back under the bright Australian sky. Even if it's winter there, it's still a bloody desert where they live. He'll take fifteen dry degrees over this soggy hellhole any day.

Beside him, Hermione is attempting to flatten her frizzy hair with a defeated sigh.

"Has it always been this humid?" she groans.

He's just about to make a very tasteful joke about her hair—one that would have made her roll her eyes with affection, probably—when the door they're leaning against swings open without warning. He barely manages to grab her before she faceplants directly into a puddle.

"Why would you block the entrance I explicitly told you to wait by?" Blaise deadpans as he gestures them inside.

They offer no excuse. Mostly because they don't have one.

The three of them cram into what appears to be an absurdly narrow pantry. Blaise pulls on a fraying bit of rope overhead, and gravity ceases to matter. They lurch upward, landing in the concealed back corridor of the Auror Department in the Ministry of Magic.

Because they can't risk being seen. Not yet.

Not with the mob of journalists starting to swarm the main Ministry entrance.

Draco and Hermione manage to score front row seats to what they sincerely hope will be a spectacular downfall. The seats behind them begin to fill, and journalists drift through the crowd, blissfully unaware that the disgraced golden girl and her Death Eater partner are sitting right under their noses.

All thanks to Granger and her clever idea: Muggle disguises.

She's currently the picture of polished, unapproachable elegance. The dark brown wig—with long bangs that shadow half her beautiful face—is paired with oversized red statement glasses and matching lipstick. The black pantsuit she's wearing screams high-fashion and haughty.

He loathes it.

He misses the wild curls and the barely-there Muggle shorts. The tank tops that highlight her sun-kissed skin. That warm, unfiltered bohemian feel.

Everything he wasn't raised with. Everything he wants now.

As for him—Granger had begged to use him as her guinea pig for something she called *temporary hair dye*.

Apparently, his hair was "practically bleached"—whatever that was supposed to mean. Supposedly, it rinses off after one shampoo. *Supposedly*. And hopefully.

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time we were here." Her arms circle his waist, her chin resting on his chest. She smirks up at him, proud. "Definitely not the same prat they met."

Definitely.

The prath her parents met in that bookshop back in second year wouldn't have lasted two hours in a campervan across Australia. He wouldn't have sacrificed hot showers or a predictable sleep schedule. He certainly wouldn't have spent out what could only be called a small fortune—emphasis on *small*! If Granger asks—to build a magical creature sanctuary in the middle of nowhere.

Cheers to progress.

Because if he'd stayed that version of himself, he never would've ended up here, with *her*. And he would've missed the best thing that ever happened to him.

He presses a soft kiss on the top of her hair, before guiding them away toward the mint van parked at the entrance.

They were just coming back from Kangaroo Island. The final photo of her parents had been taken there, and now she and Draco had officially retraced every one of their steps. She tucked the picture into the folder with the rest, eyes a little wet, and that's when he suggested a small detour to Melbourne. So she could tell them the good news.

It turned out not to be a small detour at all. But really—what's seven hours out of a twenty-hour trip back to the sanctuary?

They were so used to drive crazy distances, that seven hours was just a normal ride. They spent most of their time at the sanctuary, first setting it up and then managing it. But they'd kept travelling. Little road trips here and there. Nostalgia, mostly. Sometimes just ticking off another spot from one of her parents' photographs.

And even with that list complete, Draco knows they're far from done. Because they still have to tour the whole bloody country, searching for whatever pack of wild creatures is in dire need of being saved by Granger and brought back to the sanctuary.

But he wouldn't trade this life for any other.

And he's about to make damn sure Granger knows it too.

"After you." He opens the passenger door, like the gentleman that he is and then slides behind the driving wheels.

Oh yes. Because Draco is now officially authorized to drive, having finally passed his exam (third time's the charm—and still a win in his book). There's just something incredibly virile about chauffeuring his girlfriend instead of the other way around. Granger called him a vile sexist when he admitted his real reason for getting his license.

Since then, they've fought over who gets to drive the van.

Lucky she didn't argue this time—Draco has a whole plan and needed to be in the driver's seat.

"Draco!" she exclaims. "I said right!"

He doesn't answer. Being insulted for still not knowing his right from his left sounds like sweet music in his ears—a nostalgic reminder of their early road trip days, a year ago. Her panic fades into the background.

WHY NO ONE WILL MISS ME

"If I touch your thigh, it means right!
"Window means left."

"Draco!"

"Are you even listening?"

"How many times do I have to—",

"What are you doing?"

"Why aren't you turning?"

"Where are we going?"

He needs to be the one driving because he fully intended to turn left, despite the hand gripping his thigh so tightly.

He brakes, pulling over to the side of the road.

"Draco, what—" She stops mid-sentence as she takes in the view out the window. "Since we've completed your parent's photograph's tour," Draco grins, unbuckling his seatbelt, "I thought it only fitting to come back to the place that inspired it all."

He gets out of the van, and seeing she's still glued to the passenger seat, walks around and opens her door.

That does the trick. She looks up at him, still blinking like she's trying to process the view, and takes the hand he offers.

"It all started here." She breathes in astonishment as they walk up toward the cliff overlooking the iconic rock formations—the Twelve Apostles—standing proudly as the waves crash on them. The same place where she made up her mind about her impromptu travel plans. Plans which, at the time, did not include him. How rude.

"To think you hesitated in having me as your travel buddy."

"It didn't make sense." She scrunches her nose in that maddeningly adorable way she always does. "Still, doesn't sometimes."

He knows exactly what she means, because he gets the same insecurities sometimes. How the two of them ended up in this beautiful, if slightly unhinged, life together doesn't always compute.

"But you said yes," he smirks.

"I did."

And fuck. Here it comes.

He'd managed to shove down the creeping nerves about why he brought her here. But now he's nervous. Like *sweat-dripping-from-absurd-places* nervous. He didn't know it was humanly possible to sweat from the tops of his knees, but here are two puddles showing it is in fact possible.

What if—no. *Get a grip.* It's not like it's a novel concept. He has hinted at the idea before. Multiple times.

He exhales slowly, takes both her hands. His palms are clammy. Brilliant. And then he kneels.

"Think you... can give me another yes?"

She covers her mouth, stunned. He has no idea if it's real or if she's acting. Honestly,

Chapter 12

A simple blue box.

Meant to contain every painful memory and leave it in the past. To end the cycle—forget, forgive, suffer.

Close the box. Always remember: *no one will miss me.*

A box meant for her. Only her.

But—

When the past refuses to stay where it belongs, when it makes a mess of her life all over again...

Then surely, the box can be opened again.

She won't forget. She won't forgive. And this time—oh this time? *Others* will suffer. They say revenge is best served cold. Lucky for her; winter has just started in the southern hemisphere.

WHY NO ONE WILL MISS ME

"And by the time we arranged the trip to come here," Blaise adds, piling on, "the story had already been relayed in all the major publications."

Granger doesn't react. She just stares into the fire like it might hold all the answers.

Draco turns on his heel and crouches in front of her. The flames are close enough to scorch through his shirt, but he doesn't give a damn. He wraps his hands around her thighs, grounding her.

"What do you want to do?" he asks, and it's enough to pull her back. She smiles, then tugs him beside her on the bench.

"For now?" She summons the elf-wine bottle and refills her glass. "I want to enjoy this campfire with you and your friends."

They all stare at her like she's about to lose it. Honestly, who could blame her. Draco himself is clinging to sanity by a thin thread.

She places the bottle back on the ground, then summons a new one—replacing the Firewhisky Draco shattered in the flames—and floats it over each of their glasses to refill them.

"And then tomorrow, we'll welcome Mr. Shapiro and follow every one of his instructions to spell this refuge into shape."

They gape at her.

"That's it?" Draco asks with a little bit of resentment, not at her per say, but he's just trying to wrap his head around doing *nothing*. Like for example, committing murder.

"No." She hides her smile behind the rim of her glass, a smile that makes him shiver in anticipation. "I just want us to have the refuge ready as quickly as possible." Her grin widens into something beautifully unhinged. "Because once we light a match to everything back there, we'll need somewhere peaceful to watch it all burn."

Salazar have mercy... could he possibly be more in love with this terrifying witch?

"So if losing my way means I end up here, with you." His fingers close around the velvetbox in his pocket. "Then let's get lost together for the rest of our lives, Granger." He pulls the box out with careful fingers. Her eyes track the movement. He opens it slowly—partly for the dramatic effect, but mostly because he is *not* letting this ring get launched off the cliff by a rogue gust of wind. Or by the mortifying trembling of his hands. It's one of a kind. Like her.

"Will you marry me?"

And for a witch who claims to be clever, the fact that it takes her *two whole seconds* to answer makes him question *everything*.

He counts. Because it's the longest two seconds of his life.

"Yes, of course!"

She launches herself at him.

And now he's questioning her intelligence again, because her dramatic dive knocks him flat on his arse and almost sends the ring flying.

But thankfully, he's a bloody Seeker. He catches her and the box in one smooth motion.

She grabs his head with both hands, fingers buried in his hair like she's trying to attach herself to him. Then her mouth crashes into his and *bloody hell*, it's a kiss. A hard

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he was convinced she'd figured him out the second they arrived at the Twelve Apostles. Surely *someone* as smart as her would have seen through his game. Either way, with her hands over her mouth, he takes the chance to wipe his own on his trousers.

He clears his throat, aiming for suave, but the scorching sun has him dripping with even more sweat. Because no...it's definitely the heat—not his nerves at the idea she might say no.

Gash, gash, gash.

What would he even do? He doesn't think he'd survive it. *She'd* have to bury him right here. Or kick his body off the cliff and let the sea deal with the remains.

Pull it together.

"One year ago," he starts, voice embarrassingly shaky. "W-We were both lost—" Oh, perfect. Absolutely not the moment to malfunction. He has a whole speech planned—well not a *speech*, per se, but... something. A few meaningful lines. Now he can't string two words together. Pathetic.

He drops his gaze in shame and tries to breathe.

And then, a hand—her hand—glides along the side of his head, so tender he has no choice but to look up at her. And no, this isn't the look of a woman about to bolt, is it?

Her eyes are warm. Doting. Encouraging him to keep going.

"Okay. He can do this.

"Right here, on this cliff, you said yes to letting me join you on your wild journey," he says with a soft, almost disbelieving laugh. "And somehow, in the middle of getting ourselves completely lost in this massive country, we found each other."

One breath in. One breath out.

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and messy kiss. Not that he's complaining. But this kind of reckless passion is usually his department. His signature move he pulls way too often. How he loves to grab her pretty face and snog her stupid the moment she simply exists too adorably near him. Merlin. She said yes.

Yes to being his wife.

Yes to spending the rest of her life with him. Hm.

Draco feels a little dizzy—either from this realization or the sheer lack of oxygen as he kisses her harder, mouth open, tongue deep, like he can crawl inside the moment and never leave. He decides he'd rather pass out than be the one to break away.

Unfortunately, the part of his brain in charge of dull things like breathing chooses that moment to kick in. He takes one embarrassingly loud gasp, like someone who never quite mastered the coordination of kissing and not dying.

"Don't tell me you're actually *surprised*," he breathes loudly, mouthing his way down to the curve of her neck to hide the fact he needs a moment to catch his breath.

His arms are still uselessly suspended in the air, one hand gripping the box and the other just...summoning something. Awkward. He drops them to her waist and wraps himself around her instead, pulling her flush against him. *Much better*.

"I am," she pants, "You've called me your wife or fiancée so many times, I was starting to think it was a joke."

Jesus Christ!—another Muggle reference he learned this past year. Apparently, the man was some sort of carpenter with a martyr complex who could turn water into wine, which Draco respects, honestly, because even he can't do that with magic. Transfiguration unfortunately doesn't swing that way.

So yes, *Jesus Christ*.

Because the way she straddles him now—knees digging into the dirt on either side of his hips, pressure exactly where he needs her most—he's about to lose all sense of self-preservation. He might combust before he even gets the chance to slide the ring on her finger.

It's been almost a year of this ongoing show of passion, yet every little sound of pleasure that escapes her still manages to feel new to his ears.

Then she rolls her hips a certain way and settles her weight right on his lap—right *there*. Now she can feel exactly how thrilled he is about her saying yes. About being *his* for the rest of their lives.

He grows, low and desperate, because Hermione Granger is the only person who can make him feel like a feral beast and a starved puppy in the same damn breath.

He's seconds away from flipping her right onto the grass and have her. Right there. In front of the Twelve Apostles, no less. Fitting, really. Since he already invoked Jesus during this debauched little cliffside celebration, might as well turn it into a proper holy scandal. Let them spread the message that this woman is now his. For the rest of eternity.

And then.

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Granger has yet to respond to him.

"She knows I'll always be there for her. I've always been there for her. She's my best friend," he adds, voice weary as he runs a hand over his tired eyes. "But it hurts. Especially that she left... and with Malfoy, of all people."

He pauses. The silence says more than his words.

"I spent half our school years comforting her after the things he said to her. The way he treated her... I just don't understand."

You and I, Harry. You and I.

Because it is no secret that Draco Malfoy was particularly cruel to Hermione Granger during their time at Hogwarts. Multiple sources (including Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley themselves) recall instances where they had to step in and protect her from his venomous tirades, often centered around her Muggle-born status. And not just them.

"She was lucky to have them as friends," says Ginny Weasley, professional Quidditch star and long-time friend of all three. I meet her just outside the Harpies training grounds, where she's gracious enough to comment on the developing situation.

"They were always there for her. People don't realize how often Harry would walk her back from the library just because Malfoy wouldn't stop bullying her. And Ron—well, Ron would've fought anyone who even looked at her wrong."

So what is she thinking?

How does one go from bullied to lover? How does one abandon her fiancé in a time of need?

But rest assured, dear readers: Witch Weekly will be watching closely as this scandal unfolds.

If you have any information about this unsettling situation, please send an owl to our newsroom.

Until then, one thing is certain:

The shine is wearing off our Golden Girl.

"Mate, that was some *expensive* bottle," Theo chides.

Why he cares is beyond Draco—he's not the one who paid for it.

Draco paces around the fire, convinced the flames must burn as hot as the rage blazing in his veins.

How is it even legal for an editor to print that much bullshit? It's blatant slander, and he *will* call his lawyers first thing tomorrow morning. Well—he'll owl his mother, who will proceed to call the lawyers. He never actually learned their names. Just remembers bland faces and balding heads.

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mind's healers. I say was, because Mrs. Laura Wilson, Chief Healer of the Janus Thickey Ward, confirms that Granger quit suddenly—vanished without a word to her team. Her resignation letter arrived a full week after her disappearance.

"To leave us in the lurch like that...well, it screams unprofessionalism, if you ask me," Mrs. Wilson says. "Especially since she left at the exact same time as our Head Potioneer... Draco Malfoy. But we all know that wasn't a coincidence."

Indeed, dear readers, it wasn't.

Witch Weekly can now confirm that Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy have been spotted together multiple times in Australia (see page 6 for exclusive photographs).

"Of course I knew," Ron says, voice hollow. "You'd have to be blind not to. She had a thing for him back at Hogwarts. When it was clear he didn't return her feelings, I—well, I promised her the world. I told her I'd love her better than anyone ever could. But..."

He can't go on. His pain is too great. (This reporter counted three summoned tissues.)

"But ever since Malfoy started working at St. Mungo's... old feelings resurfaced. I thought it was just an old crush, but I should've known better. With his reputation? Of course he'd try something. I just never thought she'd..."

I won't quote the rest—his sobs making it barely understandable. What I can confirm is that the alleged "work nights" Hermione claimed to spend restoring her parents' memories often ended in secret meetings with Mr. Malfoy. A source from within St. Mungo's report to have walked in on them more than once in what can only be described as compromising positions.

"One time," Ron chokes, "even in our bed."

(At this point, our interview was briefly paused while Mr. Weasley excused himself to cry in the loo.)

Yours truly even reached out to the nation's favorite hero—none other than Harry Potter himself.

"I wish she would've told me," he says, as I sit across from him in his Auror office. "But I can't say I'm surprised. She's always been... solitary."

Mr. Potter confides that the past few months have been incredibly difficult, as he's tried—and failed—to bridge the growing distance between two of his oldest friends. A near-impossible task when one of them has fled the country. Despite sending multiple owls, Mrs.

Slam.
A car door closes.
Right.

Because apparently, this is the number one tourist stop for viewing the rock formations—according to every bloody travel guide.

They freeze, breathless, limbs tangled, both clearly calculating the odds of getting slapped with another warning for public indecency. Last month's incident had earned them a very polite, slightly amused officer after they'd parked in what was an empty lot at night... and woke up to a not-so-empty one the next morning.

Shame they'd forgotten the Silencing Charm before launching into two rounds of enthusiastic morning shagging.

But luck rarely strikes twice.

Especially when your fiancée tends to be rather loud.

So they pause—momentarily—as a family of three approaches the cliff, happily rejoining in the natural beauty of the landscape, blissfully unaware of the very engaged, very disheveled couple sitting a few feet away, trying to look decent.

Draco suddenly remembers the box still clutched securely in his hand, the poor thing entirely upstaged by Granger mounting him, and decides it's finally time to give it the moment it deserves.

He takes her hand, steadier now, and slides the ring onto her dainty finger.

"Does that feel like a joke to you?" he asks, watching as she turns her hand from all angles, caught somewhere between admiration and disbelief. The sun glints off the two lozenge-cut stones set into delicate gold bands like it was designed just for her. Which it was, obviously.

"If it is, it's a very *overpriced* joke," she mutters, clearly enchanted despite herself. "Is that emerald?"

"This one, yes," he says, pointing to the larger stone. Then he taps the smaller one beside it. "But *this*—this one's far more priceless."

She narrows her eyes at it, not seeing the difference. Which is the point.

"Remember when we were standing here last year, and you explained sea glass to me?"

She had stopped him just as he was about to throw away a rounded green rock back into the pile of rocks, and explained how it was shattered glass, worn down by the sea over decades, coming out almost like a gemstone. How sometimes it takes being broken to become something worth keeping.

So naturally, he'd kept it. Knowing it might come in handy someday.

"Is that—?"

"Yes. The same one."

He grins. "Had it cut to match the emerald. Told the jeweller I wanted them to look identical."

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She stares at it again, speechless now.

"Notice how there's barely any difference?" He says lightly, tugging her hand to his lips.

"You've always been a precious stone to me, Granger. Always worth keeping," A lone tear slides down her cheek and he brushes it away with his thumb, gentle. "You just needed someone posh enough like me to recognize the value."

He's only sorry it took years of suffering—battered by the sea—for her to begin seeing it too.

And he knows it's an uphill battle for her, every day. But she's improved so much in just one year. He reminds her as often as he can: How incredible she is, how lucky he is. But he knows that no matter how much he shows her, no matter how many times he says it, the final step has to come from her.

And he believes she'll take it.

Maybe not today. Maybe not for a while.

But one day, Hermione Granger will believe she's worthy.

Worthy of love.

Worthy of everything.

That she's come so far from the girl who once accepted being discarded, again and again, as something normal.

And she will.

Years from now, she will finally see herself the way he sees her.

An extraordinary witch who deserves everything.

20 years later

Draco is on edge.

Completely neurotic, as his wife had so kindly pointed out that morning. He glances down nervously at the top of soft, wild curls in front of him, his hands tightening on her small shoulders.

"Oh, seems like our Cassie might have a little crush," Granger says, a bit too brightly for Draco's taste.

And just like that, his worst nightmare becomes reality.

His little girl—Cassiopeia—liking someone other than her dear old dad.

Absolutely not.

Not on his watch. Over his dead body. *Literally*.

No dating at Hogwarts. Maybe not ever. As long as he's alive, that's the rule. Settled. "Wh—what? Mum, no!" Cassie stammers, stomping one foot in outrage as she throws her mother a scandalized look.

Hermione meets it head-on, just as defiant.

A perfect mirror of each other, those two. Same fiery personality.

Physically, they only differ in the shade of their hair colour—Hermione's hair is

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Her eyes widen in alarm as she stares at the document in a catatonic stupor. A very specific kind of horrified silence settles across her face.

Draco's out of his seat in a second.

"What is it?" he demands, leaning over her shoulder.

It's a magazine. A glossy, tabloid-style cover.

His and Granger's faces printed right on the front page.

Hermione Granger: Not So Golden Anymore

By Romilda Vane, Special Correspondent for Witch Weekly

It's the question on everyone's lips: Where is Hermione Granger? Mrs. Granger, the female counterpart of the famous Golden Trio, has been shining by her absence these past few months. But when she failed to appear, arm-in-arm with her longtime partner Ronald Weasley, at the Winter Gala, *Witch Weekly* knew something was amiss.

Naturally, I was dispatched to get to the bottom of it. And what I found...well, dear readers, you may want to sit down. "She left the country without telling me," Ronald Weasley says with quiet emotion as we meet for lunch near the modest house he still shares with his girlfriend—or is she?

"No, she's not. Not anymore," he confirms, voice hoarse. And in that moment, I could tell he was still heartbreakingly in love with her.

"Ever since I had my accident, Hermione turned into a completely different person," he says. "She just... stopped caring. Like I was nothing. Deadweight."

Readers may remember Weasley's tragic fall from his broom last year, an accident that brought a premature end to what many believed would be a long and brilliant Quidditch career. While the official cause has been filed as accidental, sources close to the family once hinted that Mrs. Granger's clumsy magic may have played a role.

"I don't blame her," Ron insists now, blinking back tears. "I just wish she'd been there for me afterward. I had to practically twist her arm to get her to come with me to my readaptation appointments. She was barely home. Always busy at work. Always... somewhere else."

That somewhere else is where things get interesting.

Hermione Granger was, until recently, one of St. Mungo's Leading

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in the van and sulked for a full hour.”

Ha. Ha. Ha.

He doesn’t find it quite as funny. He could’ve died.

In his defense, the kangaroo looked like it was looking for a fight. Weirdly muscled menace. Hell never admit it, but the bastard had better pecs than *him*. He was not about to test the odds.

Still, he can’t stay irritated. Not with the firelight dancing in Hermione’s eyes, as she laughs warmly with his two best friends.

“So, Theo,” she says, finally abandoning the theme of *Let’s All Ridicule Malfoy*. “I know Blaise is an Auror, but what do you do in London?”

“I’m a writer,” Theo replies, taking a smug swig of firewhisky.

“Yes, right,” Blaise snorts. “You published *one* book. My mother’s got a photo of me in an album from when I was three—you don’t see me calling myself a model!”

Theo glares. “I’m lacking inspiration at the present moment,” he says, locking eyes with Hermione. “Because my next project needs to be absolutely *sensational*. Like the first.”

“Lazy fuck,” Draco supplies.

“Says the man who was jobless until last year,” Theo fires back. “Up until Granger properly motivated you to go to work and stop watching the grass grow.”

“Hear, hear,” Blaise lifts his glass, the *traitor*. “To Hermione. We shall ever be grateful.”

Draco scowls.

Hermione winks at him over the flames, and he forgets why he was irritated.

“What was your first book?” she asks Theo, curious.

“*Sleeping with the Enemy*.”

Her eyes go wide. She splutters into her wineglass, covering her mouth with one hand. “*That was you?*” she gasps. “That book was everywhere! I can’t believe I didn’t realize.”

The book had been a phenomenon: Theo’s clever war memoir—told from both sides. Son of a Death Eater, secret boyfriend to Neville Longbottom, the Order’s snake-slaying Gryffindor.

Draco is surprised she didn’t remember. *Miss-Itie-Read-Every-Book-That-Ever-Existed*. Then again, the book had come out around the time Weasley had his accident. It must not have been her highest priority to remember every author’s name.

Across the fire, Blaise meets Theo’s eye and takes what looks like a brochure from his coat pocket with a faint...anxiousness.

“So, as much as we came here to help with the construction—”

“Liar. I had to *beg* you,” Draco cuts in.

“True,” Blaise concedes with a shrug. “But something else came up. Which means we had a second reason to make the trip.”

He hands the folded leaflet to Granger while adding “As much as you seem intent on living out here, we thought this bit of local gossip was best to be delivered in person.”

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espresso, Cassie’s the same but with a splash of milk if you will.

“I’ll have some words with the boy,” Draco says, deadly serious, his gaze locked on the blonde git his Cassie’s been eyeing. The Hogwarts Express platform is as chaotic as ever, and he doesn’t plan to lose sight of the little bastard.

“Daddy!”

“Draco!”

They say it in unison, and Draco has no idea what the outrage is about.

All he wants is to give the boy a fair warning—that if Cassie ever introduces herself, he is to treat her with respect, be kind to her, understand that she is the future woman of his dreams, and absolutely *not* screw it up by acting like a raging arsehole—And now he’s projecting. Brilliant.

Fine. He’ll settle for a simple paternal threat: do not touch his daughter, who has wisely chosen a life of celibacy.

He’s about to stalk off and deliver it when Granger grabs forcefully his arm.

“I know what you’re thinking, and don’t you dare, Draco Malfoy,” she hisses. “Do you really want to completely humiliate her on her first day of school?”

“I have no ill intent,” he replies, almost offended. “I just want to ensure that—”

“You will do *no* such thing.”

“But—”

“Her big brother will be there to watch over her at Hogwarts.”

Draco casts a glance toward Scorpius, who now considers himself far too much of an aloof teenager to wait with his family. He once told them—though not in so many words—that he prefers being his own person in public, rather than standing in the shadow of *the dating couple of Britain*.

Or, as he phrased it: he’s not into “*that background character energy*.”

So instead, he’s standing several feet away with his two best mates, Roman and Elias—which is fair, really, since he hasn’t seen them much over the summer.

Roman spent the season in Italy with his father, Blaise, and his mother, Daphne Greengrass. After what Draco calculates to be approximately an eternity plus five days of dating, the two finally tied the knot in Vernazza in July. It was a child-free affair—fancy, dignified—so while Draco and Hermione flew in Italy for the wedding, Scorpius had to stay behind. He’d sulked the entire week, left in the care of his grandmother in her New Zealand villa, with Cassie for company.

As for Elias, he backpacked across South America with his parents—Theo and Longbottom. One was collecting inspiration for his adventure chronicles; the other was chasing rare indigenous plants through the jungle. They’d rekindled shortly after the *True Heroine* book launch, which Draco had *absolutely* called. At least four times.

Granger claimed she already knew. Theo had sworn her to secrecy because, apparently, Draco was too smug when he was right.

“Mmm. Point made.”

“And I’m sure Roman and Elias will be *all too pleased* to keep an eye on her,” Blaise

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adds, standing with them too, since Roman has declared himself far too cool to be seen with his parents.

Theo is loitering nearby too, similarly exiled by his teenager. Not that Draco blames Elias—his parents might just be the most painfully sentimental couple Hogwarts has ever produced.

"Honestly... how did they grow up so much in one summer?" Granger gasps.

And that's Draco's *second* problem.

Even if, by some miracle, Cassie doesn't date at Hogwarts—which is highly unlikely, given that she will certainly be the prettiest, kindest, and most clever girl in the entire school—her two so-called bodyguards, Roman and Elias, are almost certainly going to make a move.

They've been protective of her since she was a toddler; probably just copying Scorpius at first. But that habit persisted. And now Draco's stuck with *Tweedledum* and *Tweedledee*, loitering around his daughter like she's already spoken for.

He'll deal with *them* in due time.

Right now, he has a more immediate problem: the blonde bully.

Innocent until proven guilty? Not today.

"Daddy, *don't*!" Cassie cries, grabbing his sleeve. "You're *so* embarrassing."

Draco grunts and shifts tactics.

"Honey, what do we say to bullies?"

She sighs, then rolls her eyes—exactly like her mother, who also looks like she's lost patience with his theatrics.

"I don't know... probably something like, *Wow, your confidence is amazing for someone with that haircut!*"

Draco winces. He's *certain* Elias taught her that one. Brilliant.

"Where's the bully?" Scorpius suddenly appears at his side, apparently done pretending to be cool now that his baby sister might be under threat.

"No one," Granger says calmly. "Your sister's just got a tiny crush on the Pearson's first-year son."

Draco finds it deeply hypocritical that Cassie doesn't immediately shriek about her comment being embarrassing.

"Where?"

The two teenagers asparagus materialize, scanning the crowd like Cassie's honor has just been challenged.

And Draco sees his moment. A glorious opening.

"This one," he says, pointing right ahead.

The four of them—father, brother, and the bodyguards—step forward in a silent team effort.

Closing in on the threat.

The sharp voice of Headmistress McGonagall stops Draco dead in his tracks.

KITTYBLUSH

Not Hermione Granger.

She spins in her seat, eyes gleaming.

"Really?" she asks, already reaching for the door handle. "Describe it."

Theo shudders. "Like a werewolf—but not quite. Like a skeletal bear. But... reptilian?

And its eyes—Salazar, its *eyes*—"

Hermione squeals in delight. She's halfway out of the van when Draco lunges forward and slams the door shut.

"It could be a *chupacabra*," she argues, like that justifies chasing a werewolf in the bushes.

"Why don't we come back another day, love?" Draco negotiates. "It's almost dusk. You *hate* driving in the dark."

She hesitates, lips pursed, glancing back longingly at the field.

"But—"

"When the refuge is up and running, we'll retrace our steps," he promises, but crosses his fingers behind his back. "See if your chup-abracadabra is still lurking."

"*Chupacabra*," she corrects, turning toward him.

"Chubacara," he deadpans.

"Chubacabra," she enunciates slowly, like he's just learning to speak.

Satisfied, she starts the engine again and drives off, her fingers already dancing on the steering wheel.

At least, there's no more tense silence as Hermione immediately launches into a tale on the chupacabra's origin story. This folklore creature, said to attack and drink the blood of goats in Puerto Rico, all while Theo visibly wilts in the backseat, looking somehow *paler* than he did mid-vomit.

When they finally arrive at the future site of the refuge and exit the van, Theo prowls to Draco.

"Your girlfriend is *frightening*," he says, dead serious. Then he smirks. "I like that for you."

Draco doesn't need his approval. But hearing the word *girlfriend* from his best mate makes something settle, warm and sure, right in his chest.

He smiles. "I like it too."

"No way," Blaise gasps, nearly choking on his drink. "That might be the most hilarious thing I've ever heard."

This, from his other *best friend*. A title Blaise is rapidly losing as the evening unfolds.

To comfort Theo into his first encounter with the local wildlife, Granger has decided to recount—in shameful detail—every single one of *his* own.

"Yes way," she laughs, tipping back her glass of wine. "And then he warded himself

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how to open a vehicle door. The progress he made is beyond belief. “Careful with—”

Bang

Blaise slams his head directly into the low ceiling.

“Salazar balls,” he hisses, staggering back.

It could’ve served as a warning, but Theo’s too busy gawking at the inside. *Bang* He hits the same spot.

Draco doesn’t even try to hide his grin.

“Buckle up,” Hermione chirps from the front, already turning the key in the ignition and the engine starts with a low growl.

Theo and Blaise stare at him in horror, like she’s just spoken in Parseltongue.

“Buckle *what*?” Blaise mutters, wide-eyed.

Draco sighs, climbs in front of them, and proceeds to fasten both seatbelts for them like an exhausted father dressing toddlers.

“Mate, we missed you,” Theo says, watching him work. “But I don’t think Hermione’s going to approve of your wandering hands.”

Draco responds by clicking Theo’s buckle with deliberate force right into his groin. Theo lets out a strangled squeak.

The ride back is filled with noticeable tension.

Every time Granger takes a turn slightly too tight or brakes just a little too suddenly to avoid whatever suicidal creature the Outback throws their way, both of his friends stiffen like death itself is upon them.

Draco remembers his own first car ride in Melbourne. He has been alone, in complete urban chaos, with no guide and no clue. *They’re being dramatic.*

Suddenly, Theo groans low in his throat and mutters, “Uh—I think—I’m gonna be sick.” Draco immediately yanks his legs up onto the seat in a totally unhelpful way.

It’s in moments like this that he truly appreciates Hermione’s Gryffindor instincts. While Blaise and Draco scream like banshees and refuse to even look in Theo’s direction, she slams on the brakes, throws the van into park, and practically *hurls* open Theo’s door to get him out before any damage is done.

The poor git stumbles through the tall grass, trying to preserve a shred of dignity, but the loud and disgusting sounds of retching carry right back to them.

Draco and Blaise both turn around, hands clamped over their mouths as if the sound itself might be contagious.

Hermione drops back into her seat with a muttered string of words, all of them some variation of *“utterly pathetic, the lot of you.”*

The heaving cuts off abruptly, replaced by a sharp shriek and the thundering of footsteps. Theo launches himself into the van, practically body-slammimg a very displeased Blaise.

“T-There’s a—” he pants, gesturing wildly at the field, “aa-a mon—” and then, finally, “A MONSTER GO!”

Hearing that, any rational human being might take that as a sign to drive away.

KITTYBLUSH

For a moment, he’s twelve again, sure he’s just been caught causing trouble on the platform.

At least the three boys keep walking—heading straight toward the probable bully—unaware they’ve lost their fearless leader.

“Professor Malfoy,” McGonagall calls, voice clipped, though he doesn’t miss the glint of something warm in her eyes. Pride, maybe, at having one of her former students—reformed Death Eater, academic star, and apparently a *hot commodity*—now teaching the art of Potions in her school.

The whole reason they decided to enroll their kids at Hogwarts instead of the Tasmania Academy—Australia’s wizarding school—started with this job offer for Draco. It’s not every day you receive a home visit from the Headmistress herself, holding a job contract and an acceptance letter for your son, who was about to start school the following year. The same son whose two best friends were also set to begin at Hogwarts. It didn’t seem fair to exclude him from the experience.

“We’re waiting for you in the first compartment with the other professors.”

“Of course,” Draco replies smoothly, wrapping an arm around Hermione’s waist just as she joins him. “I was just saying goodbye to my wife.”

Both women eye him with identical suspicion.

“Ah. And Professor Granger,” McGonagall says, turning her attention to Hermione. “I received your letter. Such a shame you won’t be able to join us for tonight’s Welcoming Feast. I imagine you’ll be sorry to miss Mrs. Cassiopeia’s Sorting.”

Oh, yeah. After living apart for a month when Draco first started at Hogwarts, it quickly became impractical for Granger to manage both Cassie and the Haven on her own.

They managed Saturday night family dinners, thanks to the Floo connection McGonagall generously granted them, but it wasn’t enough. Draco needed more than a weekly visit with both of his girls.

Which is why he was *devastated* to hear about Hagrid’s sudden decision to resign after that very same month. Pure coincidence, of course, that the half-giant accepted a full-time position at the Haven shortly after—one with a starting salary that just happened to be double what he earned at Hogwarts.

Completely unrelated.

“Indeed,” Hermione replies brightly. Although they both know full well Cassie’s headed straight for Gryffindor—there’s never been any question. “But I’m expected at the Haven to oversee the arrival of a Sand Hippogriff our employees rescued in the North of Australia. I’m thrilled this year’s students will get to see him.”

Draco would never dare diminish Hagrid—mostly because Granger nearly *slapped* him once for a single offhand insult years ago—but he’s fairly certain his wife is the best Care of Magical Creatures professor Hogwarts has ever had.

Who could possibly compete?

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A direct Floo connection that lets students travel straight to the Haven for every lesson? Check.

An unparalleled range of magical creatures on site? Check.

A safe, secure environment for learning? Check.

An entire trained staff on hand to manage both students *and* beasts? Check.

Lessons taught by the most beautiful and smartest professor? Check.

Frankly, it's not a fair comparison.

"I'm sure they'll fare far better than you husband ever did with *that* Hippogriff,"

McGonagall quips.

Ha. Ha. Ha.

Old straw.

"Goodbye Professor Granger; see you later this week then." The Headmistress nods, collects her train leaves in three minutes."

Oh, thank you *very* much, Madam Headmistress. He's a full-fledged adult with a wife, two children, and responsibilities. He understands the concept of time. No need to remind him.

"And I neglected the most important thing," Granger says gently, her hand settling over his chest—just like that, he forgets whatever he was spiraling about. Even after twenty years of marriage, one touch from this witch still disarms him completely.

"You and I will also be there to watch over Cassie this year."

She has a point.

Draco steps into her space, one hand sliding around her waist, the other lifting to cradle the back of her head, tilting her face to his.

"If I see one of those first-year gits being disrespectful, I'll—"

"Please don't be *that* overbearing father."

"Says the mother hen who couldn't stop fussing about Scorpius during his first year."

"I was not!"

"You were."

"Was not."

She meets his stare, already losing, and sighs.

"Okay, *maybe*. But he was just so small and shy and—"

The final whistle of the train cuts through her excuse.

Draco leans down and presses his mouth to hers, quieting her properly. She rises onto her toes, arms wrapping around his neck, deepening the kiss. They'll be apart for three whole days—might as well make it count.

Possibly too much, judging by the exaggerated gagging sounds coming from their children behind them.

They break apart and turn to face their children, who are both scowling. Granger, entirely unbothered by their adolescent humiliation, pulls them into a goodbye group hug. She kisses Scorpius on the cheek and presses one to the top of Cassie's head.

"And where's *my* goodbye kiss?" Draco asks, offering his cheek to his son—who's

KITTYBLUSH

What *isn't* a lie is that he had roped in Theo and Blaise to help with the construction. Under the Magi-Architect's supervision, apparently even unqualified witches and wizards can throw up a fully functional refuge in under twenty-four hours. Magic really is superior. He has no idea how Muggles manage.

Granger told him that some buildings take *years* to finish. *Years*. With tools and manual labor. Ugh.

Honestly? Barbaric.

If I had taken more persuasion than he'd expected, but eventually, Theo wrote back. *We'll come help you.*

PS: You'd better pay us in the finest Ogden's Firewhisky for our labour.

Which is how they find themselves driving back toward the nearest magical town to collect Theo and Blaise from the Portkey Terminal.

He crosses the street alone to the liquor store, selects a crate of ten bottles of Ogden's Reserve (the aged one, obviously), and tosses in two bottles of overpriced Elf wine for Granger, because she loathes firewhisky. Boyfriend of the year, ladies and gentlemen.

Stands there for a full ten seconds, box in arms, blinking.

When he returns to the van, he stops short.

His two best friends have easily spotted the mint-coloured van—hard to miss, given his very specific and slightly rude description of it—and are now leaning against it, laughing with Granger like they've all been friends for years. Hermione is glowing. Actually glowing. Her entire face is lit up in a candid smile.

To be fair, she and Blaise had met a few times before—usually in social settings where Potter was also present—but still, he hadn't expected them to warm up so fast. Especially not Theo, who's usually a complete bitch with people he doesn't know. But now he is laughing openly, like he's already decided he approves of her.

They all turn as they hear his footsteps on the pavement, and Draco barely has time to drop the box onto the curb before Theo barrels into him in an overly emotional hug.

There's a grunt of surprise from Draco, but no protest.

Blaise follows with a cool shoulder tap and a smirk. "Look at you. Almost tanned and hearts in your eyes. It's disgusting."

Theo's eyes flick toward the van.

"So, Hermione was just telling us that your pampered arse has been sleeping in *that* tin can for months?"

"It's spacious," Draco says, which is objectively a lie. But he never minded, not when it meant it got her closer to her. "And functional."

"It's got character," Hermione offers brightly.

Blaise raises a brow. "You're both deluded."

Granger whisks around the front of the van, sitting into the driver's seat and Draco, ever the gentleman—and now expert in all things Muggle—slides open the back door and gestures grandly.

"Welcome aboard, princesses," he smirks, far too pleased with himself for knowing

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now nearly eye level with him.

The little prat bumps fists with him instead.

“See you at school, Daddy!” Cassie calls out with a bright grin before dashing off toward the hissing train, her brother at her side. Asparagus No. 1 hauls her enormous backpack as Asparagus No. 2 rolls her trunk behind them.

Satisfied that his daughter will be thoroughly protected during the train ride, Draco turns toward his own carriage, fingers threading through Granger’s as they walk together.

“All aboard!” the conductor calls—mostly in Draco’s direction, since he’s the last lingerer on the platform.

“See you Wednesday, my love,” he murmurs, kissing her hand before stepping onto the train.

Just before the conductor shuts the door, he glances back.

Hermione is standing exactly where he left her, looking up at him, hand raised in a slow wave.

And like he does every time they part—even if it’s only for a few days—Draco says the same words. A tradition, a promise, a quiet vow. Just to be certain she never forgets how deeply she’s loved.

“I’ll miss you.”

She smiles warmly.

Because she believes it now.

She knows, finally, that she’s worthy of *everything*.

FIN