

# The Spring Turnover

*by scumblackentropy*

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Somewhere, a place for them.

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

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A/N: This story was inspired by a lovely picture called Soul Tamer by the talented Sempraseverus.

Link to the picture here:

<http://sempraseverus.deviantart.com/gallery/#/d5g84pn>

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The dirt-washed light hits her eye, and she sits up in a panic. Her wand is in her fist and a curse is on her lips before she knows what she is doing. She throws the covers off her leg and digs the heels of her feet into the mattress, and...

There is nothing but the dust.

She tucks her wand back under her pillow and lets her body fall backward, throwing an arm over her face.

She prides herself on being a neat freak, and yet there is nothing she can do about the dust. Cleansing charms and banishing spells last about twenty-four hours before it is back, lacquering everything in a sepia graininess like an old photograph. It is almost as if the house itself has a peculiar partiality for cinders and soot.

In any case, the dust is inseparable from Spinner's End. Or the Grey House, as they've learned to call it. Grey because of the peeling walls, grey because of the perpetually overcast sky, grey because of the molting refuse strewn across the sidewalk.

Grey because of the dust.

He told her that the name 'Spinner's End' leaves an unpleasant taste in his mouth.

She makes herself get up and heads to the bathroom to brush her teeth.

She finds him in the kitchen, leaning against the counter and obviously waiting for her.

"Good morning, *dearest*," he drawls lazily, with that special irony that she likes to think he reserves for her. That devastating little quirk to his keen-edged top lip, more shapely than her own. Because he never calls her anything but Granger unless he's angry. Or horny. Or both.

"Good morning, *darling*," she retorts, ruining the intended effect of her glare by padding over and wrapping her arms around his waist. She holds him hard to herself, breathing in his scent, and she thinks that he must have been born in the north where the glaciers are, where the trout streams flow and the eagle flies, because that is what he smells like.

He places a hand on the side of her neck, his thumb skimming her jaw, and looks at her. His eyes are their own kind of black. Black like the sky over the sea during a storm. Like the howl of wind. Like moonlight on wet earth. His kisses are black, too, and they taste to her like the horizon and the big, big sky, and she thinks that she knows of no sweeter coldness.

"You look like a harpy, Granger. Stop smiling like that."

Her cheeks are aching but she is suddenly giddy, so giddy, and there is nothing she can do about it.

"No, Severus. Never. Never. Never."

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Snape was even skinnier, if that were possible. They all were, in a harried, overexerted kind of way, but he most of all. It did nothing to lessen his imperious gait, though. It made his eyes sink further into their sockets, and his nose seem larger than ever, but he still walked and held his chin like he could take fifty points from anyone who dared to breathe his air.

When she saw him, she tried to hunch her shoulders and shrink behind Ron. It was the first time she had seen him since that night in the Shack, almost a year ago.

"What are you doing, Hermione?" Ron asked her, a bemused grin on his face.

"Nothing, I just... my, er... bra strap was slipping off. I was just trying to hike it up."

"Slipping off, eh?" he leered.

"Shut up." She still blushed, even at her age.

It was she who saved his life, of course.

Not Ron's.

Snape's.

Because she was who she was, and life-saver might as well be written on a placard and tacked to her forehead. She still remembered how hot his blood was as she tried to staunch its rampant flow from his throat, and how she felt oddly guilty as she Portkeyed him into the bustle of St. Mungo's.

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He came with Narcissa Malfoy.

They were in one of the safehouses, the Green House perhaps. Or was it the Old House? They were holding a meeting with senior members. She knew he'd come back to the war some few months back, but his injuries prevented him from joining the front lines. She'd seen him only in passing.

She'd wondered before what he would look like, standing in the midst of people who, only one year ago, would have willingly nailed his severed head over the doorpost. She thought he would look ill-fitting and make everyone else uncomfortable because of it. He didn't look ill-fitting, but he still made everyone uncomfortable, if only for the fact that *he* looked very comfortable in his own skin. Beside her, Ron looked like he was trying very hard not to say something nasty to Snape.

Near-death hadn't made him a changed man. He was still ugly, still miserably beaky, still holding his mouth in that indelible snarl, but Narcissa was beautiful enough for everyone in the room, even with the tiredness in the slight slack of her porcelain jaw and the shadows under her eyes.

Especially with the shadows under her eyes.

She had the kind of beauty that brought to mind stars shivering in the distance and northern lights. There was a time when Hermione thought that he did it *for her*. She wondered about his motives because she wondered about everything, and she thought he'd killed Dumbledore for Narcissa. To save Narcissa's son. Anything for Narcissa, because he could not stand to see her chin trembling so. But she had since learned from Harry that it was another son. For another woman with another beauty.

"What is she doing here, Snape?" Kingsley asked him. "And you. You don't have to be here anymore. You've done enough."

"You know why I'm here, Shackbolt. You will never find the rest of them without me. Or her."

"Very well. If you want to give even more of yourself, then I will not stop you. But the wife of a Death Eater is another matter."

It was an unspoken question. *Can she be trusted?*

"I am not giving anything of myself to anyone," he sneered. "Narcissa Malfoy is no longer the wife of a Death Eater." He shifted his stance slightly so his shoulder blocked Narcissa from view. It was unclear whether he meant that Lucius Malfoy was no longer a Death Eater, or that Narcissa was no longer Malfoy's wife.

"I don't trust her, Snape, even if she did save Potter during the final battle."

"She was just trying to save her own flesh," Charlie piped up. "That's the only reason she risked her neck." There was still a lot of bad blood between the Malfoys and the Weasleys.

Snape opened his mouth to say something scathing but Kingsley beat him to it. "Be quiet, Charlie. You just got here three weeks ago."

Again, there were a lot of unspoken things. *You just got here. You weren't a part of the final battle. You didn't see how much smoke there was.*

They called it the final battle even if it wasn't the last one. It turned out that in war, there were no such things as grand as final battles. Mostly it was just isolated skirmishes here and there. Some were violent, a few were horrendous, but most of them resulted in nothing more than bruised egos and sprained elbows. There was a lot of darting around safehouses and trying to get information from the other side and a lot of waiting. They called it the final battle for the sake of reference because at this point it was hard to keep track.

"I vouch for her, Shackbolt," Snape spat. "Is that not enough?"

It was astounding how quickly Snape's reputation shot up after Harry started telling everyone that he was the bravest man he knew. If Harry were here, he would have jumped to Snape's defense the moment he walked through the door, and they all knew this. There was a moment of hushed tension, only a moment, before Kingsley acquiesced.

"You know it's enough, Severus."

"Good."

"Good."

They were seated. She felt his presence behind her tingling in her scalp and skimming up her spine.

The meeting continued on in relative equanimity among all parties. There was another raid somewhere near Kent. There were more packets to be delivered to the other safehouses. There was no new information about the remaining Death Eaters' central location. There was one new casualty, Ernie Macmillan, who fell behind in last week's mission.

When it ended, there was a press at the door as everyone rushed to get out, eager to get on with their own missions. She hung back to let the them pass.

"Come on, Hermione," Ron said, an indecent grin on his face. Somehow, it embarrassed her, even if it never did before.

"No, Ron, not now. I have to... Just go. I'll be along shortly."

He gave her an odd look, but went to join Charlie.

She fiddled around with her belongings, taking her time placing her notes back in her folder and her folder back in her bag. She dropped her quill twice. Behind her, she heard their footsteps as they walked out of the room. Snape was holding Narcissa's elbow and whispering into her ear. She was looking very pale.

Quite unexpectedly, Hermione's eyes were met with frosty blue, the same hue of shadows at dawn, and she had just enough time to react before she looked down at her feet and blushed. Then she remembered her manners and looked up and offered a tentative smile. She wondered if Narcissa remembered that day in her drawing room, when she screamed her throat raw and left a pool of sick and urine and filthy Mudblood tears on her marble floor.

Narcissa nodded at her gravely, and Hermione knew that Narcissa remembered and that she shouldn't wait for an apology. There were too many things to apologize for as things stood.

She looked up at Snape, hoping. Hoping. But he wasn't looking at her; he was still saying something to Narcissa. She was a tall woman, the top of her head reaching his eyes, and he did not have to bend his head very much for his lips to reach her ear. His robes almost brushed Hermione's arm as they left the room.

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In the darkness, she knows the texture of his sweat-slicked limbs and the sound of his ragged breathing. It took two years before he let her see his body in the light, but they turn it off anyway, because there is something about the immensity of night that ravishes and ignites. In the darkness, she traces with her fingers the angle of his jaw, the lines of old grievances around his mouth, the hard ridge of his cumbersome nose, the dip of his collarbone, the hollow between his shoulderblades, the crags of his spine.

"Severus. Severus." His name on her lips sounds like the whistling of a blade.

"What?"

"Severus."

"Granger. What do you want?"

"Nothing. I just felt like saying your name."

She thinks this is what she said. She knows he is looking at her now, the way he looked at her before. In the darkness, his black is even darker, and it puts the unfeeling night sky to shame. This is how it should be.

"Severus."

His name on her lips has the same cadence as her heartbeat.

"Hermione," he replies, amused at first.

But then, he buries a hand in her hair.

"Hermione."

He busses her cheek with his nose, which wouldn't have worked with anyone else, but his nose is just the right shape for it.

"Hermione. Hermione. Hermione."

Inside, she feels hectic and disquieted. Her name on his lips is crisp and clean like the first dew of a spring morning.

"You said you were going to give me something. You told me not to ask about it, but you never gave it to me. What was it?"

He doesn't say anything. He kisses his way up her neck, and she closes her eyes, willing the tightness in her throat to go away.

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He came back because of Narcissa.

Narcissa Malfoy, who presided over Death Eater dinners, and yet could not stand the sight of blood. Narcissa Malfoy, who cried when she was told that she couldn't use magic in the safehouses because they could track you if you did. Narcissa Malfoy, who would rather go for weeks without bathing, rather than ask them how to turn on the hot water. Narcissa Malfoy, who wiped the vomit out of Hermione's face when she once Apparated outside the White House and they were the only two people there, and Hermione was moaning about God and Hell and pounding on the walls and please, please, Lavender was taken, please someone go back out there.

Narcissa was perhaps his only friend, even now, when everyone thought him a hero. He was still a fucking wanker, and he made it clear to everyone that it wasn't them he did it for. He loved her, maybe. Not like Lily. Never like Lily. But somehow he loved her, and he needed her, in the way that someone needs water in their throats, or the way that someone needs the sky to keep stretching over them.

She died like the rest of them; it took less than a minute, and in two hours she was under the ground. If he mourned her, he did not show it.

Narcissa did not have a gravestone. That was reserved for after the war, when they told each other that they would have the time for proper funerals. If she did have one, Hermione thought that he would stand in front of it in stoic silence, staring at her name etched in stone. It didn't matter anymore that he loved her, or that he lost her, because all of them had loved and lost so much, and every day they were reminded that they held so much more in their powerless fists, and the world was waiting to tear it away from them.

A few words were said. Narcissa had given them all she knew, which was a lot, considering her former position with the Death Eaters. All she asked was that they never inquire about the whereabouts of her husband and her son, which was fine with everyone. Hermione passed him in the kitchen of the Sunny House, and she croaked out something she meant to be politely commiserating. He didn't look at her. The last time he did was that night at the Shack, almost a year and a half ago.

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"I thought you quit."

"Yes, well. I thought you didn't snore. I would never have agreed to let you sleep in my bed, had I known."

"I do *not*. Snore."

"Oh, but you do. In fact, I'd wager you could beat even Weasl..."

"I could *not*. And stop trying to change the subject, Severus. Those things will kill you, as you very well know."

"Will they really? Well, now," he drawls, raising a skeptical eyebrow at her. Then he smirks wickedly. "Do you know, once you everfarted under the covers. More than once, actual..."

"Shut up," she says, blushing fiercely. She thought that had been a dream. She looks up to find him staring at her.

"Come here, Granger," he says, giving her *that* look, and her heart skips on a beat.

"No. I refuse to kiss you when your mouth tastes like nicotine and tar and lung cancer."

"Ah. Now that you put it that way." He drops his cigarette to the ground and stomps it out with his boot. He likes to do this sometimes: shock her into silence by agreeing with her. It doesn't happen often enough, so it keeps her on her toes like he knew it would. He looks up at her and smiles slow and heavy, and she remembers how his indolent smirk was always her downfall.

"You have to brush your teeth," she says, trying not to smile.

He growls at her and grabs her by the hip and presses her to him. "Are you certain I can't possibly...*convince* you?" he says, and she can almost feel his breath against the shell of her ear. With one hand he pushes her hair aside, and he skims his lips down the line of her neck. He smells of smoke and leaves, old sweat and cool water. She smiles, because she can't help it anymore.

"You smell gross."

His answering laugh rumbles deep in his chest, and she thinks she can feel his lungs expanding against her skin. He is wearing a shirt so thin that she knows he might be cold, so she presses a kiss to his breastbone. He pulls her even closer, ever closer, and rests his mouth against her temple, his bottom lip dragging slightly against her hair as he buries his nose in it.

"And you farted in your sleep."

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They were given different missions this time. According to their abilities, their superiors said. Harry was good at being a leader, so he was usually put on the frontlines on the raids and such. Ron was one of their top strategists, so he was often at headquarters, wherever that was. She no longer had the clearance to know such things. She, on the other hand, was on medic duty, jumping from safehouse to safehouse with supplies and information. Sometimes, she brought letters. Most of the time, it was just a rubbish bag of soup tins and bar soap and old copies of the Daily Prophet. There wasn't any more research to be done at this point, so she volunteered for this.

At first, she hated it. Not knowing things. Being relegated to itinerant nurse. At first, it felt to her like she was slacking off. Eventually, she got used to the isolation of moving from location to location. Sometimes, she would get so immersed in her own head that whenever she saw someone she knew, it would take her a while to adjust to seeing a familiar face besides her own.

Despite the exhaustion, despite the broken sleep and hurried conversations, there was a peace in not seeing the same people for more than three days that she found and was grateful for. What most people don't realise is that you can only change the world so much before you have to let things go. She killed one piece of Voldemort, and helped find the others. That was enough participation for a lifetime. After a while, she was content with her role on the sidelines. In the end, she volunteered because she was a Gryffindor, and there was nothing else to do, and after all, loyalty was her calling card.

She was in the Old House when he found her, the one with the shag carpets that smelt of naphthalene and the sagging chimney. She was restocking the cupboards with tins of meat processed beyond all recognition and packets of dried pasta.

"Miss Granger."

She actually laughed at that one, because it's been three years since anyone called her that.

"What is it, Snape?" She examined a tin of onion soup closely in the dim light. Merlin, it's two years since the expiration date.

"Are you waiting for me to thank you? Do you want me to sink to my knees and kiss your feet, is that it?"

She looked at him. "What?"

"What did Potter and Weasley say? Did they congratulate you for being the only one...*sosweet*, so *kind*...the only one to see through my *facade*? Did they give you an award for saving the martyr, for giving the double agent a second fucking chance?"

She threw the expired tin in the rubbish, but missed. The tin clattered to the floor and rolled under the formica table. "What the hell are you talking about..."

"*Fuck you*. You think you're some kind of saviour, don't you, looking down at us from your lofty pedestal.*Shit*. How does the fucking blood smell from up there, Granger? Can you even smell it still?"

She sniffed at him. "Are you *drunk*?"

"Does it offend you, then? Does it make you want to fix me? The nasty spy with a heart of gold, buried underneath all that spite. You think you can tell me what to do just because you saved my life? You think you fucking own me..."

"I never said a *thing* about that! What the bloody hell is your problem?*God*. It's almost two years ago, Snape. Get over it."

"I would if you stop walking around with your nose in the a..."

"So I saved your life. That's what I do now, Snape. They don't put me in the battles because I'm crap at recognizing people in the darkness and because I'm better at saving lives. I saved Lavender when they brought her back, I saved Finch Fletchley when they put him in a bloody coma. I'm not lording it over anyone, it's just my job. Get over it."

"Get over it?" he laughed harshly. "I see. So you *are* waiting for us to thank you, then. Well, *thank you*, Granger, for seeing the fucking goodness in me. *Thank you* for forcing me to live through another bloody war. *Thank you* for forever blowing my cover. *Thank you* for condemning me to this...to this..."

"I'm sorry: so I should have left you there? Is that what you're saying?" she said, her voice shrill.

"Yes. Yes, Granger. You should have fucking kept your presumptuous, self-satisfied, fat fucking head out of it and left me there," he sneered, his voice dangerously low.

"Okay. Okay," she bit out, her shoulders shaking with anger. "Why don't you just get yourself killed in a raid, if you want to die so badly?"

She chuckled a tin of soup at his feet and it hit the tip of his boot. He didn't even flinch.

She pushed past him to leave the kitchen. When she was in the other room, she heard a tin crash into the wall behind her.

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She runs her fingers through his hair, and it slides over her knuckles like algae in a cold pond.

"Wha...what you doing..." he mutters into the pillow. In the past, he never let himself be caught in this state of half-wakefulness because it could have cost him his life. They live in better times, though. And a sleepy Severus Snape is indeed quite a sight to behold.

"Severus. Severus, wake up."

It takes a few seconds.

"What? Granger. Get the bloody hell off my stomach. I can't breathe."

She rolls her eyes.

"I made breakfast, you wanker."

He opens one bleary eye.

"You. You made breakfast."

"Yes, I did."

"The cooker doesn't work."

"I'm a witch, Severus. I don't need a cooker to cook."

He raises an eyebrow.

"Oh, fine, you bloody git. I Apparated to Molly's and she gave me what's left of her fry up to take home, and I, out of the kindness of my own heart, waited two sodding hours for you to wake up so we could eat it together. Are you happy now?"

He turns to look at her. To really *look* at her, and something tautens in her eyelids. She touches a finger to the fine hairs above his ear. Black was always his color, but silver works just as well for her.

"Yes," he whispers.

"What?"

He runs the tip of his index finger down the bridge of her nose, which is funny because she always does that to him when he's asleep.

"I mean, yes. I am happy."

She screws her eyes shut.

"I never regretted it, Severus."

"Perhaps you should Summon the dishes up here. My back is hardly in working order. The last twenty-four hours were quite..*draining*." His mouth curls lasciviously around the last word.

"Severus. Listen to me. I never regretted it."

"I suppose you could always find a way to tempt me into getting up." He waggles his eyebrows at her, and she remembers how much she loved it when he got playful.

"Even when they told me. Everyone told me I would, even Narcissa. Did you know that? She came to me before she... She came to me and told me that you would always love her. Lily, I mean. Not Narcissa. I thought she thought I was someone else because she was half-delirious that time. Do you remember that? There was a fever going around."

He sneezes, and it is the most endearing thing she has ever seen.

"Fuck. It's bloody dusty around this sodding hovel. I've no idea why I acquiesced when you said you wanted to live here, Granger."

She looks at him with something desperate and beseeching in her eyes.

"Severus. I never asked you before, because I thought I... Because I couldn't. Do you love her still?"

He doesn't answer. He throws the covers off his naked body with a swiftness that belies his many complaints about his aging back. The gritty light outlines his silhouette, and she takes a moment to admire the contours of his shapely thighs, the indents on his sharp hips, the shadows that mark his ribcage. His wan skin fits him in a way that takes her breath away, like molten candle wax poured over the perfect cast of his bones and set in a perfect mold of his slim muscles.

He reminds her of a tree twisting in a hurricane, with his weather-stained features and the hunger ever-burning in his eyes. He reminds her of a lake just at the point of freezing over.

She looks at his face to find him smirking at her, and *Merlin*, can he make her blush.

"Feed me, Granger. I require nourishment," he pronounces with the air of a despot. Her chin wobbles a bit, and she wishes she could still feel something, anything at all.

"Okay, Severus. Okay."

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"...most got yourself *killed*, with that stunt you pul..."

"...risk assessment, and I decided that the reward was worth the bloody risk. Or did you not want to win the fucking war..."

"...had orders, Snape! What? *What?* How dare you ask me that? I. Am. A *Mudblood*. If I don't win the bloody war then I might as well turn my wand on my head right now."

She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. He muttered something under his breath.

"What about three weeks ago? You went on your own to that house we discovered in Cornwall, even though Kingsley told you to wait for backup."

"I got their bloody maps, didn't I? If I hadn't taken some fucking initiative, then we would have ended up with noth..."

"That's not the point, Snape! What about February, in Durham? You didn't end up with a bloody thing that time, did you? *Jesus*. You were a spy for twenty years and you fucked up. You fucked up, and you almost got Hannah Abbott killed."

He didn't answer her.

"Just... Just hold still, okay? I need to stitch this up. It doesn't... It doesn't make it right, Snape. I shouldn't be telling you this. You of all people should know this already. Revenge doesn't fix anything."

He flinched as she dabbed at the gash on his back. The garish purple was vivid and jarring against his waxy pallor.

"I don't give a fuck what you think, Granger. Don't you try to tell me about revenge. He killed Narcissa. It was only just. Don't tell me you wouldn't have done the same thing."

Her breath hitched, and her throat suddenly got very itchy.

"There was a time when..."

She tried again.

"There was a time when I would have. But that's not justice, Snape. If I don't know about revenge, then you don't know about justice. You want to know what justice is? Justice is a knee in your gut in the dark, a razor blade in your instep, a Slicing Hex at your throat without a word of warning. Trust me, you don't want justice. None of us do."

"Ah," he huffed out with wry amusement. "Ah. Thank you for reminding me that they used to call you the brightest witch of your age. Do they still call you that, then? Well, aren't you wise beyond your years? Did the war *break* you, Granger? Did it open your eyes? Are you all barren and bitter inside?"

She pinched her lips shut and exhaled loudly through her nose.

"Piss off, Snape. All I know is that it doesn't make a bloody bit of difference who wins the war to someone who's dead."

"What if I'm already dead?" he said so quietly that it took her several seconds to understand. When she did, her fingers slipped into the torn edge of his skin, and he hissed through his teeth.

He stood and snatched his bloodstained shirt from the back of his chair, wincing as he drew it over his shoulders. They were in the Sunny House, so called because it faced west and it had far too many windows to be deemed practical. From the sun room on the third floor, when the skies were clear, you could see out for miles and miles into the surrounding emptiness of the fields because the Sunny House was on top of a hill.

It was mid-morning, and the sunlight was sickeningly resplendent. It glinted and searched for lighter colors in his hair, but it found nothing but unrelenting black.

"What was that supposed to mean?"

"Where is the lavatory?"

"Why?"

"Why do you think, Granger?"

She fixed him with a beady eye.

"Second floor, third door to your left."

She waited for him to disappear up the staircase before slumping into a chair and covering her face with her hands. She cringed when the tang of dried blood hit her nostrils, and she realised that she forgot to wash her hands after stitching him up. Upstairs, the pipes started clamoring with an oncoming rush of hot water. The sound was too heavy to be a flushing toilet, so she concluded that he must be in the shower. Then she berated herself for wondering what Severus Snape was doing in the bathroom.

*What if I'm already dead?*

The chair clattered to the floor when she leapt to her feet. She ran up the rickety staircase. She passed the first, the second, the third door. She skidded as she stopped.

"Snape! Open the door!"

She tried the knob, but of course it was locked. She started pounding on the door, wondering if she had enough strength to shove it open with her shoulder.

"Snape! Don't make me break this door down! I have to stay here for another three days, and this is the only bathroom, and I can't repair doors without magic! Open the bloo..."

"What. The fucking hell. Do you want."

He only opened the door far enough for her to see three quarters of his face, but his glare chilled her bones and wormed its way into her veins. One side of his head was wet, and his hair stuck in stringy clumps to his face and neck. There were drops of water leaving streaks through the mud caked on his skin. He looked ridiculous.

"We've run out of potions here. Most of the supply are sent to headquarters, and the more serious injuries are Portkeyed there. You'll find the cupboard by the sink empty."

"What?"

"The tub won't fill up either. Did you see that little fissure by the top of it? You could probably get the water up to your arse crack, at the highest."

"Are you alright, Granger?" he asked her slowly.

"The razor I gave you is too dull for your purposes. It can barely slice through hair, so it won't work on your wrists."

"What are you on ab...I'm not trying to kill myself, you daft bint."

"Of course you'd say that. But I won't let you. I'm in charge of you as long as you're injured, you tosser, and I'll be buggered sideways with a Flamebolt before I let you snuff

it on my watch."

"A Flamebolt."

"A Flame... broom. Whatever. That's what it was about, isn't it? The recklessness? It isn't you, Snape. And *know* you..."

"You don't."

"Okay, no. I don't. But I think everyone who's ever heard of you can safely say that you are the least reckless man in the entirety of Great Britain, and possibly the world. It's not worth it, Snape. You've got a lot to live f..."

"Will you just stop your yakking for one fucking second? I am not trying to commit suicide. What the devil do you take me for, one of your melodramatic headcases? Did you think I would honestly slit my wrists and bleed to death in a fucking bathtub with no one but the Great Swot of Gryffindor within touching distance of my prone corpse? Did yo..."

"What? Are you implying that I would *touch* your prone corpse? Are you insa..."

"...ould recite fucking *Hamlet*?"

"You know Hamlet?"

"*Insane*," he pushed out through gritted teeth, his nostrils flaring. "Is barging into the loo while a grown man is showering and accusing him for absolutely no reason of attempting suicide. Insane is thinking you even have the right to stop me in the first place."

"Ha! So you *were* trying to kill yourse..."

The last thing she heard was a great, big, beleaguered sigh before he slammed the door in her face.

"How are things at the Grey House?"

Three children later, and Ginny Potter is as radiant and dewy as ever.

"Good. Great. Things are great." Hermione pops a chip into her mouth.

"You told me you were having trouble with the dust."

"Yeah. I mean, it's not such a big deal, really. I can handle it."

"You know," Ginny begins cautiously. "I know a bloke with a flat downtown. Everything's set up: the Floo Network, basic security wards. It's even got a few modern Muggle conveniences. Harry said it's got a marcowave," she finishes with a smug smile.

"Ah, yes. All I ever wanted was *amarcowave*," Hermione drawls sarcastically.

"Stop that. You sound like..." Ginny stops suddenly. Then she clears her throat. "You know it's for your own good."

"My own good, yes. Thank you, Ginny. Sincerely." Hermione offers a conciliatory smile. "But I have no intention of leaving the Grey House. I don't..."

"What is that?" Ginny cuts her off quietly, her eyes on Hermione's hand.

"Oh," she replies dumbly, shoving her hand under her thigh. "It's nothing. I found it."

"Where did you find it, Hermione?"

"Why does it matter? I found it. It's mine," she says sullenly, aware that she probably sounds like one of Ginny's little boys. The thought makes her scowl even more pronounced.

"Hermione," Ginny sighs sadly, placing her warm, small, slightly sticky palm on Hermione's arm. "Hermione. Don't you see what this is doing to you? I can't...we can't stand seeing you like this. *We love* you, Hermione. He doesn't..."

"Don't you dare, Ginevra," she whispers. "Don't you dare finish that sentence if you ever want to see me again."

Ginny draws her hand back like she is burnt, a look of anger and hurt on her face. She sets her jaw in that determined way that makes her look so much like (Fred and) George.

"Stop being *pathetic*, Hermione. You're being so...*Merlin*. I hardly recognise you anymore."

"Good afternoon, Ginny," Hermione chokes out, before twisting her body. She appears with a pop among the overflowing rubbish bins and piles of broken bricks in a rain-soaked alley. Her feet smack stridently against the ground as she hurries to the end of the street, her heartbeat soaring as she steps into the shadow of the Grey House. The sun is blotted out by thick, steely clouds, and the wind is faint and cool and earth-tinged on her face, and it reminds her of him.

"Severus? Severus!" she calls as she fumbles for her keys and shoves the door open. When it shuts behind her, it feels like all sound is sucked out of the room, and she is left standing by herself with the grubby dregs of a lifetime.

She checks the bedroom first, trailing her fingers across the dust on the armoire. Then the bathroom. The dining room. Her creaking footsteps seem to grow louder.

"Severus? Where are you?"

She finds him in the kitchen, leaning against the counter and obviously waiting for her.

"Good morning, *dearest*."

Even at home he has taken to wearing his robes. She smiles at him warmly.

"Hi. Good morning, darling. My darling."

She walks to him and wraps her arms about his waist.

"Severus, don't be angry. I found this in the box in your closet the other day. You said you were going to give me something. You told me not to ask about it, but you never gave it to me. Is this it?"

She leans back to show him the slim gold band around her finger, inlaid with a single cut emerald.

He says nothing but places a hand on the side of her neck, his thumb skimming her jaw, and looks at her. Just looks at her. Her hands clutch at his shoulders, and she can feel the blood pounding in her ears, and she presses the fingers of one hand to her lips, trying to quell the sudden tender spasm of hurt in her gut, and still he says nothing and just looks at her.

---

She woke up to find him staring at her from a chair in the corner, the shadows imbuing his features with a grief that wasn't his.

"Does it look hideous?" she whispered.

He stood up and approached her bed, and for a wild moment she thought he might take her hand, but he just clenched his fist at his side.

"Yes. You look like Crabbe."

"Really?"

"Worse than Crabbe. You look like Bulstrode."

She smiled at that, lifting one corner of her mouth up high.

"They said I was lucky I didn't get any scarring. I can't feel it, though. What does it look like?"

She lifted her hand to touch the left side of her face, feeling her permanent, one-sided glower. Facial paralysis wasn't too common an ailment in the Wizarding world, and no one knew what to do about it when they brought her into the sick ward. The more experienced Mediwitches and Healers were all at headquarters or St. Mungo's, and there was a waiting list for the minor injuries to be treated.

"If you frown at everyone all the time, then no one would be able to tell."

"But then I'd look like *you*. I think I'd rather stick with Bulstrode, thanks."

He clenched his lips and said nothing. She wondered if she had offended him. She never knew, these days. Sometimes, he was as touchy as Ron. Other times, she would say the worst, most horrid things and he would take it with stoic acceptance, and she would have to apologize afterwards because she could never stand the way the guilt settled in the back of her throat.

He furrowed his brows, and he had the same look on his face as he did when he was reading a particularly abominable essay, back in the Potions classroom eons and eons ago.

She watched, entranced, as he uncurled his balled fingers and slowly brought them up to her face. He touched his fingers to her left cheek.

"Can you..." He cleared his throat. "Can you feel this?"

She felt like that moment when you trip and flail your arms, and the world tilts in front of your eyes and leaves you hanging unbalanced in its wake.

"No..." she breathed.

He nodded gravely. He looked at her like he was about to tell her something very important, but he didn't speak. Instead, he stretched his fingers and rested his palm against her cheek, cupping the side of her face. If she could feel it, she knew that the heat of his hand would sink into her skin, and it would leave an imprint there that she would remember in fifty years. A hundred.

"Can you feel this?" he whispered.

"I..." she faltered when she saw him staring at her mouth, and she was suddenly very conscious of the placement of her teeth and tongue. She wondered what she looked like to him; scowling with the left side of her face, and impossibly wide-eyed on the right side. She had the distinct urge to cough, or clear her throat, but her body was working against her.

He started bending at the waist, and still he wasn't speaking.

Oh, she thought.

Oh.

Her heart was knocking itself senseless against her chest wall, and she could feel her right cheek heating up. She wondered what she should do with her hands because he was still too far up above her for her to wrap her arms around him. She settled for bunching her fingers in the covers instead.

Then he was close enough for her to map every line of stress on his face. She knew them quite well, now. She settled her eyes on the thin, hook-shaped scar below his lip, the one he got in Durham. And then he was closer, and a strand of hair swung forward from behind his ear and tickled her neck. And then he was closer still, and she shut her eyes, and her head was suddenly so very silent, and he was kissing her.

It was chaste, the barest brush of softness, and she had trouble with moving her mouth. She waited for something, for an explosion between her ears, or a sudden jolt in the earth beneath them, or for her lungs to start working again, but his hand came up to grasp her arm, and he fitted his lips to her half-scowling ones, so she wrapped her arms around his back and pulled him closer and kissed him harder.

He groaned and pulled back just enough to whisper, "*Can you feel this?*" against her mouth, his hot breath blooming against her face, and she felt something fiercely alive in her stomach.

"Yes," she whispered back. "Yes. Yes."

Then he made a sound, like a growl or a snarl, and he pulled her up by the shoulders and held her so her upper body was slanted against his, and kissed her, and kissed her, and *kissed* her.

His lips were soft and cool and audacious, and they looked so thin but they felt plump and sensuous between her teeth. He tasted like lightning and something... something bitter and wonderful, and she thought her heart would either deflate and collapse, or drop down to her stomach floor, or burst out of her ears and shatter right in front of him.

He kissed her for seconds, or for minutes, or for hours, gripping the back of her head and angling her mouth just so, before he started pulling back, gently lowering her back into the bed. Their hard breathing seemed to echo in her tiny room. She stared at his chin.

His hands moved to her shoulders and tightened there before he stepped back from her entirely. Her brain went into overdrive right then, trying to piece together cause and effect and cause and what *the hell* just happened. The nerves in her mouth, the part of it she could feel, seemed to curl in on themselves and implode, tiny sparks dancing across her lips. She felt his eyes on her face, and suddenly she felt like pulling the covers over her head.



"I..." he began. It was strange, because she'd never heard him so hesitant before.

"I..." he began again, but he never finished his thought. She looked up as she heard his footsteps hard and fast and walking out of the room.

---

"I am not her," she breathes in the darkness.

She thinks he is asleep, but his shoulders go still, and she knows that he heard her.

"No. You are not."

He turns to her and takes her in his arms, and suddenly she is sorry for everything, for doubting him, for not having the courage to call him by his given name to his face, for not telling him what he was to her, what he still is to her, so she does.

"I didn't want children with Ron," she whispers into his chest, her tears soaking through his skin. "But I think I might have been alright with a couple of them. With you. Perhaps a boy first, then a girl. Or two girls would be nice too."

He holds her tighter, his legs sliding against hers, his fingers tangling in the back of her shirt.

"They'd have greasy, bushy hair, and gigantic front teeth, which would be hidden from notice by their equally gigantic noses."

His hands lower to her bum, and he presses his loins into her, and she feels an answering heat in the pit of her gut.

"They'd be insufferable, and arrogant, and rude, know-it-all little shits. And I would teach them to raise their hands compulsively whenever someone asks a question. And you would teach them to billow as they stalk the halls."

He reminds her of the north, where the glaciers are. He reminds her of the frozen horizon.

"They'd have to be sorted into Ravenclaw, of course, because we don't want to play favorites with our own children. And Hufflepuff is out of the question."

Black was always his color. Black like the brutal glint of light on a scalpel. Black like smoke. Black like memory.

---

"I think I should like to die by a lake."

He didn't respond.

"Wouldn't you, Snape? It's an awfully poignant way to go. It's like dying in a storybook."

"I think we've established that I am not trying to kill myself. Stop trying to pry it out of me."

"Oh, don't be such a killjoy. Come on, just tell me. If you could die in a way of your own choosing, how do you want to do it? I'd like to die by a lake. At sunrise. In the winter, I think. Yes, in the winter, with two feet of snow all around me, and my fading breath clouding the air."

His raised eyebrow dripped contempt.

"You are a fool," he said, brandishing his finger at her like a weapon.

"Just tell me, you tit. I thought you wanted to be friends."

"I don't recall ever saying such a preposterous thing. And don't call me a tit, you dithering cun..."

"Hey!"

"Yes?" he grinned.

"That was exponentially more insulting than what I called you!"

"Are you going to cry, Granger?"

"*Are you going to cry, Granger?*" she mimicked in sing-song, pulling a revolting face, which she imagined was made all the more revolting by the fact that it only worked on the right side of it.

"Charming."

"Is that why...mmhm...is that why you're licking my nipple?"

He released it from his mouth with a pop. He watched her skin pucker in the cool air with a prurient fascination.

"It's one of the reasons."

"It won't be a frozen lake though. That would be too sad. Too symbolic."

"Bloody *hell*," he groused, rolling away from her and flinging an arm over his eyes.

"I mean, I want the whole scenery to be appropriately sad, because it's my place of death after all. But sad in a good way. In a nice, wholesome way."

"There is something very wrong with you. I don't think you realise that it isn't normal for people to contemplate their place of death with as much detail as you do. Especially now, when we're both *naked*," he intoned irritably.

"Have you ever been anywhere up north? I mean *really* up north, like in Scandinavia or something?"

"Hmm," he shrugged.

"It's lovely in the spring when the ice melts and you can hear the water running over the rocks. It sounds like little birds flapping their wings."

He snorted his opinion of little birds. She ignored him.

"But when the water freezes, it's quite a staggering sight. It gets so *quiet*. And still. It's like everything has gone underground, or migrated, or just up and left and the entire world seems empty, and...what?"

"It's winter, Granger. That's what happens in the winter every year, and in the spring the sun thaws everything and your fucking rabbits and forest creatures come out of

hiding."

"Yes, I *know* that. It's just... It's sad, okay? Don't you ever just find yourself in a certain place, at a certain time, and just *feel* things? "

He rolled his eyes.

"You don't have to take it personally. Lakes only freeze on the surface because ice is less dense than water. Everything is still alive underneath. I was under the impression that you were somewhat intelligent. You disappoint me."

She pinched his waist, and he glared at her. She was used to his glares, and they no longer frightened her like they did in school.

"Yes, but you can't tell that it's alive, can you? It might as well be frozen through."

"Have you ever heard of spring turnover? When the ice melts the variations in temperature result in stratification, and the less dense water rises to the top of the lake, which distributes the oxygen and nutrients that were collected at the bottom."

"So the lake has to freeze if it's to survi..."

"Stop trying to find metaphors in everything, Granger. Stop trying to analyse completely trivial weather processes. It's not healthy. Besides, I've seen you tottering about on those ridiculous skates on the Black Lake. You didn't seem very sad, then." He gave her a pointed look.

"That was before."

"Before what?"

"Just... before. Before things."

"Right."

---

"I am not her."

She thinks he is asleep, but his shoulders go still, and she knows that he heard her.

"No. You are not."

He reaches for her.

"I love you, Severus."

She can't stand the look in his eyes, so she gets up and leaves the room.

---

"I thought you said you weren't trying to kill yourself."

He swatted her hand away as she brought it to his face.

"I wasn't. Stop it."

"You said you would be more careful."

"I thought you liked your men brave and rash, Granger. What's the matter, was that not Gryffindor enough for you?"

"This isn't...that wasn't courage, Severus. That was desperation. That was... that was pathetic."

"You think you know this world so well," he seethed, and she heard his unspoken admonishment.*You think you know me so well.*

"Courage is knowing that there will always be unhappiness in the world and having the strength to get up out of bed every morning in spite of that."

"Fuck off, Granger. For once in your life, just fuck off."

"Is it... after all this time. Is it still about *her*? Now that you've done your duty to her, you have no more reason to live. Is that it?"

He stiffened under her touch, so she pulled her fingers back and pressed them to her mouth.

---

"I am not her."

She thinks he is asleep, but his shoulders go still, and she knows that he heard her.

"No. You are not."

"Fuck you. *Fuck* you," she spits, flinging the ring at his face. It hits him in the forehead and falls to the ground.

The words *For Lily, Always* wink at her from inside the wobbling band. He continues to look at her, his eyes silver, his gaze even and without recognition.

---

It's over, they told her. Over. Over. Three years of her life. Over.

They found the location of the enemy's main headquarters, and a raid was staged for next month. They no longer had to jump around the safehouses. She had nowhere to go.

She was in the Green House when he found her, the one he had entered with his hand on Narcissa Malfoy's elbow, and she watched him and waited for him to look at her. She was restocking the cupboards with tins of soup and beans. She did not know why, because no one would be coming back to the Green House when she left.

"Miss Granger."

She smiled at that, because he never called her anything but just Granger unless he's angry. Or horny. Or both.

"Professor," she smirked.

He snaked his hands around her hips from behind, his fingers toying with the hem of her shirt and his nose buried in her hair.

"Are you using my shampoo?"

"Whatever gave you that idea?"

She did, because it smelled better than hers, but she would never tell him.

He gave no response. He did that a lot, she thought. Falling silent at certain moments, as if he were trying to absorb the quiet into his mind and remember the placement of his hands on her body, of his lips on her neck, the texture of their voices tangling in the air.

"Where are you going after?" she mutters.

"After what?"

"After. Just after." She closed her eyes and tried to picture his face behind her eyelids. "After things."

He took a moment to answer, and she wondered what he was looking at.

"I might restock on potions supplies." He moved the strap of her top aside and pressed a kiss to her shoulder.

"I might get something to eat." He flattened his palm against her stomach and pushed her back into his body.

"Before that I probably have to go to St. Mungo's. They want us all there for evaluatio..."

She turned in his arms and looked at him, running her fingers up his back and burying them in his hair.

"Severus. Where are you going to go?"

His grip on her waist tightened.

"I have a house."

"You have a house."

"It's very dusty. And very ugly. It's in Manchester."

"You have an ugly, dusty house in Manchester."

"Stop repeating my wo..."

"Stop repeating my word..."

"Granger," he growled, leaning her backward and nipping at the skin below her ear. She held him hard to herself, breathing in his scent, and she thought that he must have been born in the north where the glaciers are, where the trout streams flow and the eagle flies, because that was what he smelled like.

---

"You said you would come back. Even if you were choking on your own blood, you said."

"Yes, well. I thought you didn't snore. I would never have agreed to let you sleep in my bed had I known."

He reminds her of finger tracks in the dust. He reminds her of a frozen lake in winter before the turnover. He reminds her of a lot of things.

"I miss you every day. I sometimes wish I'd never met you."

"Oh, but you do. In fact, I'd wager you could beat even Weas..."

"But you lied to me. You said you would come back and you lied to me."

"Will they really? Well, now," he drawls, raising a skeptical eyebrow at her. Then he smirks wickedly. "Do you know, once you even farted under the covers. More than once, actual..."

"Shut up," she says, her face heating up. "You can't keep...you're a fucking joke, Snape! You...you're not him! You're nothing but a silhouette, a bloody *shadow*, and you use his voice and his body but you don't know the things he does, you don't feel what he felt. You. Are. Not. *Mine*."

"Come here, Granger," he says, giving her *that* look, and her heart stutters on a beat.

"No."

"Ah. Now that you put it that way." He drops his cigarette to the ground and stomps it out with his boot. He likes to do this sometimes: shock her into silence by agreeing with her. It doesn't happen often enough, so it keeps her on her toes like he knew it would. He looks up at her and smiles slow and heavy, and she remembers how his indolent smirk was always her downfall.

"I can't...I've got to stop. I can't keep doing this..."

He growls at her and grabs her by the hip and presses her to him. "Are you certain I can't possibly...*convince* you?" he says, and she can almost feel his breath against the shell of her ear. With one hand he pushes her hair aside and skims his lips down the line of her neck. He smells of smoke and leaves, old sweat and cool water.

"I can't keep you, Severus. They...everyone's worrying about me, and they're right. I can barely remember things now. I think I might be going...I told myself I would remember, but you'd be surprised how quickly things fade away, even the most precious ones. That's why Harry tried to help me. This isn't how it was meant to be. "

She pulls back and looks at him. Black was always his color, and the silver she sees in front of her is sickening. And heart-breaking. And soul-wrenching.

"There isn't always a turnover in the spring, Severus."

Her vision is starting to blur.

"Sometimes... sometimes things stay frozen."

His answering laugh rumbles deep in his chest, and she feels it against her skin. He is wearing a shirt so thin that she thinks he might be cold, so she presses a kiss to his breastbone. He pulls her even closer, closer, closer and rests his mouth against her temple, his bottom lip dragging slightly against her hair as he buries his nose in it.

"And you farted in your sleep."

She feels her throat start to seize and clog, her heart stutter in her chest, and she wishes she could hold him to her until she dies.

---

"I have something for you."

"For me?" she said with a cloying sweetness, fluttering her eyelashes at him in a way that she knew disgusted him.

"But you have to wait for it. Don't ask me about it. Don't even try looking for it, I'm *warning* you. This house is fucking malevolent, and there are certain things that you shouldn't touch."

"Oh, you know me so well." She tugged on the collar of his heavy cloak, smoothing the lapels over his chest. "When will you be back?"

"You heard Shackbolt. They chose an empty warehouse in the city. It's fairly straightforward. I should be back before dawn. I'll give it to you then."

"I still don't see why I shouldn't go with you," she whined. "I'm perfectly adept at defending myself, and you could u..."

"Hermione," he said, and something in his eyes shut her up. He looked uneasy.

"They need you here. You know that healing is what you're best at. You need to be here," he said, reassuring her with his thumb rubbing circles into her palm.

"Alright. You...you're right. I'll see you tomorrow, then. I just wish..."

She pulled him forward and kissed him senseless, and when he pulled back he had a silly little smile on his lips. It was the youngest she'd ever seen him.

---

"How did you do it, Severus? How could you bear it, when she died?"

Courage is knowing that there will always be unhappiness in the world and having the strength to get up out of bed every morning in spite of that.

"Shut up! Shut up! How could you know when all you've ever done was hide? You coward! You bloody coward!"

Courage is knowing that there will always be unhappiness in the world and having the strength to get up out of bed every morning in spite of that.

"Stop, please. Stop. Stop. Stop."

Courage is knowing that there will always be unhappiness in the world and having the strength to get up out of bed every morning in spite of that.

"I didn't mean it. When I said that you ought to get yourself killed in a raid if you wanted to die so badly. I didn't mean it."

He looks at her with his blank, empty, frozen, silver eyes.

"Harry said it helped him after the battle. With everyone that died he..."

"Are you going to cry, Granger?"

"He thought it was his fault, like he usually does. He said it helped him stay sane. He told me how Dumbledore knew how to make his memories take the form of... of a real person. I mean like, you could *feel* what you felt, and smell, and taste, and hear. And touch."

"I have a house."

"Dumbledore never told him how to do it. But I figured it out."

"Are you using my shampoo?"

"I could even make you step out of the Pensieve. And I could feel you *touch* me. Did you ever really know how clever I actually was? I think you only had the faintest idea. I really *am*, you know. The brightest witch of my age."

"It's winter, Granger. That's what happens in the winter every year, and in the spring the sun thaws everything and your fucking rabbits and forest creatures come out of hiding."

"I love you, Severus."

"You look like a harpy, Granger. Stop smiling like that."

"*Please...*"

"The cooker doesn't work."

"*Please!*" she screams.

The Pensieve falls to the ground with a sharp clang, spilling silver clouds all over the grimy floor. She watches in stony silence as her memories seep into the worn wood, and she fancies that they form his silhouette in the dust. She falls to her knees.

"No...no...no..." she mumbles to herself, scraping her fingers on the floor, trying to collect the silver into a little pile.

"No...*please*..." she chokes out as she tries to gather what was left of him.

---

In the darkness, she knows the texture of his sweat-slicked limbs and the sound of his ragged breathing. It took two years before he let her see his body in the light, but they turn it off anyway, because there is something about the immensity of night that ravishes and ignites. In the darkness, she traces with her fingers the angle of his jaw, the lines of old grievances around his mouth, the hard ridge of his cumbersome nose, the dip of his collarbone, the hollow between his shoulderblades, the crags of his spine.

"Severus. Severus." His name on her lips sounds like the whistling of a blade.

"What?"

"Severus."

"Granger. What do you want?"

"Nothing. I just felt like saying your name."

She thinks this is what she said. She knows he is looking at her now, like he looked at her before. In the darkness, his black is even darker. At least, it should be.

"Severus."

His name on her lips has the same cadence as her heartbeat.

"Hermione," he replies, amused at first.

But then he buries a hand in her hair.

"Hermione."

He busses her cheek with his nose, which wouldn't have worked with anyone else, but his nose is just the right shape for it.

"Hermione. Hermione. I love you. Hermione."

He kisses his way up her neck and she closes her eyes, willing the tightness in her throat to go away.

---

The window is open, and winter settles into the Grey House.

Sometimes she thinks that she made it okay, and maybe she just might wake up tomorrow. But with each passing winter, she understands that she didn't leave him behind nearly as much as she might have thought. Somewhere underneath, she still feels him there, and at times it is beautiful. At times it nearly makes up for the weariness in her eyes, and the heaviness in her joints, and the feeling of having all her major arteries excised and her spine ripped out of her skeleton and her heart aching like so much, so much, too much salt rubbed into the sores festering under her skin.

On the good days, she likes to think that there's a place for them, like the song.

Somewhere, a place for them.

On the bad days, she remembers all the things he reminds her of. Like the dust and the wind. Like the smell of his robes when she sometimes takes them out to drape around herself. Like the pockets of shadow in the corners of the room. Like the cadence of her heartbeat and the sibilants in his name. Like that moment between sleep and wakefulness. Like the sound of breathing in the darkness and how she sometimes pressed the pillows over her chest and imagined that it was his body moving over hers. Like the heat in the summer and the rustling in autumn. Like the falling snow, dirty and mangled and unwept.

On the really bad days, she remembers every word, every look, and she doubts each one. And she despises herself for it.

How could you?

How *could* you?

She loved him. She *loved* him, fiercely and without reason, and of this she is sure. Sometimes, he loved her too. But her love couldn't keep him, and sometimes, she wonders if she ever really had him. Maybe he treasured their time together. Or maybe he took it for what it was: a pleasant distraction in a time when all they could look forward to was the aftermath.

The window is open, and winter settles into the Grey House he gave her. There is nothing but the dust. It is all that is left.

She turns away from the dim cold greying light and traces silhouettes in the grit caked on the floor.