

recruits during a battle near Normandy — had helped Hermione puzzle together two things. First, France was publicly against the Great Order — something she'd suspected, but hadn't confirmed until now. Second, the Dark Lord was enraged about it enough to go on the offensive — something uncommon for him. She wondered why France mattered to him.

Another two hands, and she found out more. The name of a suspected traitor in Cirillo's cabinet. How Jugson was missing more than a hand.

Flint finally lost his secret to a round of jeers, revealing that Angelina was spotted in Bristol at a closed-down Apothecary. Hermione's mind conjured millions of possibilities, but in the end, she knew that she shouldn't read too much into it. After all, while *she* had been on the run, she'd needed Ditrany and Murtlap Essence more than anything else.

Theo didn't seem terribly put out when he folded, smugly announcing that Edinburgh would be hosting the Undersecretary to the Korean Minister.

Draco didn't lose, keeping his secret of who had escaped at Dover for another round. Hermione shoved aside her irritation that he hadn't told her before. She'd take it up with him later, but now was not the time.

By the end of the next, Pucey, having lost his gold and secrets several rounds before, began kissing Mortensen's neck as he listened to the game, only piping in every now and then. Goyle was doing something similar, only it seemed he had completely disregarded the game to focus on sloppily kissing Susan's mouth.

It was Warrington's turn to throw the dice. The Carrow Girl in his lap giggled when he offered her the dice to blow on, and he caught her lips with his as the dice tumbled across the table.

Hermione looked away from the scene as Theo called out the results of the roll. They played their first hand, exchanging chips and cards. And when it was time to bet their information, Theo offered another visitor to Edinburgh in the next month.

"Don't waste our time with that," Draco drawled. "I want to know

the two girls he'd bought at the Auction."

Rookwood. She tried to remember if he had been there the night before. "Does Rookwood keep a harem too?" she asked coolly.

His eyes landed on the vines over her shoulder. "Longbottom was found to be lacking for the purposes of Edinburgh Castle. Very few Death Eaters and dignitaries found him acceptable for private uses. And he was deemed uninspiring in the other uses for male slaves."

She felt a spike of panic in her chest.

*A lake with still waters.*

"What other uses?"

Draco pressed his lips together, and tightly said, "Arena fights. Slave versus slave."

Her body jerked away, turning to the windows. She breathed deep, pushing away the images her mind conjured.

"Arena fights," she repeated.

A thought dawned in her, and she spun back to him, finding him already watching her from his place near her bench.

"Have you ever seen Ron at these parties?"

She could see his jaw clench even from this far away. He replied with a stilted, "No. I haven't seen him since he was requested by the Dark Lord, before Macnair's death."

She nodded, trying to stitch together the pieces and file them away for later. Taking a deep breath and centering herself, she prepared to ask the one question she knew she didn't want to hear the answer to.

"And Ginny?" she said, and the words floated to him like a feather.

"Why is she no longer at the parties?"

She watched him swallow, and turn his eyes over her shoulder again.

"A few weeks ago, she broke a champagne glass and sliced the neck of a guard and the aide to the Hungarian Minister. Both are dead."

Hermione scarcely breathed, feelings the words like a bucket of water over her head. She tried to imagine Ginny, running feral through the

Lounge with the jagged stem of a crystal glass in her hand. She pressed her eyes closed, and said, “And I assume she didn’t get away with this?”

When Draco did not respond, she looked to him and found him staring out one of the Conservatory windows, eyes far away.

“Malfoy.”

“No, she did not get away with it.”

A deep breath. She crossed her arms, holding her cardigan closed.

“And?” she prompted.

“She was disciplined. Publicly.”

“Tell me what happened to her. I can handle it. I’ve seen what happens at these parties—”

His face snapped back to her and he hissed, “You haven’t seen *anything*, Granger.”

Her blood froze in her veins, and she fought to appear calm as she stared back at him. “I have a right to know. I’m not a child, Malfoy.”

A long pause. “She was taken into the Lounge.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Where Avery made an example of her. In several ways, which I’m sure you can imagine.”

Somewhere, there was a lake with still waters. But a tempest was brewing over the one in her mind’s eye.

“Were there others?”

“Just him, though there were spectators. She was in no shape afterward to be shared. I was...” Draco cleared his throat. “I only saw the very end of it.”

She spun to face the violet flowers she favored most in this greenhouse, gasping silently. She couldn’t let him see her lose control. Fighting to steady her breathing and clear the images that flashed through her mind, she stood tall, blinking until her eyes stopped burning and she could see clearly again.

There would be another time to process what had happened to Ginny. But for now she had a role to play. She’d convinced him she could handle

“I’m in.” He tilted his head, and Hermione felt his hair tickle her neck. “Anyone interested to know who it was that skipped through the boundary at Dover last month?”

A charge pulsed through the table. Flint lifted a brow; Pucey leaned closer. Warrington set down his glass with a clink. Theo, on the other hand, stiffened.

“That’s classified,” he hissed from their left. “You can’t give away that kind of information.”

“I’m not giving it away,” Draco drawled. “I’m planning to *win* my hand, thank you very much.” He took a leisurely sip from his wine glass. “And you, Theo? Do you have anything of value?”

Theo sat up straight in his chair, jostling the arms of the strawberry-blond hanging off of his shoulders. “I can tell you which major government official plans to pay Edinburgh a visit next month,” he snarled.

“Cirillo already said she’d be back—”

“No,” Theo snapped. He sneered at the interruption. “Not Cirillo.”

A pause as the boys considered.

“Well, you have my interest,” Flint said with a grin. “Shall we play, boys?”

Flint whispered into Penelope’s ear, and with some reluctance, Penelope leaned forward and blew on the dice before Flint tossed them.

Hermione watched cards exchange hands — watched the dice roll — watched the quick shuffling as the boys laughed and drank. She still couldn’t figure out how the game was played, but she was far more invested in the conversation. One by one, the boys lost, spilling their secrets, and afterward, their gold. By the time they were down to their last few wine bottles, only Draco, Flint, and Theo had kept their secrets.

She’d learned that Mundungus Fletcher had been spotted outside the Edinburgh gates attempting to sell a Time-Turner. He’d been stripped of all his possessions, tortured for a few hours, and set free.

Pucey’s news on France — that the Dark Lord had lost several new

glyphs on the sides were different than the ones she'd seen the Weasleys play with, so she gave up trying to summon the little she remembered. After the first hand was swept away, Flint called for wagers.

"Let's make it good this time, gentlemen." He nodded at Montague. "You first."

"I have the names of two defectors at the Ministry." Flint rolled his eyes. "That's terribly dull, Graham."

"Well, that's what I have," Montague grumbled.

"Then think of something better. I'm not risking what I know for something my grandmother could have told me."

He turned his eyes on Pucey, who cleared his throat. "I have news on France."

"I'll take that," Flint said. "I'll raise you a sighing of Johnson."

Hermione's mouth felt dry, and she resisted the urge to lean forward. They were wagering secrets — sensitive topics about the war. The outside world.

She chanced a look around the table and found the strawberry-blonde meeting eyes with another Carrow Girl before quickly glancing away, reaching for a slice of cheese off Theo's plate.

"Intriguing, Flint. Who's your source?"

"Well, you'll have to beat my hand to find out, won't you Cass?"

"Goyle?" Montague asked. "Are you in? Anything new on your father?"

But Goyle was nuzzling into Susan's neck, content to fold.

"I have news on Dung. Spotted outside Edinburgh tonight," Derrick said.

"That old pikey. What's he selling now?"

"You'll just have to beat my hand to find out."

"Draco?" Flint asked. "Are you in?"

Hermione felt every pair of eyes turn on them. She glanced down to Draco's hand, unable to tell if what he had was sufficient to win. He plucked a card from the middle and replaced it on the end.

the truth, and that's exactly what she intended to do. Ignoring the buzzing in her ears and the tightness in her chest, she forced her shoulders to relax. She thought of Ginny as she stared at the purple hues, suffering torture and rape daily at Avery's estate. Had it been worth it?

Her own treatment at Edinburgh Castle had been tame. Draco had seen to that. But she'd still seen enough to enrage her. She could be like Ginny, finding the fire to slice at them, even if it meant her own death.

Or she could give into her helplessness and behave like Draco asked her to — push it all away at home and thank the gods that she didn't have to suffer like the others. But she'd been given signs of hope by girls who had no business hoping. A grape. Her hand grabbed under the table by nine others with glass in their knees.

And Cho was waiting for her.

"Now that I know what to expect," she said, her voice clear and strong, "I will play my part better. The next time we go, I will be better prepared to—"

"We're not going again."

It took a moment for the words to sink in. She spun to him, eyes wide.

"What?"

He stood with his hands in his trouser pockets, eyes dead and empty.

"We've made our appearances. You've been seen." He swallowed. "You won't go again. Not for a long time, at least."

Her heart pounded. Edinburgh was her only chance to communicate with her friends — her only connection to what was happening outside of Malfoy Manor.

"So I'll just contract Dragon Pox again?" she sniped.

"I'll speak to my father, and we'll come up with something—"

"They'll see through you in an instant. It will be far too suspicious—"

"What's *suspicious*, Granger," he hissed, his eyes hot, "is that my Lot and I can barely stand being in the same room, much less touching each other—"

Her mouth fell open in a snarl. “Whose fault is *that*!”

—and although I’ve been fucking her daily, I still haven’t been able to remove the stick from Hermione Granger’s ass—”

“How dare you.” She stormed towards him until he was just a breath away. “You gave me no information going into that castle. No way of knowing what to expect or how to act. You gave me no indication of how I should touch you because I *can’t* touch you without you running away like a beaten dog—”

He turned away from her with a choked sound, and the rest died in her throat. He rolled his shoulders back, and she watched his ribs move to take a deep breath.

“Listen,” he said quietly. “If we go back, Marcus will make you take the potion.”

She rolled her eyes, feeling the fire burn in her belly again. “Who do I belong to? You or Marcus?”

He turned back to her, gazing down at his ring. “Every girl has taken this potion at some point. And Flint is brewing an especially large batch for next week’s party. If I refuse, they will suspect something is off about our relationship.” His eyes flickered up to her. “Marcus already suspects.”

Her brain moved quickly through the different options. She circled one possibility, but she needed more information.

“I’d like to see that potion,” she said.

He narrowed his eyes at her. “For what purpose?”

“I’d like to see it broken down. I’d like to know the ingredients and effects.”

His jaw tightened. “Granger, if you mean to *mimic* this potion—”

“Do you have a vial of it? I assume you have a potions kit. Perhaps a laboratory?”

—I’ve already said we’re not going back—”

“Draco. You owe me this.”

She watched it land on him, the words dying on his lips before they

deck of cards and three dice. He began shuffling the deck as some boys groaned about the holes in the pockets, and others rubbed their greedy hands together in glee.

Hermione had seen the Weasleys play this game at the Burrow before (usually only betting Knuts). Her rudimentary understanding was that it was similar to Muggle poker. Ron had tried to teach her in sixth year, but had gotten frustrated with her questions and gave up after only twenty minutes.

She felt a shard of ice in her chest at the memory. She’d buried Ron in a book next to Ginny weeks ago.

Pucey started divvying the chips, and the cards slid across the table with a magical push as Flint dealt them. She looked up and realized that over half of the girls were otherwise occupied. Some sat in laps or draped over the shoulders of their “dates.” The other half refilled glasses and offered snacks. Only Hermione was left standing at attention.

She stepped forward as Draco plucked up his cards. Grabbing the decanter of wine, she refilled his almost full glass to look busy, and as he rearranged his cards, she brushed her fingers over his collar. “Do you have a good hand?” she murmured, doing her best to imitate Pansy’s purr.

His jaw tightened for a split second. “Excellent,” he said, with a confident flick of his eyes to meet Flint’s.

Flint smirked, then turned his gaze on her. “How are those heels tonight, Granger?” His gaze ran over her. “If you need to sit, you know my lap’s always free.”

Before she could craft a response, Draco’s hand was on her hip, pulling her downward without even looking up from his cards. The boys laughed.

She landed across both his legs, the right side of her chest pressing against his left. With how short and tight the dress was, she was forced to shift herself until her legs crossed, her arm slung behind Draco’s shoulder.

Draco provided no assistance.

Pucey started by rolling the dice, grinning down at the result. The

a sour expression on his face as Draco took the praise and adulation. She caught the eye of the girl on Theo's arm, and she winked at her.

Hermione blinked, and turned around. Draco herded her to the head of the table, and Hermione took her position behind Draco's chair. She found Susan behind Goyle, Mortensen behind Pucey, and Penelope behind Flint. A few new Carrow Girls behind the others. And as the strawberry-blond took her place behind Theo as he sat, Hermione realized the chair to Draco's left was empty.

Blaise wasn't here. She was thankful that meant Giuiliana was somewhere else as well.

As soon as the boys were seated, the girls stepped forward for the wine bottles. Hermione followed, reaching beyond Draco's shoulder and pouring wine into his glass.

They repeated their toast — "To the Dark Lord's power. May he reign forevermore" — and Hermione watched as eleven boys drank deeply to his honor. There was less food on the table than two weeks ago. No opulent pig roast or decadent side dishes. As the boys settled back into conversation, the strawberry-blond and two other girls started moving around with trays, serving light hors d'oeuvres and cheese.

Without dinner in the way, it didn't take long for the first girl to drop into a lap — a giggly waif in a silver collar who draped herself over Terrence Higgs without a fuss. As if he'd been waiting for the cue all evening, Goyle directed Susan to his lap, his arms wrapping around her stomach and his face inhaling deeply at her neck as she grimaced.

Hermione was listening to the conversations and watching the boys closely, so she saw the exact moment Flint pulled a small box out of his robes.

"What do we say, gentlemen," he called out over the noise. "Shall we lose some Galleons tonight?"

The boys laughed and jeered, ribbing one another about who had won and lost last time. Flint's long fingers opened the box and plucked out a

could be uttered. She tightened her fingers around the sleeves of her cardigan, and tilted her chin up in defiance.

His eyes lingered on her face before looking away. "I don't have a vial. I would need to procure one."

"Excellent. I'll wait here." She returned to her bench, plucked up her book, and opened to the page she was last on.

She pretended to read innocently until she finally heard his shoes shuffle toward the doors, disappearing.

Her shelves trembled, begging her to think about sliced throats, a tight fist of red hair and jeering men —

*A lake with still waters.* She breathed deep, tasting blood from where she'd bitten the inside of her cheek. She tucked Ginny away onto a top shelf next to Harry.

Sometime later, just as her book on the history of magical Asia had taken her interest again, the Conservatory doors opened. She looked up, and her breath caught to find Narcissa looking for her amongst the leaves.

When her blue eyes landed on her, Narcissa smiled, folded her hands, and said, "Tea?"

Hermione felt a warmth return to her body that had been absent for hours. Followed by a stab of guilt that she had someone who sat with her for tea. With a quick smile, Hermione nodded and shifted her discarded books off the second seat.

Narcissa did what she did best — distracted from the horrors outside Hermione's gilded cage with her truly pleasant company. Hermione felt her body urging her to relax into the familiar comfort of it, but she resisted.

After a pause where they both turned to a book in their laps, a cup of tea on each side table, Narcissa said, "I heard you went to Edinburgh Castle last night."

Hermione darted a sideways glance to find Narcissa's lips curling into her tea. "Yes," she managed.

"I haven't had the *pleasure* of attending a gathering there. Nor do I have any intention to." She took a long sip.

Hermione swallowed, wondering how much Narcissa knew about her son's activities there. The things he witnessed. Turned a blind eye to.

"It wasn't to my liking either." Hermione stared into her teacup.

Narcissa parted her lips and placed her teacup on the end table. "When they were in my house, there was little I could do about that kind of behavior. It was... a powerless feeling, Hermione."

Hermione blinked up at her, hardly daring to breathe.

"And even then I wondered, 'How can I *not* stop this? How can I possibly stand by and allow this to happen?'" She shook her head. "But I had little choice in the matter. My principles were overruled by the need to keep my family safe." Narcissa pushed a lock of blonde hair behind her ear. "I think it's a common philosophy amongst us Malfoys," she said with a smile. "Survive. In dangerous times, let pragmatism be the death of principles."

Narcissa turned her eyes on Hermione for the first time, a fire in them that Hermione had seen the night before in a different pair of eyes. "And once they've underestimated you — strike."

Hermione was still, waiting for her breath to return. Waiting for Narcissa to smile and return to discussing the weather.

It didn't come.

Hermione's lips parted, skin tingling with adrenaline.

The doors flung open, and she jumped. Draco was stopped in the doorway, staring at the sight of his mother sitting with her. She watched him push a hand into his pocket, a vial disappearing.

"Mother," he greeted. "I have to borrow Granger, I'm afraid."

Hermione stood, placing her teacup down. Her heart pounded with the fire ignited in her.

She had to break down the potion. She had to learn how to mimic it. She had to go back to Edinburgh.

Her *talents*. She imagined the other Hermione shifting sensuously on Draco's lap, unbuckling his belt and unzipping his trousers while his hand wandered up her dress —

She breathed deep and centered her mind, ignoring the anger and disgust bubbling beneath her skin. Instead she let her eyes flit across the room, searching for Cho.

"Father's right, you know," Theo said as the three of them headed through the passage to the other building. "You're only making things worse. I heard that men in the *other* room have been talking about her —"

"And where's your whore tonight, Theo?" Draco drawled, leading them up the winding stairs without a look backward. "Waiting for you on his knees in the men's room?"

Hermione's eyes widened, and she heard Theo miss a step behind her. He was sputtering and scrambling for a reply when Draco reached the landing, grabbing her elbow to guide her for the last two steps and ignoring their companion.

Harper stood at the door again, and with him was the strawberry-blonde girl from two weeks ago. Harper stood up straight, and the girl batted her lashes demurely at them as they arrived.

Theo's protests died on his lips as the girl skipped to his side and pressed a kiss to his cheek. His cheeks were bright red, and his jaw clenched as he slipped his arm around her back.

Harper did his security tests on their rings and collars, and then they were headed into the snake pit. Boisterous laughter and shouting assaulted her ears, and when the door swung open, the room cheered, greeting Draco and Theo. Montague started a chant of "*Fratelli d'Italia!*" and the boys shook Draco's hand with mocking greetings of "*Buongiorno!*" and "*Ciao bello!*"

Draco took it all in stride, shoving them off and joining their chanting with an energy she knew was put upon. One look back at Theo showed

no luck. She and Draco passed a pale-faced Jugson with a nod, and she noticed that he was missing a hand.

"Draco," a slimy voice called out behind them, Hermione felt a nauseous dread sliding through her veins. They turned and found Nott Sr. approaching with Theo at his side. "I didn't expect you back so soon."

"Sir." Draco shook Nott's hand and gave Theo a careless nod. "We were able to resolve the situation quickly. Yaxley is staying for another week, and Dolohov joined him as we were leaving."

"Good," Nott Sr. said. And though she was staring at the floor, she could feel his eyes slither down her body.

"Hello, little dove." The handle of his cane pushed under her chin until her face tilted back. She felt Draco's thumb twitch against her back. "I missed your little show last week. Perhaps you'll grace us with a repeat performance tonight."

Her blood froze, sound rushing in her ears. A snort from Theo as Draco's hand pressed harder into her skin. "Not likely, Father. I'm sure Draco is going to hoard her *talents* for at least another year or two."

"Is that so? How unfortunate." He tsked. "You know Draco, forbidding the fruit only makes it more tempting."

Hermione kept her gaze steady on Nott's, holding her breath. His cane slipped down her neck, between her clavicles, and landed between her breasts.

"Such a pretty dress," he crooned. And even with Draco standing so close, with his hand tightening on her waist, Nott Sr. stepped even closer, long fingers sliding low over her hip. She felt every muscle tighten. "It just begs to be peeled off."

"Unfortunately, *Ted*," Draco's voice was smooth in her ear, like a warm breeze. "I'll be the one doing the peeling."

Draco's fingers curled tightly on the curve of her waist, unsteady until she had to step back. She found her breath, and Draco quickly excused them, taking Theo with them.

"Of course, dear," Narcissa said. She gave a quick nod to Hermione, her face as serene and unassuming as ever. "I'll see you for breakfast tomorrow, Hermione."

Hermione nodded back, and moved quickly to the doorway, following Draco out.

He swept from the Conservatory, already halfway down the corridor by the time she caught up to him. Following him down hallways she had yet to memorize and turning down another staircase to a lower floor, she struggled to keep up with his long legs.

A door at the end of the hallway appeared, and Hermione's brows jumped when she recognized the Notice-Me-Not Charm. No wonder she hadn't spent time down here yet.

He pushed open the door and lit the candles with a wave. She stepped into a potions laboratory lined with beakers and cauldrons and ingredients. Her eyes scanned the walls greedily, searching for secrets and rare finds.

"Is this your father's laboratory?"

He looked over his shoulder at her. "It's mine." He pulled his eyes from hers. "You are welcome to it, now that you know the way."

Her eyes widened. The Suppressant Potion. She could break it down here if only she had a vial. She tucked away her excitement at the possibilities, and returned to the present, where Draco was lighting the fires.

He retrieved an elm spoon and pulled the vial from his pocket, placing it next to the heating pot. Then he stepped aside. She blinked at him, realizing that he was allowing her to do the work.

She stared at the lab table. She hadn't thought she'd ever be allowed near magical ingredients again.

She stepped forward, eyeing the cauldron. Her fingers pried the cork from the vial, and she tipped two drops into the bottom.

"Where did you get it?" she asked.

"Blaise. He has a few vials, but he doesn't like to use them."

She looked up at him, finding his eyes on the cauldron, and quickly turned away.

The shelves were impeccably organized. She read each label until she found an acid that would work. She pulled down distilled water and a honey paste for thickening. She searched for an oil, perhaps beaver oil or—

Long fingers next to hers, tilting behind a tall bottle to pluck out a jar labeled *Niffler Saliva*. Her eyes grew wide. Snape would never let them use such expensive products in school. She glanced up at Draco, taking the jar from his fingertips. He was standing as far away as possible while still being able to reach the shelves. He looked away.

She drizzled the acid, added the distilled water, and prepared the second cauldron with honey paste. She felt his eyes on her hands as she worked, though she refused to look up to confirm. The steam rose as the cauldron bubbled, and she wondered why Slytherins always brewed their potions in the most ill-conceived underground locations. Sweat rolled down the back of her neck, and she pushed her hair over her shoulder as her curls expanded.

He stood by her side, stepping in silently when it was time for wand-work. She scribbled her findings into an empty notebook nearby.

Ashwinder eggs, rose petals, and moonstone for the obsessive euphoria. He was right about the asphodel, possibly for a bit of drowsiness. Porcupine quills to add enhance the euphoria. Sneezewort for confusion and a bit of recklessness.

Mixed with the hair of the intended partner, the drinker would become dizzy and confused until their skin touched their partner's. The confusion would fade and the obsession would begin, euphoria spiking. Pulling away from the partner would bring back the confusion and dizziness.

Hermione frowned down at her notes. It would wear off eventually, but it could take hours.

that it was truly happening again.

The werewolves howled, the guards smacked their lips, and the crowd of Death Eaters in the courtyard whistled. She ignored them all, hardly registering their jeers about her bare legs as she focused on a lake with still waters.

Draco was putting on a show of being quite relaxed. During their first walk into Edinburgh, he was rushed and anxious. This time, he was shouting back at the crowd with a laugh, stopping to chat with someone at the top of the stairs, and teasing someone who was coughing on their cigar. But when the spectators vanished and it was only the two of them, she watched his face fall, an empty expression in his eyes.

He led her through the doors to the Great Hall, and Hermione's breath caught to see Charlotte turning to them with a tray of champagne.

"Master Malfoy," she said with a flirty grin. "Good evening. And Miss Granger."

Charlotte's eyes met hers briefly before offering her champagne. Hermione reached for her own glass this time, hoping to draw Charlotte's eyes, but she was already reaching for the curtain and letting them into the Great Hall.

The music and the chatter hit her like a wall, stirring her memories of two weeks ago. She was flooded with terror for a freezing moment before feeling Draco's hand on her back, warm and steady.

He stopped to talk with people as they sipped their champagne. Hermione tried to catalog the guests and conversations more fastidiously this time. Two weeks ago, she was far more focused on the girls. This time she needed to listen to the whispered jokes and unspoken clues.

Draco greeted Rabastan Lestrange while he was mid-conversation, a quick tap on his shoulder and a few polite words while Lestrange's eyes wandered down Hermione's waist and hips. He led her to a quick conversation with Mulciber, who did not have Cho hanging off of his elbow — Hermione's eyes scanned for her as inconspicuously as possible, but with



her imagination flickered through a series of disgusting and depraved images of... multiple people... and—"How old is she?" she croaked.

Draco paused. "Fourteen." His reply wasn't surprising, but it still hit her like a blow to the gut. She swayed her on her feet. He continued, "So Flint's potion is no longer allowed—"

"Was your hair mixed in?" she asked, her voice cracking.

His face turned to her sharply. And the disgust on his features brought her as much relief as the words from his mouth.

"No. We were at dinner when it happened."

His lip curled, and he turned away from her again as she nodded.

"And the Dark Lord was displeased?" she prompted, breathing easier now.

"The involved parties were punished. He reminded his followers of the purpose of these revels. Not just a place to amuse ourselves. A place to serve him and his ambitions."

Something was familiar about his wording, and it was only a moment before Hermione realized that they were Narcissa's words.

A smirk curved her lips. It seemed that Narcissa Malfoy had pulled not only her husband's strings, but the Dark Lord's as well.

He held out a hand for her arm, and she gave it to him. His hand was warm over her tattoo as they moved through the gate. They walked to the hill where they could Apparate from, and she felt relief thrumming through her veins that he'd made it through the last week unscathed. "Your mother was worried about you in Italy. Was it dangerous?"

He looked around them, almost like searching for enemies in the wind, and said, "The Italian Magical community knows exactly what happened to Braveri, despite Skeeter's attempt to spin it differently. It wasn't a walk in the park."

He took her elbow and spun them to the signpost outside of Edinburgh Castle. She allowed the long walk up to the gates to center her mind, the breeze to cool her emotions, and the sound of her footsteps to confirm

"Have you ever used this potion at the parties? On a Carrow Girl?" she asked, breaking the hour-long silence.

"No. But I've seen it."

She stared down at the ingredients list. "We should be able to make an antidote fairly easily. I can take it before the party on Friday, and then when I'm given the potion, I can mimic its effects."

When no response came, she looked up to find him facing her, leaning one hip on the lab table, his lips pursed and eyes fixed on the floor.

"Malfoy?"

He didn't look up. "Granger, every eye will be on you next week. Not just Montague and Pucey and the others. Flint is planning quite the spectacle, and most of the guests are interested in you already. Even without the potion."

His jaw clenched, like he was stopping himself from saying more.

She crossed her arms. "You're suggesting that I wouldn't be convincing?"

He paused, and tilted his head. "How do you suggest we steer clear of penetrative sex while you... obsessive just drives you?"

She felt a blush rise in her neck and watched the same flush spread over his cheekbones.

"I see," she said, throat tight. "Have you had penetrative sex in the Lounge before?"

His eye twitched and he shook his head, still focused on the floor.

"Then perhaps it's your preference to stick to more minor acts while in public. That's something you can sell, right?"

He took a deep breath, and the frustrated sigh on his exhale prickled the back of her neck.

"And what 'minor acts' are you suggesting we engage in, Granger?"

She swallowed, listening to her throat click loudly in the small room. She searched for the words to articulate—

He grabbed the honey paste and distilled water from the table and

capped them. “I’ve let you break down the potion. I *owned you* that.” He turned from her, putting away the ingredients on the shelf. “But you’ve never seen girls on this potion. It’s humiliating. Degrading. You have no idea what it does—”

“I do, actually. I just broke it down—”

“And is *research* also how you’ve prepared for the practical application of this deception, Granger?” His back to her. A jar slammed down onto a shelf.

Her mouth fell open, indignation burning in her gut.

“Are you suggesting that because I’m a virgin that I’ve never lusted after someone? That I wouldn’t understand those urges?”

She lifted a brow and watched his fingers shake over the beakers on the shelf, glass clicking.

“I’m sure you have an idea of it, but you’ve seen the ingredients. This Potion is no joke, Granger.”

He swallowed, turning back to the table and pressing his lips together as Hermione glared daggers at him.

She remembered the simpering smiles Cho would give Mulciber. The flirty laugh from Charlotte to Flint. And Narcissa’s reminder about when to strike.

His hands reached for the empty cauldron to shelve it and she lurched forward, grabbing the collar of his shirt. His quick reflexes caught her, hands coming up to her elbows, head turning to her, and she caught sight of his shocked expression as they stumbled backwards to the shelves, her mouth landing on the corner of his.

Her chest fell against him as her lips slid from his mouth with their tumbling feet. He righted them, holding her arms up, but she focused on the feeling of connecting her skin to his. How dizzying it would be to not touch him. How right it was to kiss his jaw.

He grabbed her shoulders and shoved her back, her hips slamming into the table edge. His eyes were wide and hot, almost scared.

They were steps away from the gate. Draco’s pace didn’t falter until Hermione reached out and grabbed his arm, spinning him back. He met her with a lazy expression.

Her brows furrowed, trying to work out a piece. “Why did you have to go to Italy? Are you... Have you been promoted?”

He smirked. “As Lucius Malfoy’s son, I don’t need a promotion. I volunteered, actually.”

Her lips parted in shock. “You—”

“For Blaise,” he said. “His mother was close friends with Bravieri — a well-known bit of gossip. It was in his best interest to volunteer his assistance with the transition.” He stared off over her shoulder at the Manor. “And it seems to have deflected any suspicion. The Dark Lord gifted Giuliana to him as a token of gratitude for his service.”

Hermione’s lip curled. “So she’ll have to pretend now, too. Only it *was* real for her. I saw her there. That girl is a *child*. She isn’t strong enough to act like Zabini’s plaything—”

“Giuliana won’t be attending any time soon,” he cut her off. “She’s not... in any state for it. Blaise will make her excuses.”

The summer wind brushed through them, and Hermione felt it dance across her spine in a shiver.

“What happened to her?”

Draco pressed his lips together. No response.

“Malfoy—”

“Do you really want to ruin your evening before it even begins, Granger?”

“Yes.”

He sighed deeply. A hand came up to rub his brow. “Jugson thought it would be a bit of fun to put multiple hairs in her potion. Apparently he was plucking them at random from around the room. Half of the men didn’t even realize until... it began.”

She blinked up at him. “Oh.” Bile crawled up the back of her throat as

will come up?”

He swallowed and said, “Everything was the same until the Lounge. The Great Hall, the champagne, the dinner.”

The images flashed up in front of her eyes again — red lips on his, painted nails running through his hair, Draco’s fingers dipping underneath her knickers—

“And the Lounge?” she asked as evenly as possible, shoving the pictures aside. “What do I need to know?”

“You won’t be asked to do anything... Anything more.” He looked up at her for the first time since she landed at the bottom of the stairs, and his eyes flickered. She caught something almost guilty in them before his mask clicked back into place. “The Lounge will be infinitely tamer tonight.”

“Why?”

His jaw tensed. “There was an incident last week.”

Her eyebrows shot up as he turned on his heel and headed to the door, as if he could just end the conversation there. She hurried after him, nearly jogging to catch up.

“Incident? Does this have to do with Italy?”

He pushed through the Manor doors, and as he swept down the stairs, she could swear she heard him mumble, “Brightest Witch of Her Age.”

“Yes,” he said. “The Dark Lord has forbidden the use of Flint’s potion at Edinburgh. Last week, it was misused on the Italian Minister’s niece.”

Hermione stumbled down the Manor steps, following behind him on the stone path as her mind worked at breakneck speed.

“Antonio Bravieri didn’t support the Dark Lord, did he?” she asked as he moved briskly down the path. “That’s why Giuliana was taken and given to a Death Eater. To coerce him into changing his mind.” Draco didn’t respond, but she didn’t need him to. “Bravieri found out what happened to Giuliana at the party, came to rage at the Dark Lord, and was killed for it.”

“What are you doing?”

She panted and let her eyes glaze over. “Draco, please.”

His eyes widened, and she caught a glimpse of black pupils before he backed away. She stumbled forward, reaching up to pull his head down to her, but before she could connect their lips he pushed away again.

“Granger, stop—”

“I need you. Please, Draco.” Her fingers wound into his hair, and she rose up on her toes again, aiming for his lips, and murmuring, “Touch me.”

Quick as lightning, her hands were off of him and her body was pushed into the table. He was across the room in three strides.

“I told you I could do it,” she panted, and he froze in the doorway.

His shoulder twitched, and then he was gone.

She tried to catch her breath, her skin humming and lips tingling from where she’d touched him.



Draco diligently ignored her for the next six days. The first few days, she told herself that it was a good thing, but by Wednesday night, she started to get nervous. She had to go back. Regardless of how they might feel about one another at the moment.

She finally sought him out on Friday morning, finding him in the kitchens taking an apple from the elves’ basket.

She placed her hands on her hips and said, “I assume we’ll be leaving at ten tonight?”

He turned, and his eyes scanned her before replying, “No. No party tonight.”

She lifted a doubtful brow. “Why?”

“It’s been postponed.” He tossed the apple between his hands, keeping his eyes away from her. “A mission from the Dark Lord has taken precedence.”

"You can't avoid me forever, Malfoy. We're in this together whether you like it or not, and the sooner you—"

"Did you hear a word I just said? It's not happening tonight." He brushed past her without another word.

Hermione huffed at the empty kitchen, fists clenched. He was clearly lying.

So at ten o'clock that night, she cracked her door open, waiting to hear the sounds of him leaving the Manor. After half an hour with her eye on the door, she moved to her balcony windows, wondering if he'd left through his own fireplace. While she still didn't have access to her balcony, she could press her face to the glass and look for the light coming from his bedroom.

It was dark.

She glared and stomped into her bathroom, deciding on a bath while she waited for him to return. As she relaxed into the warm water and bubbles, she tried to think of ways to convince Draco to bring her back to Edinburgh. He didn't think she was capable of the sexual challenges they would face, but she could convince him. She *had* to.

She had to get back to Cho. She needed to figure out who Charlotte was and whether that grape had meant what she thought it did. She'd been stuck inside of Malfoy Manor for two months now, and Edinburgh was the closest she'd gotten to the remains of the Order.

*Let pragmatism be the death of principles.*

Hermione had to prove to him that she could handle herself. Whatever it took.

After midnight, she dragged an armchair to her balcony window and read a book with one eye on Draco's balcony, waiting for a sign of life from inside the room.

At a quarter past two, her bleary eyes drifted up from her pages. Light was pouring from inside his room onto his balcony. She jumped up, wide awake, the book tumbling on the carpet. Yanking a jumper over her

quickly dismissed her, asking her to tell Draco that she'd be downstairs momentarily.

The slip dress was black lace with a low neck. It would be tight on her body, leaving very little to the imagination. But perhaps the revelers at Edinburgh Castle no longer needed to *imagine* her in any way. It was possible they'd seen quite a bit of her body already.

Hermione pressed her lips together, and pushed away those thoughts. She went to the armoire, reaching into the drawer that held her knickers. She rummaged through them and decided on the pair that looked the most sensual.

The dress slithered down her skin, needing to be tugged around her backside. She slipped the collar on, and the metal shrunk to her skin just as it had last time. She fidgeted with the chilly gold metal as she checked the clock, testing to make sure it hadn't glued itself to her. It seemed to shrink and tighten in response to her touch, attracting to her skin like a magnet. She easily fit her finger between her neck and the collar.

With shoes on and one last look in the mirror, Hermione headed down the hallway to the stairs. The portraits took the opportunity to hiss and call her names as she wobbled by, righting herself on the credenza.

She'd found her footing by the time she descended the stairs, but the sight of Draco watching her from the ground almost sent her stumbling again. His eyes dripped over her face, dress, and legs before tearing away and staring down at the marble.

He looked rested, and despite the way his gaze had lingered, he seemed to have his mask in place. She clicked down the stairs in her heels, awkwardly listening to every step until she reached the bottom.

He didn't immediately lead her out, so she asked, "Is it the same entry every time? Through the main gates?"

After a beat, he nodded at the floor, almost as if snapping out of a trance.

"What do I need to know about last week?" she asked tightly. "What

“Yes, Granger,” he said flatly, walking away from her. “We’ll go to Edinburgh tonight.” And then under his breath, “Bloody woman...”

She watched him trudge to his door, frowning at his retreating back.

*Have you had breakfast, she’d been about to ask.*



At eight that evening, she did something for the second time since she’d taken up residence at Malfoy Manor — she examined her vanity dresser. She’d rummaged through it just once before, shortly after she arrived, while looking for weapons.

She pulled out the top drawer, finding basic makeup products and brushes.

Hermione didn’t know much about applying powder and goo to her face, but she could remember a bit from fourth year. With Lavender Brown’s voice in her mind, she laid out the tubes and gels across her counter and separated them by use. The eye makeup on her right, the lips on her left, and the rouge and powders in the center.

After half a dozen frustrating attempts, she finally was staring at a shadow of what Pansy Parkinson had been able to do to her face. Her eyes were dark, her lashes long. A dusty pink lipstick was all she could find in the drawer. She searched every drawer and cabinet for nail polish, thinking of Pansy’s scarlet nails, but couldn’t find any. She wasn’t positive she could pull off whatever act Pansy had played, but she could come close to it.

As for her hair... Hermione had to leave it alone. She had no tools, no wand, and even if she did have a curling iron, there was no electricity in Malfoy Manor.

Mippy knocked at quarter till ten, handing her the collar, the dress, and the shoes. The elf wrung her hands and stared tremulously at the floor, clearly knowledgeable about the plans for the evening. Perhaps she’d heard Narcissa’s rants as well. Hermione took pity on her and

pajamas, she marched out her door and to his.

She rapped on his door and waited, anger unfurling in her belly. When no response came, she knocked louder, more insistently.

She was just raising her fist to pound against the wood when it swung open. Draco stared down at her, leaning forward on the doorframe with one hand still on the door.

“Why are you still up?” he demanded.

She glared at him, lifting her chin. “I should be asking you the same thing. You haven’t been *out*, have you, Malfoy?”

He swallowed and said, “I have. I was on a Mission from the Dark Lord.”

“Then why do you smell like cigars and Firewhisky,” she hissed.

She would have this out with him. She would demand that he take her next week.

Hermione stepped forward to push past him into his bedroom, but Draco stood in the way, blocking her. She blinked up at him, scowling. After lying egregiously to her, the least he could do was let her in his damn room.

She stepped to the side and he moved with her, obscuring her vision. She stared up at him, a pale horror cracking over her skin.

He had a guest.

Her mind conjured a rapid-fire sequence of images of a Carrow Girl sprawled across his sheets — the activities she’d just interrupted.

“Is there someone here?” she gasped.

He stared down at her, jerked his head once, and said, “No. Just in the middle of something.”

“Oh, come on, Draco,” a familiar voice called from inside the room. “Give it up. She’s caught you.”

Hermione’s mind whirled, struggling to place the voice that sounded like — that sounded like...

She watched Draco close his eyes in resignation.

A girlish chuckle from inside the bedroom. And though the tone was all wrong, Hermione recognized the sound of that voice.

She pushed through him, sliding under his arm and found Hermione Granger sitting in his armchair, legs crossed and sipping a glass of scotch with a smile. Her lips were redder than Charlotte's had been, lashes darkened and lids smoky, her black slip sliding up her thigh.

Hermione's heart skipped and stuttered as her stunned mind tried to place the smirk on her face. The smirk on her own face, worn by someone else.

And when she watched her own brow lift into a perfect arch, the realization dawned on her.

"Pansy?"

The girl in Hermione's body smiled brightly, and toasted her. "Brightest Witch of Her Age."

The puzzle fell into place in her mind as her eyes turned to Draco's carpets. He'd gone to Edinburgh after all. And instead of taking her, he'd taken Pansy Parkinson in her body.

"Hmm. That look of furious disgust there?" Pansy said, pointing at Hermione's face. "I think I pulled that off quite nicely tonight."

Hermione couldn't find her voice. She could do nothing but watch as Pansy stood from the chair, patting down her dress and brushing Hermione's curls over her shoulder. Not only did she have on makeup, she'd styled the unruly locks into something soft and lustrous. Even as she walked, Hermione could see the telltale signs of Pansy—the confident strut and sway to her hips that she recognized from Hogwarts—but it looked wrong in Hermione's body. The artless grace and sensuality.

Hermione's cheeks burned, suddenly aware of her baggy pajama bottoms and shapeless jumper.

Pansy approached Draco, reached for the gold collar around her neck, and extended it to him. She'd painted her nails scarlet.

"I'm going to get out of your hair." She turned to Hermione sharply.

black cloak around her shoulders.

Zabini and Draco spoke in hushed tones as Zabini reached into the bag of Floo powder, nodding his head at something Draco said. She watched Zabini turn to the girl and hum something in a cadence she recognized as Italian. They moved to the fireplace, and Blaise righted her when she stumbled in her heels.

"*Grazie*," she croaked.

Blaise took her elbow, and Hermione caught the faintest glimpse of gold and black letters on her arm as they disappeared through the Floo. Draco stared at the empty fireplace for several long moments after they vanished. Then he crossed the room and started to climb the stairs.

His body moved slowly, exhausted and thin. Purple-blue rings beneath his eyes. He didn't look as wasted as he had a month ago, but he clearly hadn't slept or eaten much. It wasn't until he was steps away from the platform she was on that he finally looked up and paused.

"Granger." He stood tall and took his hand off the railing, removing all weakness from his stance.

She blinked at him, heart thrumming painfully with the weight of the things she wouldn't let herself say. "Who was that?" she finally managed, nodding her head down at the fireplaces below.

His throat bobbed as his eyes took her in. "Giuliana Bravieri. She'll be staying with Blaise from now on."

"Bravieri," she repeated. "She's the Minister's—"

"Niece, yes. Excuse me, but I'm not in the mood for an inquisition right now."

He started to climb again, moving past her as her mind whirled.

"Did you rescue her?" she asked. Her heart thudded dully in her chest, and her lungs held tightly, waiting for his response.

He laughed—a dry, aged sound. "I'd hardly call it that."

A strange hope fluttered in her chest. She spun, taking a breath to ask—

enough importance in the Death Eater's ranks that he was now replacing his father in his absence? She shivered, dread twisting in her stomach.

She spent the rest of the day looking into the politics of the Italian Ministry and the Braveri family, searching for clues on why Antonio Braveri had dared to challenge Voldemort and paid for it with his life.



By Friday morning, when Draco had still not returned, she had grimly come to terms with the fact that they would not be going to Edinburgh that night. Narcissa had spent the week distracted, inviting her to tea only to drift off and then jump up, excusing herself. Hermione assumed Italy had taken a turn for the worse, but the *Prophet* had been completely silent on the situation.

After two anxiety-filled days with no news of Italy or Draco, she had thrown herself back into her research to steer her mind firmly away from his absence. Only that topic was equally frustrating. She'd finished *The Mysteries of Magical Asia: Volumes 1, 2, and 3*, and found only a handful of irrelevant, throwaway references to magical slavery. She was no closer to finding the inspiration for the tattoos than she had been a month ago.

She was headed to breakfast when she heard voices in the entry hall. She froze at the top of the stairs, listening carefully to catch the mumbled words and ascertain their owners. Peeking over the banister, she found the top of Draco's blond head — a wave of relief through her veins — as well as two others.

Zabini and a dark-haired girl.

Gasping, she moved forward until she could see her face, fingers squeezing the polished wood.

It was the olive-skinned girl from Edinburgh. The one who had been crying through the night, the one who looked too young for all of this. She looked pale and dazed, her large eyes locked on Zabini. Thinner than the last time Hermione had seen her, she practically swam in the heavy

"Or, *your* hair, truly." She laughed at her joke, running her hand over Hermione's curls. "I must apologize to you for ever making fun of your hair in school. It really is quite a hassle." She smiled. "I won't miss it. But your arse, Granger." Pansy ran her hands over her hips, rounding to Hermione's backside. "I much prefer this. I know Draco's preference is—"

"That's enough, Pans." His voice was cold and cutting.

"Just trying to lighten the mood. Well, I guess I'll be going." Pansy strolled to the fireplace. "Looks like you two have *loads* to talk about."

Pansy winked, tossed the Floo powder, and disappeared.

The shock that had frozen her for the past few minutes was fading to a fiery churning in her stomach, spreading outward and lighting up every nerve ending on her skin. Hermione felt Draco's presence next to her, but she refused to look up at him.

"You took Pansy Parkinson to Edinburgh. In my body."

She heard his throat click.

"It was the easiest of options."

She scoffed, whipping around to glare at him. "*Easiest*."

"Yes, easiest. For both of us." He ran a hand through his hair. "Pansy had experienced the effects of Flint's potion. She knew what it did. I brewed an antidote, like you suggested. And she mimicked the effects."

Fury burned in her bloodstream.

"The *point* of breaking down the potion, was for *me* to take the antidote so I could return to Edinburgh—"

"And the point of me asking Pansy was to spare you from that." His eyes finally met hers. His mask perfectly in place except for the spots of pink on his cheekbones. "We put on a convincing show. The boys should be appeased for now."

Rage choked her, her breath growing shallow as she thought about her own body in Pansy Parkinson's hands, moving over him.

"What kind of 'convincing show,' she hissed, stepping closer to Draco as he retreated.

## THE AUCTION

"I did it for your own good, Granger."

"You *violated* my body—"

"Your body was going to be violated either way," he snarled, holding his ground. "This way, you didn't have to be in it."

Her arm moved quickly, slicing through the air and slapping him across the face. His head scarcely moved despite the angry, red handprint on his cheek. His eyes were hot on hers as they panted in each other's faces.

"Did you have sex with her in my body?" she demanded, hating the way her voice shook. His eyes dragged across her face, lips pressed together firmly until he answered, "No."

She felt something untangle in her chest, loosening like a rope. She looked away. "If you put on such a 'convincing show,' then I assume they won't force you to use the potion again," she said, her voice deadlly calm.

"No. But you've been seen twice in a row now. I won't need to bring you again—"

"You will bring me." She stared into his eyes, demanding to be heard.

"You said it yourself — they already suspect something is off. The other girls go every week with their masters, and so will you and I." She tilted her chin up and watched his gaze drop to her mouth and back up to her eyes. "We will continue to appear at Edinburgh Castle. And you'll stop treating me like a child who's unable to navigate this new world." The silence sent shivers down her spine. She summoned whatever confidence she had left and said, "Do I make myself clear?" His eyes were dark, the grey fading into black dilated centers. She felt his breath on her cheek and the heat from his chest just inches from her own.

Dropping his eyes once more before finding her gaze again, he whispered, "Perfectly, Granger."

"Good," she said, stepping back and reaching for the door.

She disappeared back to her own room, letting her mind wander to the 'convincing show' Pansy had put on in her own body, wondering if she would be able to replicate it the following week.

## CHAPTER 17

# ITALIAN MINISTER DEAD BY HEART ATTACK

BY RITA SKEETER

ANTONIO BRAVERI, ITALIAN MINISTER FOR MAGIC, WAS FOUND DEAD IN HIS CHAMBERS SATURDAY EVENING, SUFFERING FROM A FATAL HEART ATTACK.

THE MINISTER HAD PAID A VISIT TO THE DARK LORD'S CASTLE EARLIER SATURDAY AFTERNOON TO PLEDGE HIS GOVERNMENT'S SUPPORT FOR THE DARK LORD AND THE GREAT ORDER. TRAGICALLY, IT WOULD BE HIS LAST OFFICIAL ACT AS LEADER OF THE ITALIAN MAGICAL COMMUNITY.

CONSTANTINE ROMANO, HEAD OF THE TRANSPORTATION DEPARTMENT, HAS VOWED TO CARRY OUT BRAVERI'S FINAL VISION FOR HIS COUNTRY, AND HAS BEEN APPOINTED TO THE TITLE OF MINISTER IN BRAVERI'S PLACE. EMISSARIES TO THE DARK LORD ARE ASSISTING WITH THE TRANSITION THIS WEEK, HELPING ENSURE THE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN OUR TWO COUNTRIES.

The lies jumped off the page, sticking out like thorns.

The Minister had been found dead the day after he visited Voldemort? Not likely. And his last official act was to swear fealty to Voldemort? Hermione rolled her eyes, shaking her head at the paper. He'd clearly gotten himself killed, and now Draco was part of the mission to replace him with some kind of Voldemort puppet, like Pius Thicknesse.

Hermione leaned back against the wall outside the kitchens, listening to the elves work. Unless she was very much mistaken, Voldemort had just carried out a major political coup. But why send Draco? Had he gained



## THE AUCTION

see Narcissa smirking. Her cheeks heated, and she ducked her head.

Narcissa left Hermione to take breakfast in the dining room alone. Hermione managed to pour a cup of coffee from the carafe, add the sugar and milk, and stir before her curiosity won out and she ripped open the wax seal.

*Granger,*

*I have some important business in Italy. Allow*

*me to head off your questions.*

*No — I don't know for how long.*

*No — I can't say why. Yet.*

*Yes — if I am home by Friday, we will still be going to Edinburgh.*

*Yes — I've eaten breakfast. How kind of you to ask.*

*D.M.*

She glared down at the letter, as if it was Draco himself, lifting a brow at her and strutting away.

Italy.

She racked her memories for mentions of Italy. Coverage of the political climate there — or any other foreign country, for that matter — had been scarce in the *Prophet*. She expected that would change once Voldemort had more international support.

After breakfast, Hermione visited the kitchens and asked Remmy for the *Daily Prophet*, like she did every morning. She blinked down at the headline, not even bothering to thank a sour-faced Remmy before she huffed and waddled away.



Hermione woke up the next morning with her blood still boiling. She rescheduled breakfast with Narcissa and locked herself away, researching and reading in angry solitude. Every time she'd let her mind wander, it would conjure images of Draco with Hermione's doppelgänger in his lap, moving as Pansy Parkinson moves and kissing like Pansy Parkinson kisses.

So she kept it occupied well past dinner time, until she was too exhausted to think.

She woke early on Sunday morning, determined to speak to Draco before breakfast. After compiling another list of questions for him — none of which had to do with the “convincing show” he and Pansy had put on two nights before — she finally left her room and rapped smartly on his door. She waited for a more than acceptable amount of time before rapping again. The door handle was immovable, as expected. She frowned in frustration. After fifteen more minutes of aggravated pacing, knocking, and waiting, she headed downstairs to meet Narcissa.

Only Narcissa wasn't at the table. The dining room was set for two, but it was empty.

Hermione had a brief flash of panic, remembering how all three Malfoys had disappeared before, leaving her alone for weeks.

“Mippy?”

A *pop!* sounded from behind her.

“Miss!”

“Good morning, Mippy,” Hermione said, smiling down at her through the tightness in her chest. “Where might I find Narcissa?”

"Missus is in her study?"

Perhaps Narcissa had forgotten? "Thank you. I'll visit her there." She hurried out of the room before Mippy could blink her overlarge eyes.

Hermione traveled down the corridor to Narcissa's private study. She needed to see for herself. She needed to know they hadn't left her alone again. Lucius had been gone for weeks. Draco wasn't responding. If Narcissa was gone too...

She turned a corner and froze at the sound of a voice rising to biting tones, floating into the hallway from behind a cracked door.

Her pulse calmed when she recognized Narcissa's voice, then quickened with her rising curiosity. She paused, debating. Spying on Narcissa's private conversations felt like crossing a line.

Hermione took a quiet step backward, preparing to turn on her heel—"...our son. And now he's off... dangerous and... He's out of his depth—"

Narcissa's voice cut out as she ranted. Hermione let the words wash over her, heart hammering in her ears. They were talking about Draco.

A few more heartbeats, and her self-control shattered. She tiptoed forward, ears straining for a response.

*Was Lucius home?*

She wasn't eavesdropping, she told herself as she crept forward, guilt twisting in her gut. She was simply going to take her time before knocking.

"...becoming a liability," she heard Narcissa hiss. "Even the Dark Lord must see. Remind him *why* these revels exist in the first place... not just to wet their cocks—"

Hermione's brows jumped, and she stifled a gasp at hearing such crude language from Narcissa Malfoy. She craned her neck to peek through the crack in the door and found her pacing at the opposite side of the room, in front of the fireplace. The Floo.

A low baritone rumbling from behind a pair of chairs, where Hermione couldn't see. She took a shaky breath and knocked faintly at the door,

praying Narcissa wouldn't hear her.

"I will *not* watch my language. Your *friends* are running wild here in England without the Dark Lord's oversight. *Do something about it* before our son gets killed."

She was talking about Edinburgh. Hermione's mind tumbled through the ways that Draco could be harmed by the events that had taken place there, but before she could process it—

"I have to go. Miss Granger is at my door, and I'm late for breakfast with her. I'll send your regards."

Hermione held her breath as Narcissa's heels clicked towards the door. "Good morning," Narcissa said. Her face was flushed, but not a hair was out of place. "I apologize for keeping you waiting."

"It's me who should be apologizing," Hermione rushed, heart creeping up her neck. "I came looking for you, and then I — heard voices. I didn't want to interrupt, but I wasn't here for very long—"

"Of course, dear," said Narcissa smoothly, the anger of the previous conversation melting away. "Unfortunately, I'm afraid I can't take breakfast with you. I have several urgent matters to attend to."

Hermione nodded her acceptance and said in a small voice, "Draco is gone?"

Narcissa took a deep breath and nodded. "He is in Italy. Dealing with an unexpected incident. I'm afraid I can't say much more than that." She pulled a thin letter from her robes and extended it to Hermione. "He asked me to give this to you."

Hermione stared at the parchment. "For me?"

"Yes," Narcissa said. "He had to leave rather abruptly, and he wanted to put your mind at ease."

Hermione blinked, gazing up at her. "He said that?"

"Technically, I believe he said, 'that bloody witch will give me hell if I disappear.' But I'm sure those were his true sentiments."

Hermione's fingers paused in grasping the note, and she looked up to