

"Now you're worried about how dangerous this all is? Every note you've passed would have gotten you killed—"

"This is different." She took a deep breath. "If this falls into the wrong hands, getting killed is the least of my concerns."

His eyes flashed as he took a step closer. "What is this information that's apparently worth more than your life, then?"

Hermione blinked at him. "Well, I can't very well tell you that."

A muscle twitched in his jaw, and she watched his throat swallow. "Granger, just an hour ago you were spilling all your machinations and theories, *begging* for no secrets between us—"

"*Begging?*"

"—and now we're back to it again?"

"Malfoy, you're in the Dark Lord's inner circle—"

His expression made the words die in her throat.

"And?" His voice was low as he stepped closer, looming over her.

"What of it?"

She swallowed thickly. "And if there's one secret I have to protect at all costs, this is it."

"We'll both be dead if it gets to that point, so I fail to see the difference."

"Is that all that matters to you?" She lifted her chin, meeting his eyes. "Surviving at any cost to those left behind?"

He scoffed, but said nothing. She could see his pupils blooming as he stared back at her, and her stomach flipped.

"I have to get her this information, Draco," she said softly. "I'm not asking you to agree with me, but I am asking you to respect me on this. If your mind is read—"

He huffed and turned away. "That won't be a problem."

She scowled at his back. "Why? Because you're so advanced at Occlumency?"

"Yes," he replied simply.

"practicing" paying off, but she did have a moment of guilt for the extra minutes Susan had to spend against Goyle's chest when he quickly followed Draco's lead.

She crossed her legs in her little slip, tilting her knees toward Draco's waist. His left arm slipped over her hip, holding her to him instead of clenching his fingers tight around the arm of the chair. When she shifted in his lap, nuzzling into his neck and letting her fingers play with the hair on the back of his head, he didn't flinch. She felt giddy with success. Their time together had paid off, just like she'd predicted.

He jostled her when he laughed at something Zabini said, and she turned to the source, finding the Italian girl staring at her with deep brown eyes. She was sitting gingerly in Zabini's lap, as though he wasn't nearly as comfortably intimate with her as he'd been with the others. Hermione felt examined, flayed open by her gaze. The girl quickly turned her eyes back to the tablecloth, a small smile pulling at her full lips, almost as if she'd been caught. Hermione swallowed and pushed her concerns for the young girl aside, focusing on what information she could gather.

Nothing noteworthy caught her ear in the table's conversation after the first half hour. But then Theo's voice rang out above the others.

"There's a One O'Clock Gun tonight," he said, lazily twirling his fork in the air.

A collective murmur of interest swept through the table. All except Draco, whose thighs tensed beneath hers. She dragged her fingers through his hair, rubbing circles in his scalp like he'd done for her their first night here.

The phrase was familiar, but she couldn't place it. It seemed like a military expression.

"I love dinner and a show," Flint said, and the table erupted into laughter.

Draco's hand squeezed her hip — shivering her skin pleasantly. She caught herself, refocusing. She had more pressing concerns, like whether

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this new event would cut into her time to find the strawberry-blonde.

Feeling eyes on her, she turned to find Giuliana Bravieri staring at Draco's hand on her hip with gleeful curiosity. Hermione frowned at her, trying to decipher what the girl was thinking. Her brown eyes flickered up to hers, and just before the girl looked away to stare submissively down at the tablecloth again, she lifted her brow at Hermione — a perfect arch — and sent her a mischievous smirk — one born from years of practice, years of superiority and status.

Hermione felt her breath stutter in her chest.

Pansy.

Could it be? It was too much of a coincidence that this broken fourteen-year-old could conjure a smile like that.

Hermione caught herself staring, and closed the book on Pansy, showing it away. She turned her eyes back to the table, and opened her ears again.

It was a rather uneventful evening in the dining room, despite the hours they sat there talking and laughing. Pucey was bringing up past memories of notable Quidditch games at Hogwarts. She heard Harry's name several times, and she felt the pages of his book shiver and rattle until she forced them to settle in her mind.

A chiming, amplified throughout the dining room, cutting off the music playing and silencing the voices in surprise. Hermione looked up, searching for the source. The clock on the wall read quarter till one.

The boys cheered, grabbing their drinks and gripping their girls close, rubbing their hands together.

Draco peeled her off of him, all tension returning to his body, Zabini shared a look with Giuliana — *Pansy*.

“What is it?” Hermione whispered to Draco.

He shook his head at her in warning and followed the others as they descended the spiral staircase into the Great Hall. She kept her eyes open for the strawberry-blonde, searching the crowd of people as they headed



Silence hung in the room, thick and heavy like a cloak. Draco's eyes flickered between Hermione's eyes and her lips, as though he couldn't believe the words that had emerged from them over the past hour.

He'd been quiet as she spilled her secrets, one after another. The note from the strawberry-blonde. Charlotte. The grape between Cho's painted lips, and what it meant.

Apart from a sharp breath or two, he'd done nothing but stare as she'd listed the facts and shared her suspicions. But now that she'd finished, his eyes on her felt even more intense, and her sense of calm logic was slipping away from her.

When she could bear it no longer, she cleared her throat. Loudly. He blinked, as if snapping out of a trance.

“Well?”

He scratched the back of his head. “Right. That was...a lot, Granger.” She glared at him. “A lot? That's all you have to say?” Draco opened his mouth, but settled on a shrug. “Never mind,” she huffed, crossing her arms. “Are you going to help me or not?”

A pause as he frowned at her, mind working. “You want me to arrange a private audience with Cho Chang.”

“Yes.”

“Knowing full well what the risks are if you're caught.”

“Yes.”

His scowl deepened. “And why can't you just pass her a bloody note?” “It wouldn't fit. And it's far too dangerous.”

"Dolohov," he whispered, his eye twitching.

Hermione felt like a bucket of water had crashed down on her. "Oh." She frowned, distracted from her purposes by his strange question. "Just threats. He made it clear that he had a special interest in me."

Draco's face was impassive. There was no need to tell him about the showers, or his hand between her legs. Certain things couldn't be erased.

She stepped closer to him. He eyed her in acceptance, and she pushed on, trying again to get an answer to the only question that mattered.

"Why am I here?"

He blinked, looking away from her quickly. His lips pressed together.

"No more secrets," he mumbled. "But anything but that."

Rooted to the floor in front of him, she felt the disappointment twist her stomach. She thought again to the picture of her in his closet drawers. The possibility that she was being kept safe as a bargaining chip should the Order revive.

Narcissa's actions today could have multiple intentions...

We kept Hermione Granger alive and unharmed.

She nodded, filing this away. Burying her irrational sadness. "I need to speak to Cho."

He frowned. "Chang?"

She lifted a brow like he did. "Do you know another Cho?"

He narrowed his eyes at her in annoyance.

"At Edinburgh. Can you arrange it?" she asked.

He stared at her, taking in her face, her curls, her eyes. "Perhaps. Why?" She pressed her lips together. *No more secrets.* "I have something to tell you about the Carrow Girls and their collars."

to the exits into the courtyard.

Her hand reached for her collar to adjust it, and she caught herself.

"She has to use the loo," Draco announced. "I'll join you at the Mills Mount."

Pansy snapped her head to them, looking out from Giuliana's brown eyes. Hermione turned up to Draco as he steered them toward the hallway.

Her mouth opened to ask—

"Don't," he hissed. "Just trust me on this."

She felt her heart pounding in her ears as Draco led them around the crowd, suddenly cutting left to the fireplaces.

"Not leaving already, Malfoy?" a gravelly voice sounded from behind her. "I haven't even had a chance to say hello."

Hermione's chest rattled, hair standing on end from the memory of eyes on her naked body, a hand between her legs, a scratchy voice whispering filthy things into her ear. Draco held her in a punishing grip as they turned to face Antonin Dolohov, his black eyes focused on her.

"Dolohov," Draco greeted in a stilted voice. "Back from Italy so soon?"

"Just today." His gaze skated over her chest, her waist, her legs. "I'd heard you'd been letting her out of her cage. Had to come see for myself."

There was a pounding in her blood, but she focused on holding her head high, meeting his eyes.

"And now you've seen," Draco replied curtly. "If you'll excuse us—"

"Not sharing her either, I've heard," Dolohov said, stepping so subtly to the left, blocking the narrow path around him. "What a shame that is." He took a small step forward, cocking his head. His eyes hadn't left her once. "With me, you would have been the Queen of Edinburgh, Mud-blood. The grandest prize, presented and polished. You would have had your fill of pure-blood cock every Friday until you were overflowing with it."

A chill passed along her shoulders, but she didn't move a muscle. Draco shifted, his shoulder passing into her sightline, putting himself in front

of her.

"Just to come home to your worthless half-blood prick?" Draco lilted, and she could hear the naszy smirk in his voice, so reminiscent of their school days. "I think she got the better deal, Antonin."

Dolohov sneered and stepped into him, nose-to-nose. "Your daddy's not here, Malfoy. I'd be very careful what you say to me."

"Oh, I have nothing to say to you at all. We have a binding agreement, Antonin," Draco said lowly. "Now kindly step away from me and my Lot. I'll only ask you once."

"You've been keeping her locked away for far too long, Malfoy. Careful," he warned. "Or someone might figure out how to pick the lock."

Draco's left arm was still twisted behind himself, squeezing her wrist so hard she knew it would bruise. He breathed a humorless laugh, and slapped Dolohov's upper arm.

"Good to see you, Antonin. I'll give my father your regards."

With a sharp tug, he pulled her around him, passing Dolohov on the right with a shove to his shoulder. Hermione didn't look back, only focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

They moved into the chill of the courtyard, and she chanced a look to Draco's face — stony, impassive. She realized they were following the crowd traipsing down a winding pathway, weaving through centuries-old buildings. The resignation in his face grew, and he kept glancing over his shoulder. Draco was no longer looking for a quick exit.

She felt a cold horror build in her chest as they walked into the crowd gathering at the base of the hill. A courtyard looking out over the horizon of Edinburgh filled with black hoods and girls shivering in flimsy slips.

Hermione took in the crowd. There was more than just the revelers from the castle here. She spied a handful of shadows on top of the hill, prowling with canine movements, howling. At the edges of the crowd, smugglers and dealers from Edinburgh stalked, trying to entice the fringes of the masses into buying their wares.

"I won't apologize for finding the ritual," he said, looking back at her.

"But I will apologize for not telling you sooner."

"I could have helped you."

"I know."

"But you didn't want me to," she surmised.

"I didn't want you worrying about Plan B."

Hermione swallowed. She wondered what she would have done. If she had hours and hours sitting next to him in the library researching ancient spells, squirming at the thought of needing to do it the "easy" way... Would she have just turned to him at midnight and kissed him?

Would he have let her?

She cleared her throat. "You treat me like a child who needs protection," she said softly. "And I don't like it. It makes me feel even more useless than I already do."

His jaw clenched. She continued, finding a fire inside of her that had been born at Edinburgh as the cannons fired.

"We can help each other. Already, I am assisting you with any suspicions of your behavior. I can help with other things if you just tell me what they are." She held his eyes, and she watched them flash quickly before returning to grey. "And I need your help as well. But first, I need to know there will be no more secrets between us."

He was still. "No more secrets," he repeated, like testing the words in his mouth.

"No more waking me at two in the morning with a ritual from the Middle Ages. No more stealing my hair for Polyjuice potions. No more tugging me away from Edinburgh because there's a catastrophe in the courtyard you forgot to inform me of."

There was pink on his cheeks, and tension in his arms.

"No more secrets," he said, almost daring her in his tone. He stepped into her, eyes dark and dangerous. "Tell me what he did to you."

She blinked, her mind crisscrossing in different directions. "Who?"

She brought her hands to her stomach, the hospital gown scratchy against her skin.

The terror that had frozen her upon seeing Dolohov's leer and the Medivich's wand drained from her veins until a slow dripping serenity surrounded her.

Once more, she'd been saved. Narcissa Malfoy had attacked one of the Dark Lord's most trusted followers to protect her from being sterilized.

Hermione braced herself on the back of her armchair.

Mippy *popped* into her room again with wide eyes, carrying her discarded clothing. "Miss! I needs your gown!"

She stripped, mind too numb to feel shame, and traded the gown for her garments. Mippy disappeared.

She stood alone in her room, breathing in the silence before beginning to dress. As she pulled up her trousers and clasped her bra, her mind started to tumble.

Her door slammed open, and she gripped her jumper to her chest. Draco stepped in, eyes skating quickly across her skin, before turning abruptly to give her privacy. "Are you alright?"

She couldn't think of a suitable answer, so her mind jumped elsewhere.

"It will have to be a very strong Memory Charm," she said, voice trembling as she pulled her jumper over her head. "Replacing the memory with something different entirely."

"Mother has it under control."

She nodded quickly, trying to focus. He checked to make sure she was entirely decent before stepping into the room.

"You're alright?" he asked again.

"Why did she do that? That was... beyond stupid, really."

He swallowed and met her eyes. "She cares about you."

A warmth spread over her, from her chest outwards. She felt the full events of the day return to her. It seemed he was doing the same — his eyes over her shoulder, caught on the glowing white light in a jar.

Draco walked her towards the middle to a cleared space. A pair of hooded figures shifted in front of her. Hermione's heart jumped in her throat. The strawberry-blonde stood at the front of the crowd, standing against the ledge overlooking the city.

She gasped breathlessly, stunned into silence. Sound disappeared in a vacuum.

The girl stood in a ragged slip, her hands magically bound in front of her. Her chin was lifted, and she was murmuring something, lips moving quickly. To her left, a boy with the same color of curls on top of his head stood shaking. He couldn't have been more than fifteen.

Hermione thought of the note stuck between her skin and the gold collar. Had the girl been caught? Did someone know what she was doing with the collars? Hermione spun around — was someone coming for her as well? — and felt herself jerked backward by Draco's hand, squeezing her tightly in warning.

Amycus Carrow stepped into view, and the cheering hit her in full force. Amycus smiled toothily and amplified his voice, greeting the crowd.

"To the Dark Lord's power," he boomed.

And the crowd responded, "May he reign forevermore."

"A traitor to the Dark Lord's reign stands before you," Amycus hissed. "She and her brother — two *Muggles*!" — the masses snarled — "find themselves ungrateful for everything we've given them here, at the center of the Dark Lord's power."

The booing and spitting rang in her ears. Draco stood behind her, a hand still on her elbow.

Hermione knew what was to come. The girl and her brother were standing at a firing squad. They were to be executed, here, in front of them all. Hermione searched the crowd for someone, anyone. Her knees buckled as she tried to turn about, and Draco's hand tightened on her again.

Her eyes landed on Charlotte, still passing drinks around on a tray, smiling tightly. She watched as Charlotte glanced to the front, a stab of sadness in her eyes that couldn't be masked quickly enough.

Hermione looked back to the strawberry-blond as Charlotte gazed on her. The Scottish girl in the front of the crowd was staring directly at Hermione, an intensity electrifying the space between them. Hermione felt her heart splintering at the edges.

"This Muggle filth," Carrow continued, "showed no appreciation for what we've given her. We allowed her and her brother into our *world*. Allowed them to serve us, as is their rightful place. And how does she repay us?"

She held her breath, watching the strawberry-blond flicker her gaze between Hermione and Charlotte.

"By attacking one of her superiors!" Amycus bellowed, his spittle flying into the crowd. "By forgetting her natural place. Her brother — a filthy *groundskeeper*" — he paused for emphasis, and the crowd jeered — "was chosen to serve one of our guests. And this Muggle slut attacked the wizard that would have graciously bestowed his attention her brother!"

Hermione inhaled sharply. This girl's sentencing had nothing to do with Ginny Weasley or assisting with a plot to murder the Dark Lord. The girl settled her gaze on her again, and Hermione's mouth dried, heartbeat quickening as her brain scrambled for a plan —

"Champagne, Master Malfoy?"

Charlotte stood in front of her, blocking the girl and her brother from view. Hermione blinked at her, mouth gaping open.

"No, Charlotte," Draco clipped behind her. "Thank you."

Charlotte turned her eyes on Hermione for the first time that evening. "Poor dear," she said in a motherly tone so out of place with her scarlet dress and cleavage. "You must be freezing."

A hand against Hermione's cheek.

"She's practically an icicle." Charlotte's hand drifted down her jaw,

Her limbs were heavy. She felt cold and useless. Pain pricked behind her eyelids.

It would all be over soon.

From the corner of her eye, the Mediwitch lifted her wand, grim resignation in her face as she prepared to cast —

BANG!

Hermione jolted, springing to her side and curling away from the danger. She felt a hand on her waist, and she jerked. Turning to see Draco standing up against the table, neck craned behind him — staring at Narcissa's smoking wand.

With a flourish, the Mediwitches were disarmed, terror in their eyes.

Hermione sat up, looking around Draco's shoulders. Dolohov lay crumpled against the opposite wall, head lolling to the side.

"Draco, dear," Narcissa hummed, voice low and dark. "Collect all three wands." Narcissa's eyes were on fire, magic crackling from her skin.

In a flash, Draco was gone, following the sounds of clattering sticks against stone.

"Hermione, please return to your room," she said with an air of cool authority. Hermione had never heard from her. "Your examination has concluded."

Narcissa held her wand on Dolohov's unconscious form, watching for movement. Draco returned to her side, looking pale.

Hermione slid off the table onto shaking legs. "What are you going to do?" she croaked.

"A simple Memory Charm on all three should do the trick," Narcissa said. "Mippy?"

The elf snapped into existence. Hermione jumped at the sound.

"Take Hermione to her room and then return."

And before she could ask another question, the elf took her wrist, and she was in her room. Mippy was gone again before Hermione could form words.

She was going to have it ripped from her again. This possibility. This small chance of a future.

"Let's see then."

Hermione felt the Mediwitch's wand tap against her left hipbone. A dim red light appeared from her wand. She switched to Hermione's other side, and with a tap, a bright green illuminated the witch's face.

A pause, like skipping a step on the stairs. She felt every eye in the room on her waist. She didn't dare look to the Malfoys.

And then a sharp, "Ha!" cracked from Dolohov's throat. He chuckled, and the room shook with it. "Three months with a fertile slut and she's not knocked up? You check to see if your boys swim, Malfoy? With me, Muddblood, you'd have triplets by now—"

"That's enough, Antonin," Narcissa hissed. "Please remember your manners while you're in my house."

"*Your* house. The 'lord of the manor is gone, ain't he?" A stunned silence before Dolohov turned back to the Mediwitch. "Go on then."

Hermione braced herself for the wrenching pain she'd felt the last time her tubes had been severed. She looked past the arm of the Mediwitch toward the ceiling and took a shuddering breath, focusing on anything but the image of children with her curls and grey eyes—

"Don't—" A cleared throat. "She's my property. Don't I get a say here?"

Hermione swallowed, blinking rapidly. A thick silence fell like snow.

"All Muddbloods are sterilized." A pause. "Why, Malfoy? You want pups?"

"Of course not." Draco's voice was clipped. "I would just like all procedures cleared with me—"

"By order of the *Dark Lord*, I am sterilizing the Muddblood in your possession, Malfoy."

Hermione could see the faint green light over her hip fading, winking out of existence.

stretching to her collar. "You'll have to ask Master Malfoy nicely for a Warming Charm." She scratched the paper from under the metal, slipping against Hermione's skin like rough sand. "I'm sure you could convince him."

Charlotte winked at her, but there was something fiery in it. A tension in her jaw that promised blood. And then she was gone, sauntering through the crowd, one hand fisted at her side.

Hermione felt the world tilting on its axis, and it took her several long seconds to realize that Draco was steadying her lower back, pushing her upright. She barely registered the Warming Charm he cast over her. She stiffened and looked back to the Scottish girl and her brother, ears ringing.

Amycus Carrow was recounting her sins, speaking in rousing tones about Muggle crimes befitting Muggle punishments. The strawberry-blonde turned to her sobbing brother, speaking quickly, too low to overhear. He nodded solemnly, his shiny eyes never leaving his sister's.

They were Muggles. They had no business getting involved in any of this horror. And yet, this was the girl who'd grasped her hand under the table with glass digging into her knees. A girl who had risked everything to get Ginny's note to her. Just like she'd risked everything to protect her little brother.

A noise to her left. Hermione glanced over to find a Silver Collar girl with silent tears trailing down her cheeks.

A wild cheering brought her attention back to the front. A cannon wheeled forward.

The One O'Clock Gun.

Terror gripped her as the old war cannon spun slowly to face the two siblings.

"No!" she choked, but it was too loud everywhere — inside her mind and out.

A pair of hands on her waist. A firm chest against her shoulder blades.

Amycus called out that they would prove how foolish it was for anyone, let alone a pair of filthy Muggles, to resist the Dark Lord's will. They would take the boy first, and let his sister watch.

Hermione turned, heaving for air. A hooded Death Eater on her right turned to glare at her. The hands on her waist turned her back, forcing her to face ahead as they aimed the cannon. A sharp jaw pressed to her temple. Warm breath fanning across her cheekbones.

"There is a lake with still waters," he whispered. "A mountain range surrounds it. The waters are deep with hidden secrets, but the water is still."

She blinked, legs swaying, feeling her breathing even out as she let his words wash over her. His hands slipped around her stomach, pressing her close to him.

They lit the cannon. And screamed and stomped while they counted down.

"Think of your mind as a library. Shelves upon shelves of novels and journals and biographies," the voice lulled. "Find an empty shelf for this moment."

An explosive boom, rocking the stones beneath her feet. Hermione watched with a slack jaw as the spot where the boy stood smoked and crumbled, his sister speckled with his blood. The cannon was reloaded.

"An empty book in your hands. Its blank pages between your fingers. Write this moment into the book. Give it a title."

The One O'Clock Gun, her mind supplied.

"Fill the pages, and close the book."

The cannon aimed at the strawberry-blonde. She shed tears slowly, mixing with her brother's blood and dripping pink down her neck. "Close the book, and push it into a corner. Lose it within the piles and piles of texts and novels." A book's pages fluttered shut in her mind. It locked. And she breathed deep, stretching to her tiptoes to push it onto a shelf that was just too tall for her to reach. She imagined a hand with long

hands pulled away as Hermione jerked. It was just the Mediwitch behind her, trying to help her tie the laces of the gown.

"Sorry," Hermione whispered.

She padded out to the table, thinking of cold black marble in the Ministry.

Dolohov's eyes were on her as she slid up to the table.

"Looks like you learned how to play nice after all, Mudblood."

"I'll ask you not to speak to my Lot," said Draco coldly. "You may address me if you have a direct order for her."

Hermione lay back, her mind numb. Instead of a high arched ceiling with chandeliers, she could only see a low lamp, black ceilings.

She breathed deep, pulling air into her empty lungs. *A lake with still waters.*

"What kind of issues?" Narcissa asked. "What's wrong with the other Lots?"

The Mediwitches hovered over her, silently casting several scans. She watched the familiar Virginity Detection scan wash over her, finding nothing.

"They weren't properly sterilized," Dolohov said.

And Hermione felt the room shake, quivering before her eyes.

A thick silence as the Mediwitches tested her.

The girls were becoming pregnant. She wasn't the only one whose fertility had been spared.

"This is unnecessary then," Narcissa said, voice slightly rising. "I can tell you that she hasn't bled since she's been here."

Hermione's eyes shut, and she felt her throat close.

She'd stopped menstruating when she was on the run with Harry and Ron. Her body had been too stressed, too underfed. Even now, with the comforts of Malfoy Manor and one working fallopian tube, she hadn't begun to bleed again.

Her chest shook.

remorse. "But your mother tells me you're early risers here at the Manor." He smiled at her and Draco. "Thank you for your hospitality, Narcissa," he said with a wink.

Narcissa stepped forward. "Of course, Antonin." A thin smile pasted on her face. "And I'd prefer if you called me Mrs. Malfoy."

Hermione's eyes turned down to the stone floor. Her skin was cold, and her breath was shallow.

"What's this about?" Draco asked. He crossed his arms over his chest, shifting in front of her.

"Yaxley and I have been tasked to check in on the Lots. There've been a few issues, and the Dark Lord has asked us to follow up." His voice scratched down her spine.

One of the Mediwitches conjured an examination table. The other approached her with a hospital gown and silently gestured toward a conjured privacy stall. They'd been silenced.

Draco gripped her upper arm before she could step away from him. "Is this really necessary?"

"The Dark Lord wishes us to be thorough, Malfoy."

Hermione stared at her shoes as she followed the witch to the privacy curtains. Before she could disappear behind them, Dolohov said, "No need for all that, is there? Nothing I haven't seen before."

Her skin shivered and her mouth tried to swallow. Her eyes unfocused, remembering the showers at the Ministry. She thought she'd closed that book weeks ago, but it fluttered open at her feet. She summoned her magic and focus to slam it closed.

It was silent in the drawing room. She disappeared behind the curtain and listened to Narcissa start polite but stilted conversation. Her hands tugged her jumper up. Her fingers unbuttoned her trousers. And in a distant memory, she heard the echo of water against tile. She felt his black eyes on her naked body.

A pair of hands reached for her back, and she jumped, gasping. The

fingers helping her reach the top.

A cannon was lit.

There was a girl crying.

A crowd cheered and counted the seconds.

The girl tilted her head back to the sky and screamed.

She disappeared in a spray of smoke and blood and rage.

Hands around Hermione's waist, pulling her close. A sharp jaw cutting into her temple. Hands leading her backward, tugging her past the screaming fanatics and werewolves and other monsters. Pulling her to climb a cobblestone hill, moving into a courtyard, into a hall.

She found herself stepping through a fireplace and into a bedroom with green curtains and neatly organized trinkets. She turned around, bookshelves swaying and buckling, and Draco Malfoy stood before her in his bedroom.

His hands came to rest on her jaw, examining her eyes.

"Look at me."

She blinked, and they crashed to the ground. Free.

Her senses were overwhelmed. Shivers over her skin, gasping breaths from her chest, a flood of tears down her cheeks. She sobbed, her hands clutching his elbows, keeping him close. And without knowing how, she pressed against his chest, her forehead pushing into his sternum. Her cries shook her body. He enclosed his arms around her back.

A hole in her stomach the shape of a cannonball. Filled with grief and rage and despair.

Draco didn't say a word, simply holding her. She pulled back when she'd finally exhausted herself, stepping away from him. She knew she was red and swollen and wet. But he looked down at her with a raw passion that she couldn't feel vulnerable. "They're going to pay for what they did," she vowed, her voice hollow and misshapen.

His grey eyes stared down at her. He moved a curl behind her ear. And he nodded.



CHAPTER 19

“My *family* is in jeopardy, Granger—”

“And you’re blaming *me* for that—?”

“Sometimes I have to act without your approval to do what’s best for my family! All four of us!”

Her lips opened in a silent gasp.

His eyes widened as he seemed to realize what he’d just said. His jaw snapped shut, horror dawning over his features. Before she could press him further, he turned on his heel, dashing for the door.

Hermione gaped at the empty doorway for several long moments before sitting down on the corner of her bed. She stared at the fluttering light in a jar on her nightstand, listening to the echo in her ears of him calling her family.



At seven, Draco knocked on her bedroom door.

“They’ve arrived.” His voice was flat. And his eyes were cold.

She had been dressed for hours, unable to sleep. It seemed the same for him. Both of them resigned to whatever fate awaited them.

Pulling her bedroom door closed behind her, she followed him down the stairs and to the drawing room.

Always the drawing room.

As he pushed open the door, he took her elbow in a firm grip, tugging her through the threshold behind him.

She cataloged the room quickly. Narcissa. Two women in Mediwitch robes she didn’t recognize. And turning to greet them, a smug leer on his face, was Dolohov.

Her feet stumbled, and her stomach tightened before she cast her gaze down to the floor.

Draco’s steps slowed, but he gave away no other reaction.

“Dolohov,” he greeted.

“Apologies for being so early, Malfoy,” Dolohov said without a hint of

Waking on Saturday morning was like pulling herself from a thick bramble that had settled over her in the night. Fighting her way back to consciousness, she struggled against aching muscles and a pounding behind her left eye.

She turned on her side and willed her body out of bed. But she couldn’t move.

And then she remembered.

The Occlumency.

The One O’Clock Gun.

The strawberry-blondé’s scream.

Dolohov’s eyes.

And Draco’s voice in her ear, steadying her, guiding her through the night’s horrors.

He’d let her sob, let her lean on him, holding her close. And then he’d nodded. Agreeing with her? Agreeing to help her?

He’d called for an elf to take her back to her room with a Dreamless Sleep Potion, and her mind had shut down the moment her body slid in between the sheets.

Her eyes fluttered open as her mind sputtered to life, remembering all the things she needed to be doing. But such strong Occlumency had taken a toll on her body and mind. In spite of her intentions, she found herself drifting back out to sea.



staring down at the blood dripping from the slice over her heart. His wand raised, and he muttered a spell to sew the skin back together. His eyes didn't leave her chest as she felt the cut heal.

His frown drew her eyes down. Just below his hand, a thin white scar crossed her heart.

"Magical wound," she whispered, temporarily distracted. "The scar will remain."

When she glanced back at him, his lips were pressed together, displeased. He looked away from her skin, and she remembered her anger.

"What if it didn't work," she asked, voice thin.

He stepped back from her and ran his hand through his hair. "Then I'd think of something else. A different spell."

She wondered at what point he would have come to her room, held her down on the bed, and penetrated her.

Minutes before the "visitors" arrived? Or perhaps he'd rather let them all die instead.

"And if you couldn't find another spell? When would you have consulted me and my opinion on the matter?"

He blinked at her before looking away to her bookshelves. "I was hoping I could find something like a glamor. Something cast to deceive the Detection Spell." He swallowed thickly. "I was hoping—"

"You were hoping I'd never have to know," she finished for him. Her skin buzzed with anger. "To cast a spell and brush it under the rug."

His lips pressed together tightly. "Do you not understand that we could be under investigation? By order of the Dark Lord, you are being *examined* tomorrow morning, and we have no idea why—"

"I understand perfectly, thank you," she spat. "I also understand that you had twelve hours in which you could have *told* me what was going on—he took a breath to interrupt—"to inform me of the problem so that we might be able to come up with a solution together, but instead you chose to surprise me—"

When she could finally sit up in bed, the clock next to bed read four in the afternoon.

Hermione groaned. She couldn't afford to lose any more time. She needed to build up her Occlumency endurance. She needed to set an alarm from now on. She needed the elves to splash her with pails of cold water if she didn't move before nine.

Dragging her legs from the covers, she sat on the edge of her bed until she could pull herself into the bathroom. When she returned from a cold shower, there was a pain relief potion on her nightstand. She sent a prayer of thanks to the elves and downed the contents.

Once her head was clear again, Hermione focused her thoughts, closing the books in her mind that held the horrors of the One O'Clock Gun and the grief for the nameless Scottish girl and her brother.

A fresh memory fluttered to the surface. Arms holding her close, long fingers tracing the shell of her ear. Grey eyes locked on hers as he'd nodded.

Draco. He'd helped her last night. And maybe he'd help her again. Her heart thumped with the possibilities.

She threw on a jumper and denims and headed down the hall to Draco's door. A few knocks and several long minutes of waiting — and nothing. She wasn't surprised to find him absent, as he was rarely where she needed him to be.

His study was empty. The drawing room was empty.

But when she hurried down the stairs and pushed open the doors to the library, the sight stopped her in her tracks. Texts were strewn across the chairs, the floor, the small end tables. A dozen books hovered in front of their shelves, waiting to be plucked by whoever had called upon them from the book finder.

Hermione's lips parted at the sound of pages turning quickly from deep in the stacks. And then — "Still not hungry."

She blinked. She peered behind her shoulder to see if Mippy or Narcissa

were standing there with a tray. As she turned back to the stacks, Draco poked his head from around a shelf, glaring. When he saw it was her, his frown vanished, and he snapped his book shut. He pulled a quill from behind his ear — a habit from school — and twisted it between his fingers.

“Granger,” he said. “I thought you were Mother.”

His eyes whipped around the room, as if just taking in the disarray she’d walked into. She held her breath as she studied him, watching the flush creep up his neck. He dropped the arm holding the book and tilted it so slightly behind him, and her eyes followed the movement.

“What are you researching?”

“Just looking for a solution to a problem,” he clipped. He swallowed and ran a hand through his hair.

She nodded slowly, undeterred. She moved a few steps closer. “I wanted to thank you for your kindness last night.”

He stared at her stiffly as she gazed up at him. His eyes different from the warm ones that had locked on hers last night, in his bedroom.

“You’re welcome.”

She waited for more, but nothing came. “And I wanted to—”

“Granger, I’m in the middle of something. Can this wait?”

She startled at the bite in his tone. There was a tension in his posture, a squaring of his shoulders that she recognized from Quidditch matches. Determination.

Suddenly she felt very silly. Thanking him for taking care of her while she cried. Thinking something had shifted. Her eyes prickled, and she snapped her mouth shut.

His eyes instantly softened. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” she replied, watching his shoulders release. The burning behind her eyes faded into a slow throb. “Exhausted.” She stood surrounded by all of his books and notes and messy piles. “Is this ‘problem’ anything I could help with?”

She inched toward the table filled with notes, eyeing an open book on

with the sconces lit and the fireplace back to roaring. She wondered if she should feel different.

“I apologize for the suddenness,” he said, shifting his weight. “I was only notified yesterday afternoon. And the spell required my father, and I wasn’t even sure if I could—”

“I want to see your research.” She tore her eyes from the ball of light and looked up to him. “I want to read up on the spell.”

He nodded, eyes distant but directed at the jar. “Of course. Tomorrow, after they—”

She scowled. “Now. I’m awake. You’re awake.” She stumbled out of bed, the long silk nightdress twisting around her legs in an awkward constriction. Unraveling it brought her close to him.

He glanced quickly down to the cut on her chest and then at her face. “You should get your rest.”

“Give me the book,” she demanded.

He was always keeping information from her, especially if it pertained to her directly. Irritation sharpened and bubbled in her chest.

Extending the book to her, he watched as she grabbed it and flipped to the marked pages.

It was still in German.

“Translation Spell, please,” she snapped.

His wand tapped the pages, shifting the letters into English.

She took deep breaths, focusing on the words as they arranged themselves. It was done. There was nothing she could do to change what had happened or how it had happened. She just needed the specifics.

It was a journal. A wizard’s entry from the 1200s, detailing a ritual to save his daughter’s “purity” from evil spirits.

Two candles. Two parents. The mother cleanses, the father bleeds her. She slammed the book closed, cheeks burning in anger and embarrassment. She pivoted to Draco, ready to release her pent up rage.

A warm hand dropped on her shoulder. She looked up and found him

He held the jar in one hand, pulled his wand in the other, and cast the Virginiy Detection spell. The scan hummed over her head and toes, scanning towards center. When the magic reached her abdomen, the four of them watched with bated breath.

And nothing. The scan stopped.

She didn't know what was supposed to happen if she wasn't a virgin. She hadn't seen it.

No one moved. She heard Draco swallow.

"Did it work?" she whispered.

A pause. And then: "It seems so," Narcissa breathed into her hair.

Lucius pulled his wand, cast the charm again, and watched as the same results happened.

A buzz from Draco's wand. "2:10," he said.

Lucius stood abruptly from the bed, looking down at her, and then up to Draco. "You won't be able to contact me if there's an issue."

The light from the glass jar in Draco's palm cast eerie shadows across Lucius's face, and she watched his throat move and his lips part in unspoken words. "You'll hear from me soon." He turned and exited through the fireplace without a backward glance.

With a wave, Narcissa lit the sconces low. She slid off the bed and gathered the ritual candles. "I apologize for all this fuss, Hermione, dear," she said, still not looking at her. "Get some rest. We'll talk in the morning." She sent Draco a stern look before leaving, the door clicking softly.

Hermione took a few breaths before she jolted upright. She sat in a bed in a white gown, blood from her chest dripping on the sheets, and stared at Draco Malfoy, who held her virginiy in his hands.

The relief on his face dissipated, and he paled as looked at her. He placed the jar delicately on her bedside table.

"This should stay here." He swallowed. "It would... it can catch quite a price on the Black Market, so it's best to keep it hidden in your room."

She blinked at the light, still the brightest source in the room, even

the edge. Draco was there in the blink of an eye, slamming it closed. She managed to catch a glimpse of runes and Germanic translations scribbled on parchment before he swiftly stepped in front of her.

Her eyes flickered up to him, so close she had to tilt her head back. They'd been this close the night before, when he'd folded his arms around her as she sobbed. He'd pushed a curl over her ear and stared into her widening eyes like he'd been entranced.

She pushed the memories away. "I *am* pretty good at research, if you'll recall." She smiled, hoping he couldn't resist the chance to tease her. To let her in.

Instead he jerked his head. "No. I'm almost there." He swallowed tightly. "Thank you, though."

She blinked quickly, nodding her disappointment at her shoes. Maybe when he was done with his "problem," they could finally talk. She lifted her chin, took a deep breath, and said, "I find that in most cases, the answer is right in front of you."

His lips parted on a silent inhale, as if her flippant remark had disturbed him. Pink spots high on his cheeks as his eyes roved over her before returning to her gaze.

"Thank you, Granger. I'll keep an eye out for that," he murmured.

Nodding one last time, she excused herself, heading to the doorway. As she turned to close the library doors, she caught a glimpse of him sitting at the table, beginning to organize whatever he was researching. She was reminded of sixth year when he would sulk in corners and hunch over books in the library, looking pale and thin.

She ate dinner alone in her bedroom, poring over a heavy book on the history of South America that contained a reference to magical slavery somewhere.

She made it three chapters before an overwhelming exhaustion pushed at her eyelids, beckoning her to sleep.



“Granger, wake up.”

Her eyes snapped open, her body jolting with the presence of someone else in her room. It was pitch black.

A candle flamed next to her, revealing Narcissa leaning over her bedside table, shaking out a match.

“It’s alright, dear,” she whispered, but there was a quiver to her voice. She pulled back the coverlet, refusing to make eye contact. “It’s alright,” she said — more to herself.

“What —” Hermione fell silent, lips parting at the sight of Draco coming around the other side of her bed with another candle. His fingers flamed a match out of a box, dropping it next to the candle without lighting it.

“What’s happened?” she asked.

“Come.” Narcissa peeled back the sheets over her legs, reaching for her. “Come with me.”

Hermione scrambled out of bed, heart pounding in her ears. Narcissa led her into the bathroom suite as Draco moved to the fireplace, wand tracing a spell over the flames.

Opening the Floo.

Narcissa shut the door behind them, and Hermione blinked, taking in the elegant Narcissa Malfoy in her dressing gown, sans makeup, sans tailored robes. A white silk nightgown hanging limply from her elbow, and a pale expression to match.

“Remove your nightclothes,” Narcissa whispered.

Hermione swallowed, mind begging for answers. But something told her to obey. “Are we going somewhere?” she squeaked. Her fingers moved quickly over her buttons, cold and quivering.

“No, dear. There’s... someone is —”

She watched Narcissa struggle for words. Hermione’s eyes went wide

Her limited German caught words like “devil” and “protection.”

She jerked her head over to where Draco stood in the corner, and her dizzy mind imagined she could see the whites of his eyes reflecting the darkness back at her.

A sharp pull from her belly, like the worst kind of menstrual cramps. She gasped, jerking. Narcissa held her down, and Lucius raised his voice as he continued chanting.

It felt like her intestines were fighting to twist in opposing directions. She squirmed, trying to stretch her body into positions that would alleviate the cramping, but it was like a wrenching low in her stomach.

She groaned, and she heard the floor creak near the windows.

A tight pop, as if something inside of her dislocated. She scrunched her eyes shut in pain, blocking out the darkness.

And a wash of peace. Like a Calming Draught. Like sunlight. Her stomach relaxed.

She opened her eyes, praying that it worked, and found Lucius Malfoy’s face boring over her in the candlelight.

No. Not candlelight. A ball the size of her fist hovered over her stomach. Just like the spell the Mediwitches cast months ago, burning so white it looked blue.

It cast shadows across the pitch-black room, sparking warmth in Lucius’s grey eyes.

Narcissa’s fingers threaded through her hair gently as every pair of eyes stared at the ball of energy, symbolizing what hadn’t yet been taken from her. She watched the light fluctuate like fairy wings held it aloft.

A glass jar pushed into view, scooping under slowly, capturing the orb, and closing a lid over top. She looked up to see Draco screwing the lid on, watching the light breathe. His eyes danced with its glow, and she watched his lips part in wonder.

Victorious.

She tried to remember if she’d ever seen him catch the Snitch.

"There's no need to worry, dear," Narcissa whispered into her ear.

Lucius struck the match. And the flames hissed out in the fireplace.

The only light in the room was from the two candles, casting shadows against their cheekbones and chins.

Narcissa crossed her legs and guided Hermione to lay with her head in her lap. She stared at the canopy as her mind raced.

Who was coming? What were they looking for? Why now?

And then all thoughts of possibilities swept from her mind as Lucius Malfoy climbed into her bed.

She jerked her legs, almost kicking him as his long limbs crawled like a panther to sit beside her. Narcissa grabbed at her arms to calm her, to hold her still.

"What does this spell entail?" she repeated, her voice cracking in her dry throat.

Lucius's calm features sharpened into a smirk. "Now, now. Don't fret, Miss Granger. Just lie back and think of England."

"Lucius," Narcissa warned.

Hermione felt her heartbeat strain beneath Narcissa's fingers, pounding to get out of her. And before she could ask another question, Lucius was pulling a knife from his robes, his impassive mask on once more. She gaped at the glint of the blade as he pressed one long hand firmly against her collarbone. The knife drew a quick, shallow slice against her heart, too quick for her to wince. She watched with wide eyes as Lucius's lips formed a silent prayer, wisps of German brushing across her forehead.

She looked at Draco, bathed in moonlight near the windows, watching with his hand clapped over his mouth. Their eyes met.

And the candles went out.

She felt the darkness like a cold plunge into water. If she didn't have the pressure of Narcissa's fingers on her wrists, she'd have shrieked.

Lucius's cool tones dripped ancient words across her face. She felt him shift back, hovering over her stomach and chanting.

with rising terror, her breath coming quick. *Voldemort?*

"We're having visitors first thing in the morning," Narcissa finally managed. "I don't know why. We were told they need to do a medical examination."

Hermione pulled the opened shirt off her shoulders with shaking fingers, fear overriding her modesty as Narcissa bunched up the white silk and tossed it over her neck.

"Alright," she rasped. Chills bursting along her skin as the silk slipped over her. Too long. Probably Narcissa's. "And what are we doing?"

"There's an old spell. Something that they used to use on their daughters.. A ritual."

Hermione stood frozen in terror as she let Narcissa's hands pull the gown down her legs. Fingers push her hair to the side. A cool chain draped over her shoulders as Narcissa placed a crystal necklace over her.

"What kind of ritual?" She didn't recognize the sound of her own voice. The crystal hummed against her skin. Magical.

Narcissa's cool blue eyes met hers. They pierced her, studying her.

"They will be able to see that your virginity is intact," she said quietly.

"So, we're going to take it."

Hermione's skin tingled, feeling the weight of the silk gown on her shoulders. Waiting for the words to make sense to her.

A rattling knock at the bathroom door. "1:59," Draco's clipped tone rang out. Her body jerked, and Narcissa gripped her arms to guide her out.

Draco stood aside to let them pass, his eyes firmly planted on the mantle clock above the fireplace. Narcissa guided her to the bed, pushing her to sit.

Her mind caught up to her circumstances as Narcissa knelt before her, produced a bowl of water, dipped her fingers, and brushed her fingertips over Hermione's eyes and lips.

There was a ritual.

A ritual to trick the virginity spell. The one they'd cast on her to decide

her starting price at the Auction.

Narcissa whispered something into the water bowl — something in German — before bringing it to her lips and swallowing half. She looked to Draco. He stood rooted to the carpets, muscles moving in his jaw.

This is what he'd been researching. Finding this ritual. He hadn't let her help him.

The small chime from the mantle clock, and he turned to them. "It's time."

He faced her, his grey eyes dead in the moonlight. Narcissa pushed the bowl to her, bringing it to Hermione's lips. Hermione drank the rest of the water, watching Draco over the rim. He stared her down as she swallowed.

He knew last night that they were coming. He knew they'd find her untouched, and he'd ransacked the library for a solution to his problem.

Hermione's breath hitched at the realization that he'd skipped over the easiest one.

Narcissa placed the bowl on the nighstand and crawled onto the bed, her long limbs gracefully folding under herself. She guided Hermione to sit in front of her, both facing the fireplace. Draco paced to the end of the bed, hand against the bedpost, watching the clock.

She opened her mouth to break the silence, to ask about the spell, and question the research, but the words died in her throat as the fireplace burned green, and Lucius Malfoy stepped through.

And her heart thumped in her chest.

Lucius glanced at her, dressed in white silk, waiting for him on a bed.

Draco stepped forward, pulling a book from his robes and flipping it open.

"From the Germanic. I've checked the translation. It's accurate." He met his father at the fireplace. "I've outlined the steps. The candle, the blood, the incantation—"

Lucius Malfoy raised a hand, halting his son. He took the book from

him and peered down, turning the pages. The air around Draco seemed to buzz with a dark, twisting energy as he waited for permission to speak again.

A page turned, and Lucius paused, his brow arched. Hermione watched his eyes move quickly over the same passage until they lifted to her.

The book snapped shut. Lucius assessed her and said, "And if it doesn't work?"

"It will." Draco's mouth was in a hard line.

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then I'll think of something else."

But Lucius was staring at *her*. She blinked at him, feeling the question under her skin.

If this doesn't work, will you do this the easy way?

She swallowed, and tilted her head into the tiniest of nods.

Lucius's eyes returned to the text, browsing the words lazily, casually, like one might window shop at Diagon Alley. He was supposed to be in Romania. He was only permitted emergency Floo calls. They'd brought him in for an illicit dark ritual, and he had the nerve to act as if they had all the time in the world.

As if all of their lives weren't at stake.

Draco's fingers twitched. Narcissa's breath stirred her hair.

Lucius closed the book and handed it back to Draco. He looked at the mantle clock and turned to her. "Ready."

"Let me see the book," Hermione said, voice too loud for the quiet room. "Let me read it first—"

"There's no time, Miss Granger," Lucius said, and she could hear the sneer in his voice as he crossed to the unlit candle by her bed.

"What does it do?" She turned her neck to look up at Narcissa, who was pressing her lips together and fixing a disappointed glare across the room. Hermione swiveled in the direction of her gaze to find Draco near the windows, watching silently.