

CHAPTER 24

“Since this appears to be a... difficult order for you to follow, one might hope you would at least take necessary precautions.” He paused delicately. “However, my wife tells me that you declined a Contraceptive Potion.”

Hermione blinked at him. The chopping knives ceased. Even Remmy seemed surprised, before turning to glare at her like she was an idiot.

“The elves will be stocking your cabinets with the potion tonight. Each dose is effective for exactly thirty days.”

Outrage began prickling through her shock. She opened her mouth to defend herself.

“Let me be very clear, Miss Granger. I expect you to drink it whether or not you are currently having intercourse with my son.” He looked back down at the week’s menu, scribbled his name with a quill, and handed it to Remmy with a careless flourish. “If you still refuse, the elves are under instruction to dose your meals with it.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes, fury licking her veins. “Assuming I ignore your wildly invasive accusation that I’m—I’m—”

“Having sex with my son,” he offered.

“—might I ask what *Draco’s* contraceptive responsibility is in all this?” Lucius lifted a cool brow. “He has already been given instructions and is blatantly disobeying them. I’m afraid I don’t trust him to remember the Contraception Charm every time you two happen to find yourselves alone.”

Hermione’s ears burned. Lucius smirked at her before glancing at the elves to his right, who quickly resumed their chopping.

“My wife is opposed to my more... stringent suggestions, so my compromise was to come to you first. You cannot become pregnant.”

Something strange bubbled through her, closing her throat. “Of course, Mr. Malfoy.” She felt her eye twitch. “I would hate for a Mudblood to sully your pristine family line.”

His lips twisted in a grin that didn’t reach his eyes. He stepped toward her, and she fought the urge to retreat.

THE AUCTION

“Am I correct to assume you are acquainted with Miss Mortensen, Adrian Pucey’s Lot?” He tilted his head at her, and she blinked and nodded slowly. “The imbeciles who examined her before the Auction decided to spare her from full sterilization, just as they did with you. She became pregnant.” He tapped his fingers on the table, watching her. Hermione swallowed as blood pounded in her ears. “Miss Mortensen is a Muggle-born. Per our new laws, the fetus was removed. I’m told she was fully conscious and forced to watch. Dolohov himself did the honors.”

Bile rose in Hermione’s throat. Lucius took a deep breath.

“You are under far more scrutiny than Miss Mortensen. In part due to your connection to Harry Potter”—his lip curled—“and in part due to the foolish choices of my son. Hiding you away for nine months would be nigh impossible. If you were to become pregnant, we couldn’t protect the child. And I will do everything in my power to prevent inflicting that kind of pain on my son. And my wife.”

Hermione felt a spreading numbness splintering out from her chest, running down her arms and into her fingertips.

“So,” Lucius said, standing tall and seeming to brush away the conversation like lint from his cloak. “You will take the potion. Is that clear?”

Her stubborn streak begged her to demand whether *he’d* said anything against those laws. Or whether he’d simply helped spread them. In Switzerland, Romania, and all the other places he’d disappeared to on Voldemort’s orders.

But her rational mind knew he was right. She didn’t want a child. Not like this.

As she nodded slowly, she wondered if Lucius would mourn the loss of an unborn, half-blood grandchild in the same way he thought his wife and son would. Or if his pure-blood ideologies would prevent him from thinking of a potential pregnancy as anything other than a disgraceful inconvenience.

He examined her, seemingly satisfied that his demands had sunk in.

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“Come with me.”

Hermione’s eyes widened as Lucius swept toward the small doorway, ducking smoothly with a practiced ease, and paused just outside the threshold.

“I won’t ask twice, Miss Granger.”

She stumbled to follow him, her mind reeling. He moved through the corridor quickly, not bothering to spare her a backward glance. He finally stopped at a window overlooking the gardens.

“We have eleven elves in total at Malfoy Manor,” he said conversationally, once she joined him at the window. “Four kitchen elves for feasts. When the size of the family is small and there are no extravagant feasts, Tom-Tom and Havy double as tidy elves, along with Boppy, Yipper, and Caf. Yipper is our youngest; he is Boppy’s son.” He pointed out the window. “Hix, there, is our head grounds elf. He works alongside Jot and Mck. You may never catch sight of Mck. He’s terribly shy. Mippy, as you know, is something of a personal elf to my wife.”

Hermione turned her gaze on Lucius, astounded. He was still moving pieces on his chessboard, ten paces ahead of her. “Why are you telling me this?”

He kept his eyes out the window. “You like elves, do you not?”

“I—”

He spun away from the window and moved briskly down the corridor.

“Do you know where the elves sleep, Miss Granger?”

She huffed and jogged to keep up with him. “No, but I still don’t understand—”

“No one but the elves can find their bedrooms.” He stopped in front of a tapestry and waited for her to catch up.

Hermione gaped at him. “Why?”

“The Manor has many secrets. Some are known to the immediate family, some only by me. Others are still yet to be revealed, if and when the Manor deems it prudent.”

THE AUCTION

“But why are you telling *me*?”

“Do you know the artist of this piece, Miss Granger?” He gestured to the tapestry, ignoring her question.

She blinked at him. “No?”

“The Manor has a vast collection of art and antiques.” He eyed her coolly. “Though not all of the furniture is treated with the respect it deserves.”

She blushed.

She spent the next twenty minutes in a slow walk back to the library as Lucius Malfoy led her through the Manor, pointing out family heirlooms, the architecture, even hidden corridors. Hermione felt a bit dizzy, her mind still trying to suss out his game. Perhaps forcing her to be his captive audience was some way of demonstrating control over her.

They stopped at the library doors. Lucius folded his hands behind his back and spun to face her. “And what, pray tell, are you researching so diligently these days, Miss Granger?”

Her heart pounded in its ribcage. If he knew, he’d certainly put a stop to it.

She cleared her throat, and closed the books in her mind. “I found a scroll that I believe was written by one of the earliest magical communities in Egypt. I’ve dated it around the 8th century B.C., but I won’t know for certain until I can translate it.”

Lucius raised a brow. Her heartbeat quickened.

“I know it sounds silly, but Ancient Runes was one of my favorite subjects, and it’s... it’s nice to have some normalcy.” She trailed off, blinking. Thinking about her old classes brought a genuine lump to her throat. “And this would be an incredible contribution if I succeed. It might even be from one of the lost cities—”

“Fascinating.” His voice was thick with sarcasm. “And might I ask why my son is so eager to help with this little project?”

“I asked him,” said Hermione quickly. “He’s a good study partner.”

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She flushed in spite of herself. “We may get distracted at times, but we’ve made significant progress.”

Lucius slowly curled his lips. “Very well. Do remember to take that Potion, Miss Granger.” He turned on his heel and left her at the doorway.

Hermione stared after him. There was no way to know whether he’d bought it — only time would tell. She sighed heavily and pushed through the library doors.

Draco’s head snapped up from where he loomed over their research table. He didn’t so much as blink as she made her way over to meet him. “Well?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know where to begin. The whole thing was just... odd, really.”

Relief flickered in his eyes. He moved quickly around the table and placed his hands on her hips. “Start at the beginning.”

She rose to her toes to place a kiss against his lips. His hands slid up to her waist, and he kissed her slowly before pulling away. “What did my father want,” he whispered.

And suddenly, the idea of telling Draco that she would soon be on a Contraceptive Potion was ten times as embarrassing as any discussion she’d had with Lucius or Narcissa. She felt a blush spreading across her cheekbones, and decided that with her body pressed to his — with his hands rubbing sensuous circles on her waist — it wasn’t the time to mention sex.

“He... he wanted to introduce me to the house-elves. And bore me with knowledge of the portrait curation in the west wing.” She laughed.

Draco’s brows furrowed. “Really?”

“Really. I think it was just an excuse to nag me about us snogging on his chaise. Oh, and he asked what we were studying.”

“Maybe he was trying to distract you.” Draco looked over at the door, as if he could suss out his father’s intentions. “What did you tell him?”

“That you’re helping me translate an ancient Egyptian scroll. Speaking

of distractions,” Hermione said, sliding out of his embrace and turning to the books. “I’d like to get some things done today.”

He leaned over her, pressing his front to her backside and reaching for a book in the center of the table. “How am I supposed to get anything done when you’re wearing these shorts,” he whispered.

She shivered and suppressed a grin. “You could always transfigure them into something less distracting.”

His lips ran over her ear as he murmured, “Not a chance.”



Having Lucius home had renewed Hermione’s sense of urgency. There was no guarantee he wouldn’t storm in at any moment and shut their research down in the blink of an eye. The thought terrified her.

Lucius had been unable to attend dinner last night, so Hermione and Draco had worked late into the night — truly working. Draco had been particularly grumpy when they finally turned in, but agreed to meet her at eight o’clock the next morning nonetheless.

Two hours into their morning, Hermione was curled up next to him on the loveseat, halfway finished with skimming her eighth book, and still no closer to finding the language source of the seventh cluster of runes.

She shifted and leaned forward, taking a long sip of coffee. Her stomach twisted with anxiety. There had to be a shortcut. Even if she did locate the source, they were still looking at months, if not years, to translate a single journal. The Order didn’t have that luxury.

She pressed her lips together and set down her coffee cup. “How is Theo?”

Draco looked up from the translation he had been working on for the past week — still on the first paragraph of a Scourer journal — and rubbed his eyes in a bleary, kittenish way that made her stomach flip.

“You’ll remember,” his deep voice grumbled, “that I don’t give a fuck

as he turned back to her. “You have to promise me you’ll get Oliver out.”

Her lips parted, sympathy sweeping through her veins.

“As soon as possible. The first wave,” he clarified. “Things have been worse for him with my father’s state of mind. His failures...” Theo swallowed, and he blinked rapidly. “He takes it out on Oliver.”

“I swear it.” She clutched the journal to her chest. “I’ll make sure Oliver is a priority.”

Theo’s eyes hardened as he finally looked to Draco.

He gave a single nod. “I swear it.”

Theo nodded back, clenching his jaw. “So you’re helping her,” he said, in confirmation. When Draco didn’t respond, a flash of concern crossed his face. “Be careful. You’re going to get yourself killed.”

Draco tilted his head and gave him a wry smile. “Same as you, I suppose.”

He took Hermione’s arm and led them out, passing Oliver just outside the door, his eyes downcast. She looked back as Draco tossed the Floo powder, and saw Theo lean against the doorway to watch them leave, his fingers reaching for Oliver’s as they disappeared in the green flames.



“Amazing the things you can learn with a little truth serum.” Hermione whipped her head to look at Draco, and he smirked. “Always get leverage, Granger.”

“Wood!” Theo screamed. “Leave us.”

There was a cold silence in the room as Hermione tried to recover from the splash of the last ten seconds. She watched as Oliver hobbled out and closed the door behind him. Theo and Draco held each other’s eyes in a fierce contest.

Theo broke away first. He pursed his lips and took a deep breath, pulling a book from the inside breast pocket of his jacket.

“The only thing I can say for sure,” he said quietly, “is that my father was determined to get his hands on every copy of this book after he’d created the tattoos. We traveled all throughout Europe tracking them down and either destroying them or removing sections.” He moved closer to them, staring down at the book like it could hurt him. “I was supposed to destroy this one.” His eyes locked on Hermione’s. “He’ll kill me if he finds out I gave it to you.”

And in what seemed like slow motion, Theo stretched out his arm and offered her a familiar book with the name Jeremiah Jones on the cover. She gasped and took it from him, flipping through the pages.

It was a complete copy. No torn-out pages. And at the center, thirty or so pages in gold. A key to deciphering the Scourers’ code.

“So you know what it is,” Theo confirmed. “You know how to use it.”

Her eyes snapped up to him, and just as she opened her mouth to thank him, Draco plucked the book from her fingers. He scowled at Theo.

“Why?” he asked.

Theo pressed his lips together and met Draco’s gaze. “Granger’s going to break these tattoos. You know she is. She’s probably the only one who can.”

Hermione felt hope spark in her chest, thrumming and burning.

“And when she does...” The lilt of conniving Slytherin shaded his tone

about Theo. How am I supposed to know?”

Hermione closed her book and turned to face him. There was no point in being coy. “I need to speak with him.”

He finished his yawn, ending in an indulgent stretch. “No.”

“Draco, you know as well as I do that we’re moving far too slowly. At this rate...” She shook her head. “I *know* he knows something. I can feel it—”

“What do you want to know?” he said lazily, breaking off a corner of a biscuit. “I’ll ask.”

“And why would he tell *you* anything? You’re terrible to him.”

He scowled. “I take it you still think you can seduce the information out of him?”

She sighed heavily. “I think he needs flattery. A chance to brag. He sees you as a rival, and there’s no way he’ll—”

Draco abruptly stood, tossing his parchment on the cushion. “It’s far too early in the morning for you to be psychoanalyzing my friendships, Granger—”

“It’s half-past ten!”

“And how late did you keep me up last night?”

“Tomorrow night at Edinburgh is the perfect opportunity. Flint won’t be there. I just need five minutes—”

He cracked his neck and took a few steps away. “I’m not going to leave you alone in a *booth* with him—”

“I’m not asking you to!” She scrambled to her feet. “What about a Trade for the Lounge.” It was a term she’d heard thrown around once or twice. By now she could guess what it meant. “Just the couches, not the booths.”

Draco glared at her.

“Hear me out,” she said, approaching him carefully. “Theo has just taken the Mark. He’s working closely with his father and loves bragging about it to anyone who will listen. I think I could easily sway conversation

toward the tattoos.”

“You really don’t think he’d see through you?”

Hermione lifted a brow. “With a bit of alcohol? No. Besides, I think he’s been lacking an opportunity to talk about himself. For *years*, possibly.”

“How kind of you to take an interest in him.” He sneered and dragged a hand over his face. “I cannot just make you available for Trades and Shares. Word would spread—”

“What about a one-time bet?” She took another step closer. “Perhaps another card game? You could wager a Trade for the Lounge.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “And you think Theo will win?”

“He doesn’t have to. You just need to lose.” She watched him frown and let his eyes drift out the window, as if searching for more reasons to say no. An idea sparked, and her heart quickened as she closed the distance between them. “You’re clearly the best card player there. I have no doubt you can twist the game however you see fit.”

His eyes flickered down at her.

“I saw it the last time you played cards with them,” she hummed, sliding her hands around his neck. “Did you play cards a lot in the dormitories?”

“A bit, yeah.” His throat bobbed.

“You probably won a lot of bets.” Her lips tilted up to his jaw, and his arms slid around her waist. “What was the best hand you ever played?”

He cleared his throat. “There was a tournament fifth year—” He went still as stone beneath her hands. “Granger, are you *seducing* me?”

She grinned. “I was. Did it work?”

He pushed her away, running a hand through his hair. “You’re an amateur. There’s no way Theo will fall for that.”

She gasped and hit his shoulder. “An *amateur*? I *had* you!”

Draco jerked away and strode to the table. He leaned back on it, glowing at her. Hermione frowned. Apparently she’d misfired.

you accidentally lost her in a bet tonight? I would have written it off if it weren’t for her clumsy probing—”

Hermione opened her mouth, but Draco grabbed her wrist.

“And *speaking of probing*,” Theo hissed. “I have a mother of a headache despite not drinking more than a glass or two.” He pointed a finger at Draco. “You and Blaise are fucking with me again, aren’t you? Like you used to with your fucking mind tricks—”

“Theo, it’s two in the morning.” Draco let out a long-suffering sigh.

“Did you have a point besides these wild accusations?”

“I know you’re up to something, Draco. If my father hears that you’re asking questions—”

“Fine,” Draco cut him off in a bored tone. “You’re right. I’m looking into the tattoos.” Hermione blinked up at him, stunned. He took a step forward. “But only because I’m having trouble with hers. Last week, her tattoo allowed her outside the boundary with hardly as much as a shock. I’m trying to fix your father’s mistake so my 65,000 galleons doesn’t run off in the middle of the night.”

Theo glared at him. Then he let out a loud snort. “Merlin. You’re losing your touch. Haven’t heard you lie that poorly since school.”

Theo downed his scotch and set the glass on the table. Oliver hobbled across the room to clear it, and Hermione’s heart cracked with every stumbling step.

“I was trying to do you a favor by looking into it myself,” Draco said coolly. “But if you’d rather I inform the Dark Lord that another one of your father’s projects is failing—”

“Are you blackmailing me?” Theo snarled.

Draco smiled, low and cat-like. “That’s a rather indelicate word, but I suppose I am. *Speaking* of blackmail, Cassandra and I had a *lovely* conversation tonight about what goes on in the booths — or better yet, what happens the next day, when you bribe the guards to bring her home—”

“She *wouldn’t*.”

her back to him, she shimmied out of her old pair and into the black ones. She balled up the dirty pair, unable to meet his eyes. “I’ll just... put these in my room—”

His hand shot out, ripping the lace from her fingers and tossing them across his sheets. “I’ll take them.” He grabbed her arm and led her to the fireplace.

“Oh,” she squeaked. “I can wash them myself—”

“I’m not going to wash them, Granger.” His voice was low and dangerous, and then he yanked them through the Floo.

A heat flashed through her body, but it was quickly extinguished by apprehension as they stepped through the flames and into a grand hall. The smoke cleared, and she found Oliver Wood leaning to one side, one arm in a sling and his eye purpled and swollen shut.

Hermione gasped.

Oliver nodded, and gestured for them to follow — like a house-elf, sent to retrieve visitors. She blinked, her emotions boiling and tumbling over, struggling to get control.

They followed his limping form to a grand double-doorway. Oliver had always been tall and muscular. She’d never seen him this thin and broken. Anger crowded her chest, suffocating her lungs. She hadn’t thought Theo capable of this kind of cruelty.

Oliver led them through the doors and moved to the wall beside the door as Draco and Hermione filed into the sitting room. A stone-faced Theo stood from a large chair, a tumbler of scotch in one hand.

“So,” Theo began coolly. “You and your whore want to know more about the tattoos, do you?”

Hermione’s breath hitched, and she felt Draco stiffen next to her.

A low scoff. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. If she asked you inappropriate questions tonight, I’m happy to discipline her.”

“Discipline her,” Theo muttered into his glass. “You don’t let anyone come within a foot’s radius of her, and now you expect me to believe that

“Draco, I have to follow this lead. Do you really want to sit in this library translating those symbols for the next two years?” She watched him deflate. “There has to be a better way. Any information Theo could give us might help.” Slowly, cautiously, she approached him. “I know you can do your part, and I’ll do mine.” She bit her lip. “Please.”

Something flickered in the grey. He crossed his arms and clenched his jaw. “If this idea works — if he loses, and we do a Trade...” His eyes hardened. “No kissing.”

She blinked at him. “No. No, of course not.”

“Not on the mouth, not on the face,” he continued, like he had a list written up somewhere. “No groping, no skin-to-skin contact—”

“That might be a little extreme—”

“I don’t want his hands on your body.”

Hermione stared at him, watching a pink blush color his cheeks. Apparently his rivalry with Theo ran deeper than she’d thought. She nodded her acceptance, and the tension in his shoulders relaxed. His gaze flickered down to her lips, and he reached for her arm to drag her closer.

She let herself be pulled between his legs, his hands dipping low on her waist to run over her hips and round her backside with a squeeze.

“So, what’s the plan?” she asked breathlessly.

“Blaise.”

“Blaise?” She tilted her chin to look up at him,

“He’s a shit Legilimens, but he’ll do the trick.”

Hermione thought of what Pansy had told her. How Blaise had moaned about Draco getting himself killed. “I’m sure he’ll love that.”

“Mmm.” He pressed his lips softly against hers. “Now, tell me again how good I am at cards.”

She smiled up at him, and they kissed each other until Plumb popped in to ask if they wanted more tea.



By Friday afternoon, Pansy had delivered a silky black dress that slithered down her thighs and cut low across her back. It had a modest neckline, almost up to her collarbones, but the tag on the hanger in Pansy's scrawl read, *Wear braless*. There was also a tube of red lipstick.

Hermione rolled her eyes, put on her bra, and slipped the dress over her shoulders.

Of course, the bra was glaringly visible across her back. There was no hiding it. She didn't know of a spell to fix it, and there was no way she was going to ask Draco.

She removed the bra and stared at herself. The silk clung to her body, her nipples pebbling under the cold fabric. The curve of her breasts and the point of her nipples stood out perfectly under the silk.

She huffed and went to do her makeup and hair carefully, like Pansy had taught her, certain that Draco would not stand for this dress once he saw it.



When Draco saw her in the dress, he had very little to say. In fact, he looked like his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth.

She felt the weight of his gaze on her as she descended the staircase in her heels and gold collar. When she reached the bottom, he escorted her out with a hand on her bare back, and the warmth of his palm sent goose pimples over her skin.

But she needed to focus. She had a mission this evening. And she and Draco couldn't act like anything had changed between them. For all the world knew, he had been pushing her against library stacks and grinding his body against hers for weeks.

(As he pushed his tongue into her mouth with a moan. And sought her eyes whenever she started to move her hips back against him—)

The burst of wind whipping around them as they stepped out of the Manor doors made her shiver, and his hand pressed more firmly to her

"No," she said hoarsely. "Just you."

Draco swallowed. He slowly removed his hand from her knickers, and held her hips, staring down at her like there was more to say.

Tap, tap, tap.

They both jumped. The rest of the world came back to her in a flash of light and color, unsteadying her.

Draco turned to the window. A beautiful black owl was pecking at the glass.

He glanced at her before moving to open the pane. He grabbed the letter and tossed a treat to the owl before ripping it open.

Blood rushed through her ears as she watched him read, waiting.

"It's from Theo." His mouth pressed in a hard line. "He wants a chat as soon as possible." He looked up at her. "With both of us."

Hermione staggered, the full weight of the night's events returning to her. "Now?" she rasped. "Will we go now?"

He looked her over. She must look a mess if his flushed cheeks and open trousers were any indication. He nodded.

She ran her fingers through her hair, her heart pounding. "Draco, I'm sorry I—"

"I have it under control."

"But—"

"Trust me. Let's go contain this."

She fell silent. He muttered a spell to clean himself up, and when he adjusted his trousers, she was shocked to find him half hard again. Blushing, she quickly turned away to slip on her shoes. She grimaced as soon as she smoothed out her dress. Her knickers felt like they'd been dunked in soapy water.

"Can I..." She cleared her throat. "Could you summon a clean pair of knickers for me?"

He blinked at her, and then his eyes darkened. He flicked his wand, and a pair of black lace knickers appeared on the desk next to her. Turning

His fingers slipped beneath the lace. Her hands jumped to his elbows, clutching him as she swayed. He ran a long finger through her soaked folds, and it was so much better than her own. She bit her lip to keep quiet, but when he found her clit, her legs shook and she cried out his name.

She buried her head in his shoulder, knowing her face was twisting and pinching in pained pleasure. His free hand took her chin and guided it back up to him.

“Look at me when you come.”

Her eyes fluttered open to find his gaze burning into her. “Please,” he mouthed, swirling her clit.

Her eyes rolled back.

“You’re a fucking dream, do you know that?”

“Draco—”

He swallowed the words, his mouth hot and sloppy.

He sped up his fingers, testing what worked for her, but it seemed like everything worked for her because she was coiling tighter and tighter to the point where the string inside would snap and shatter her.

She sucked in a tight breath, and Draco pulled back to watch her face.

“Oh god oh god oh god—”

“Come on, Granger. Just like that.”

The rhythm of his fingers didn’t slow, jerking quickly over her clit, and just as she started to moan she forced her eyes open like he’d asked.

She came with Draco’s dark grey gaze burned into hers, memorizing her like he’d never have the chance again. Her body snapped, her fingers tearing at his shirt, her knees buckling as he held her through it.

Her breath was hot against his lips as she gradually steadied herself. She took deep breaths as her legs returned to her, and he carefully kissed her once.

“Has anyone else ever touched you like that?” he whispered. She blinked at him, and he quickly shuttered, remembering himself. “Sorry. That doesn’t matter—”

back as they moved down the drive.

She looked up at him as they approached the iron gates. “So you and Blaise are ready, then?”

“I’m not concerned. We used to read Theo’s mind in school. Take the piss out of him for his fantasies.”

“Is that what you told Blaise, then? That you just want to mess with him again?” Draco hesitated, and she froze just as the gate opened. “What did you tell him, Draco?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “I... told him some of it, Granger.”

A sharp wariness spiked through her veins. “Draco—”

“It’s fine.” He grabbed her arm and dragged her through the barrier, and before she could scold him, they were Disapparating to arrive on the cobblestones outside Edinburgh.

He walked her through the stone entrance and up the stairs to the courtyard. Hermione barely had a moment to blink at Charlotte before Draco took her elbow and began dragging her through the Great Hall. His jaw was tight and his strides longer than usual, seemingly wanting nothing to do with the other guests. Hermione tried to glance around as he hurried her through, but they were moving so quickly she couldn’t single out any new guests. She did catch a glance of Dolohov and Yaxley schmoozing a pair of stiff and pale-faced men she hadn’t seen before.

Draco tugged her up the stairs and into the dining room. Her eyes landed on Theo, who was kissing the neck of the same dark-haired Carrow girl from weeks ago. Blaise lounged at the head of the table, where Flint usually sat. As the boys greeted Draco, Pansy gave her a cool, approving look through Giuliana’s eyes.

“Get a promotion, Blaise?” Draco tilted.

Blaise took a dramatic sip from his tumbler. “Heard Flint couldn’t be here tonight, so I took advantage. The early bird and all that.”

“What a shame.” Draco moved to the other head of the table, tugging her into his lap.

The silk of her dress bunched around her hips, and she tugged it down while situating herself.

She had become far more comfortable in Draco's lap since their last visit. She fought the blush rising in her cheeks, thinking of just *how* comfortable she was as his arm wrapped around her waist, his hand sliding along the silk barely covering her back.

Certain formalities had started disappearing at the Edinburgh dinners. The girls no longer stood by the wall. Instead, there was a relaxed socializing — girls instantly plopping into laps, eating freely. Her eyes flickered to Mortensen, who was accepting fruit from Pucey's fingers with a grimace, and to Susan, who was still wrapped tightly in Goyle's embrace. Theo's Carrow Girl was leaning over to pour herself a glass of wine and giggling with another Carrow Girl on Bletchley's lap.

Once they were settled, Draco's voice rose above the rest: "Anyone fancy a card game tonight?" He waved a hand, and the box with the cards and dice appeared. The boys cheered and slapped the table.

"You ready to give away your secrets tonight, Draco?" Montague jeered. "We'll see, Graham. Try coming up with something worth knowing this time."

Hermione twisted on Draco's lap to watch the whole table. Draco dealt the cards, sliding them magically across the table to each player. The game started with the seat to the right of the dealer, so Higgs rolled the dice and the game began.

After two rounds, Goyle was out, happy to suck on Susan's neck without interruptions. Blaise folded early, complaining about his cards. Hermione watched him through her lashes, and caught the occasional lingering glance with Draco. A subtle tilt of his head or drum of his fingers. The first round of wagers began, and when Bletchley lost in the next round, he revealed what he'd overheard from a guard at Hogwarts.

"I know the biggest thorn in Umbridge's side. The bloody house-elves," he announced, to sounds of laughter and disbelief. "Slow to answer

"Granger. *Fuck*."

She slipped her hand between them, not entirely sure what to do, but taking a few educated guesses. When her fingers slipped over his trunks and cupped the bulge of him, his eyes fluttered closed.

"Fuck. Merlin, fuck me."

He grabbed her wrist, holding her hand on himself as his hips jerked against her. She held very still and watched in amazement as Draco Malfoy rode her palm like it was the most exquisite pleasure he'd had in his life.

His lips covered hers, moaning long and low into her throat as he thrust against her and squeezed her breast. She whimpered, throbbing and aching and riding the high of his pleasure.

Just as she wondered if she should be doing more, his body seized, and a sigh poured from his lips. His cock twitched under her hand, and she felt his come seeping through the fabric of his trunks.

She stared wide-eyed at him, her veins singing and her skin vibrating. His eyes were screwed shut, his lips carved in a delicious "o." He slowly caught his breath, and before he even opened his eyes, he was muttering, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have..."

He wasn't allowed to run away. Not this time. Not when she was still suspended between his pleasure and hers.

His eyes flew open, and he released her wrist. "I'm sorry—"

"Touch me," she begged. "Please."

His gaze focused. He gaped at her, taking in her eyes, her lips, her heaving chest.

"Draco, please. Don't stop."

His hand left her chest, sliding down to the lace around her hips, dipping to her drenched center.

"Oh fuck," he moaned. He rubbed her just a little. Nowhere near enough.

"Please—"

caught, eyes flickering. She blushed. “Maybe not—not everything, but... more?”

He nodded, mouth parted in awe, and bent to kiss her again. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pressing her chest to his. As he kissed her — slower, with a simmering fire — his hands glided around her backside to her hips, following the lace of her knickers. She sighed as his thumbs brushed her bare stomach.

His tongue danced with hers, and his fingers inched upward, skating toward her ribs. Her thighs pressed together, aching for his leg between hers, but too afraid to ask. His warm hands sent shivers across her skin, and her breasts pulled into peaks, begging.

The first brush of his fingers on the swell under her breasts had them both moaning. Both hands rounded her outer curves, slipping between them under the silk of her dress. Her knees buckled when his thumbs found her nipples, brushing softly — as if something inside of her had melted and liquified, rushing south.

His thumbs rolled and circled, his mouth moving to her neck, groaning in time with the steady thrusts of his hips against hers. Her breath was ragged, panting quickly and gasping his name without her permission.

Firmer strokes from his thumbs. Her breasts filling his fingers. Harder pumps of his hips.

The entire world could burst in on them now, and she would ignore it. She needed this. *He* needed this.

Her arms slid from his neck to his belt. He cursed into her neck when she unbuckled him, pulling his face back to press their foreheads together.

“Granger...” Her shaking fingers unbuttoned him. He paused. “You don’t—”

She grabbed his retreating hand and dragged it back to her breast. “Don’t stop.”

His pupils were bottomless, eyes glazing over as he palmed her. His other hand gripped her hip, and she continued to pull his buttons apart.

summons, serving dreadful food. Just disobeying everything.”

Draco reached for his wine glass and said, “Maybe Granger here had the right idea trying to free the lot of them.”

The table laughed, and she pressed her lips together as Draco started dealing the next round. She noticed that Blaise was spending more time holding Theo’s eye.

Theo lost the next round. They learned that Yaxley and Dolohov were entertaining Belgian dignitaries tonight, working on gaining their allegiance to the Dark Lord.

Soon they’d have France surrounded on all sides.

Hermione nibbled on a slice of cheese to keep her stomach at bay.

Finally the round came where Draco started bluffing. She wouldn’t have known from his cards, but she could feel the slightest of taps from his right foot. Montague, Warrington, Higgs, and Bletcherley all folded. Blaise kept raising with him, but when Pucey and Derrick folded, Blaise followed. It was just Theo and Draco.

“I’ll wager a bit about Switzerland,” Draco announced.

“Everyone knows your aunt is fucking that up,” said Pucey with a snort. “Is it anything we don’t know?”

“I’d say so.” Draco ran his thumb across her bare back. “I’d like to know how poorly Ted Nott is doing in breaking the French Apparition Line. He’s been chained there for — what, two months now?”

“He still comes home,” Theo snapped. “Just this week actually—” His cheeks heated instantly. “I can’t share sensitive details about his mission.”

“Oh?” Draco shrugged and sipped his wine. “Then I assume your cards aren’t great.”

The boys tittered as Theo glared at him. “Your secret is shit, too. Why would I bet against you?”

“You really shouldn’t.”

“Oi, Draco!” Blaise called out. “If you really want to know about the Apparition Line, you should give Theo a taste of Granger, like Flint got.”

Draco sneered at him. “Not happening.”

“Live a little, mate. You’re stricter than Umbridge.” The table howled. “What about a Lap Warner? Maybe Cassandra and Granger could swap for a night in the Lounge.” Blaise winked. “You could keep it mild, of course.”

Hermione swallowed, turning to look up at Draco. Anger radiated from him as he scowled at Blaise. He was an excellent actor, truly.

The boys were banging the table, egging him on. Draco waved them off.

“I guess your cards aren’t that good, huh, Draco?” Blaise wrapped his arms around Giuliani’s waist, and Hermione found Pansy’s eyes watching her.

“I have a great hand.”

Blaise leaned forward. “Then prove it.”

A thick silence. After several long moments, Draco sighed. “Fine.”

The table erupted. Theo looked a bit shocked, but quickly recovered. “A Lap Warming Trade it is,” he said. “Alright with you, love?” His girl laughed, tossing her hair over her shoulder. Hermione sipped her wine.

“No kissing on the mouth,” said Draco sharply. “Or touching under her clothes.” The boys groaned, and Theo grinned. “Those are my terms. I’m taking her when we get home, and I’d rather not have to wash her mouth out first.”

“Fine.” Theo scooped up the dice and let the girl blow on his fingertips before he rolled. They called the cards. And Draco’s hand lost — just barely.

The boys cheered and jumped up on their chairs, shaking Theo’s shoulders and toasting glasses. Draco cursed.

She could hardly believe how well their plan had worked even as she was dragged off Draco’s lap and tossed into Theo’s arms. He cracked a grin at her, victory dawning on him, and slipped his arm around her waist.

They made their way down the Lounge, the boys jostling Draco and

fought him back, gasping and diving between his lips.

Her arms were free for only a moment before his hands slid around her back, dragging her closer. She rose on her toes and threaded her fingers through his hair, using her teeth and tongue to pour her anger into his mouth.

Tearing his lips from hers, he grazed his teeth down her jaw, gasping for air against her neck and sucking sin into her skin. She moaned as his hands slid down over the silk, tucking it up her hips and cupping her backside. There was nothing between her skin and his greedy fingers but the lace of her knickers — something that must have delighted him, because he started kneading his fingers into her cheeks, groaning low in his throat.

She bit the lobe of his ear, and his hips snapped forward, pinning her to the wall, his hands still on her arse. “*Fuck.*” She could feel him hard and heavy on her stomach.

Her body was coiling, searching for something. Something he could give her.

But he paused, ceasing all kneading and grinding. She dragged his face back to hers, kissing his jaw, his cheek, until she found his lips again. He breathed harshly into her mouth, like he was trying to control himself, to hold back.

She didn’t want him to.

Her fingers slid across his collar and pried the first button of his shirt open. He pulled his face from her neck, his eyes black as they locked on hers. She licked her lips and popped the second button open. His fingers squeezed her backside again.

He stared down at her, eyes curious and on fire. Studying her.

The jealousy that had fueled her seconds ago calmed, and she suddenly felt very aware of his body against hers, the closeness of his fingers to her core. He was asking her, waiting for her to tell him what she wanted.

She bit her lip, and when she popped the next button, his breath

them if your *girl* hadn't been as loud as a banshee. If we arrange another Trade—"

"Not a fucking chance," he growled. "I have to clean up this mess, like I always knew I would—"

"Oh, thank you for the vote of confidence!" She threw her arms in the air. "I *knew* you never trusted me—"

"You should have stuck to *talking*. Trying to kiss his neck and play with his hair like some fucking—"

"Oh, I'm *sorry* I don't have as much *experience* charming the knickers off of people like you do, Draco—"

He stepped into her and pointed a finger in her face. "You had plenty of time, but instead you spent the entire night grinding all over him—"

She slapped his hand away. "I couldn't start with a damn interrogation, could I? Last time I checked *you* were busy running your hands all over Clara—"

"Cassandra," he corrected. And she felt her skin light on fire.

"Oh, *Cassandra*," she hissed. "Of course. So glad you had a chance to learn her name while you were pawing her!"

He stepped into her, crowding her against the wall. "Well, maybe if you had spent less time purring in his ear and letting his hands grope your ass—"

"I did *no such thing*—"

"—then we wouldn't *be* in this situation—"

"I was close to winning him over, and it's *your fault* we were interrupted! Maybe you can invite him by the Manor so I can finish the job—"

He gripped her upper arms, pressing her to the wall. "You're not going within a mile of him ever again." His eyes flashed, and she felt his breath on her face.

"If you even *look* at that girl again, I'll—"

He kissed her, fierce and biting. Her hands grabbed for his waist, digging her nails into his robes as his tongue pushed into her mouth. She

offering fake condolences.

"I'll keep her warm for you, Draco," said Theo, smirking as they passed.

Hermione looked back at Draco, and found Theo's girl slipping her hand around his elbow, bating her lashes. She tore her eyes away.

They entered the Lounge, Theo striding over to the armchair Draco usually sat in with her and pulling her into his lap. Blaise and Pansy took the adjacent couch, with Pucey and Mortensen at the opposite end, and she watched as Draco sat across from her and Theo, tugging the girl into his lap. The girl shimmied, moving closer.

Theo's fingers skated across her back, and Hermione jumped, remembering herself. "Champagne?"

Hermione smiled and nodded, tilting her head back as he tilted the glass to her lips. She could use a bit of liquid courage.

"Easy, Granger," Theo chuckled, snapping his fingers at a nearby Carrow Girl for another glass. "Since when do you drink so much?"

Hermione pouted. "Since when do you gamble so much?"

"Still feisty, I see." He took a long dreg, looking over her shoulder.

"Want to get a bit more comfortable?"

The music buzzed through her ears, and she swallowed. "Of course. How should I—?"

His free hand dropped to her thigh. "Why don't you turn to face me."

She took a deep breath and shifted, preparing to straddle him. She wouldn't let herself think about how her dress was riding up her backside, now directly in Draco's eyeline.

A trilling laugh as she moved. She glanced over her shoulder and caught a glimpse of silky hair bent over a fringe of blonde. The Carrow Girl was straddling Draco, too.

She turned back to Theo and slipped her arms around her neck. "Do you often win at cards?" she purred.

He looked at her, as if suddenly remembering she was there. "Uh, yes."

His chest puffed. “I like strategy, that sort of thing.”

Oh this was going to be *easy*.

“Mmm.” She leaned closer in his ear. “What kind of strategy?”

She spent the next fifteen minutes listening to Theo talk about Wizard’s Chess and Quidditch betting. His hands were resting on her hips, occasionally skating across her bare back, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that his touches were perfunctory. Once, she hesitantly tried moving her hips to the beat of the music, but he gave her an odd look that stopped her in her tracks. So she decided to up her game by increasing her flattery. She could see it land on him, with one boyish grin after another.

“You were always smart in school, too.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “Do you help your father a lot with his missions? I hear he’s always working on terribly difficult projects.”

“Yeah, a bit.” Theo shifted to reach for his glass, wrapping his arm around her back to steady her. “I’ve been shadowing him. More than Malfoy’s allowed, I bet.”

Hermione laughed, turning to look at Draco, and found his eyes glaring daggers at Theo’s hand on her back. The girl redirected his attention to her, rubbing his shoulders. Hermione scowled and turned back to Theo.

“Your father must really trust your skills then,” she said, running her hands over his shoulders.

“Yeah. Yeah, he does.” He sipped his champagne.

“Is the library at Nott Manor as grand as Malfoy Manor’s?”

“It’s *just* as stocked and almost the same size.” He sneered. “You know, the only reason people wank over Malfoy Manor is the peacocks. Our acreage is just the same. I’ve checked.”

“I can only imagine.” Hermione bit her lip. “I wish I could see it someday, but”—she raised her left arm and gave a helpless shrug.

Theo hummed, simply watching her.

“They really are a brilliant bit of magic, you know,” she continued

lightly. “The tattoos. I’ve never seen anything like them.”

“They are.” Theo smirked. “It’s very dark magic, Granger. You wouldn’t have read about it at Hogwarts.”

“No, I doubt that I would.” A giggle caught her ear, and she glanced over her shoulder to find Draco whispering in the girl’s ear, twisting a lock of hair around his finger. Her chest boiled. She quickly looked back to Theo. “What do you know about them?”

The effect was instantaneous. Theo’s body stiffened under her. His gaze zipped to Draco and then back to her, his lips curling. He abruptly pushed her to her feet.

“Well, this has been fun,” he sneered. “But I think I’ll take my leave.” He turned to Draco. “Thanks for the Trade. Her arse is divine.”

Hermione blinked at his retreating back. He was onto them. She’d failed. Before she could spiral further, Draco was beside her, reaching for her arm.

“It’s time for us to retire as well.” He turned to say goodnight to his friends, his arrogant mask still in place.

Dread prickled through her shock as Draco swept them from the room. If Theo was onto them, things could get bad. Very bad. Draco would never let her run her own missions ever again. Perhaps they should Obliviate him—

Draco’s grip was tight on her arm as he moved them to the fireplaces. She swallowed and whispered, “Should we go after him?”

“You’ve done enough for one night, Granger,” he bit out.

She glanced up at him, expecting his anger — and her eyes fell on a lipstick stain on his collar. From the Carrow Girl. She saw red as they swept through the Floo.

They arrived through the fireplace in his room, and he dropped her arm and spun to her. “Well, was it worth it?”

“I don’t want to hear it, Draco!” She kicked off her heels and tore her collar off. “I was *this* close, and I would have gotten something out of