

## THE AUCTION

She was about to prod him again when he shot up tall, staring over her, his eyes dark and empty. His jaw was set and his expression dead.

A chill ran down her shoulders as she took in his vacant eyes. “Are you alright?” When he said nothing, simply gazing into the fireplace, she inched closer. “Do you have it under control?”

His head turned, and when his eyes landed on her, they seemed to flash with a black fire before it vanished — like a reptilian blink.

“Perfectly.” He reached for his discarded wand with long, elegant fingers. He stared at a point over her ear and said, “Lead the way.”



*ll of us.*

Hermione heard her heartbeat drum in her ears. Bellatrix. She was going to see Bellatrix again.

“Father.” She heard Draco’s voice from far away. “You can’t possibly be suggesting—”

“Am I in the habit of making ‘suggestions,’ Draco?” Silence.

Lucius rolled his shoulders — the smallest of movements. “The Dark Lord has observed that your aunt and I seem... somewhat strained. Appearances must be maintained. Your aunt and uncle have invited us to dinner, and they *insisted* that Miss Granger be included.”

Lucius turned his cold eyes on Hermione where she sat askew on the chaise, her chest still pounding.

Draco shifted behind her. “Surely there’s an excuse that can be made—”

“Your mother and I have this under control. All four of us will be attending, and I expect you *both* to be on your best behavior.” Lucius looked from Draco to Hermione, his gaze catching on her rumpled top and mussed hair. She felt her face heat as he studied her, his lip curling in amusement. “Well? Don’t you two have Occlumency to be practicing?”

Hermione blinked, then scrambled off the couch. She nearly collided with Draco as she rushed to the door, her mind racing with visions of sharp knives and echoes of cackling laughter —

“Miss Granger,” Lucius drawled. “A word?”

Her hand froze on the doorknob. She turned slowly, seeing Draco do the same behind her.

Lucius cocked his head, then an eyebrow. “You are dismissed, Draco.”

She watched Draco swallow.

“Anything you have to say, you can—”

“Perhaps in my absence,” Lucius cut in, clasping his hands behind his back, “you’ve forgotten who is master of this house.” His eyes glittered as he watched his words land. “Run along.”

Hermione’s mouth went dry as she watched Draco clench and unclench his fists, then finally turn to move slowly through the doorway. He kept his eyes ahead of him, a muscle twitching in his jaw. She listened to his footsteps disappear down the corridor.

Lucius watched her with a twist to his lips — like a hawk staring down a field mouse.

“My wife tells me that you have a partially-functioning reproductive system,” he said, as if discussing the weather over tea. “I suppose congratulations are in order.”

Hermione felt her cheeks blush crimson as she tried to think of a response.

“And might I ask, Miss Granger,” he said, hands still behind his back as he strolled towards her, “whether it was your intention to carry the Malfoy heir by concealing this? Did you believe a pregnancy would bring you additional protection?”

Her eyes popped, and her breath choked in her throat.

“N-no! No, not at all!” She gaped at him, trying to form coherent words. “It was made perfectly clear from the beginning that I had no cause for concern in... in *that* area. There was no need to mention it!”

“Hm,” he drawled. “And yet, my poor chaise begs to differ.”

“No, we’re not— This wasn’t—” Hermione squeezed her face in her hands. “This hasn’t— before.”

“Before?”

“No! This was the first!” Lucius’s eyebrow raised even further, and Hermione groaned, shaking her head. “This hasn’t *ever*! I swear it. It just —

protests vanished. Her fingers curled into his robes, knees buckling.

Draco’s hands snapped to her backside, squeezing her, lifting her up, causing her thighs to wrap around him on instinct. Her mind spun to keep up, screaming at her to slow him down, but then her back slammed against a wall and his hips rolled harshly against her core. Her eyes shot open.

“Draco—”

He mumbled broken desires against her neck, hands roaming her thighs and slipping under her thin dress to cup her arse.

“Wanna taste you...” He breathed heavily on her skin, and when his hips pressed into her again, her hands gripped his hair, thighs tightening around him. “Fuck... Wanna fuck you. Want you to come... Wanna feel it on my cock...”

Hermione shuddered at the images, the need, the rawness of it all — and then reality crashed through her foggy consciousness.

“Stop,” she gasped.

His body slowed. His lips paused.

“We have to stop,” she panted. “You need the antidote.”

His forehead dropped against her shoulder, his entire body trembling. She slowly let her legs drop to the floor. He exhaled shakily, and seemed to breathe her in one last time before pushing away from her and stumbling backward. He pushed his hands into his eyes and hunched over, breathing deeply.

She took a cautious step forward, her pulse racing. “We have to act quickly. Do you have any more of the antidote? Or do we need to brew it?” He was still, apart from the sharp rise and fall of his ribs. “Need to brew it,” he wheezed. “Not sure it works on this version.”

She nodded, ignoring the cold fear in her chest. “Let’s go.”

“I need a minute,” he growled.

She bit her lip and dug her fingers into her palms, waiting. He breathed into his hands, his ribs expanding slower and slower as he calmed himself.

this state.

Hermione tossed the Floo powder, stepped into the fire, and the moment his fingers wrapped around her skin, she yelled, “Malfoy Manor!”

The sound of his gasp as their skin connected was audible even in the whoosh of the fire. His arm slipped around her waist in the transport, gripping her close to him. When she stumbled out of the fireplace into the Manor’s entryway, he stumbled with her, his face buried in her hair, his arms clinging to her body.

He moaned against her ear, as if the most delicious meal had been served in front of him, and then a hand was sliding down her spine, roaming over her backside, and gripping her close.

She squeaked, grabbing his shoulders to steady herself, and his wand dropped from her fingertips. She whipped her head to watch it knock against the floor just before he grabbed her face and kissed her.

There was nothing hesitant, nothing gentle about it. His tongue was in her mouth and his hand twisting in her hair, as if he needed her like oxygen. She could feel him hard against her stomach, and the hand on her arse was kneading her, filling his palm with her.

Hermione tore her mouth away, trying to breathe. “Draco—”

His lips attached to her neck as she squirmed, trying to put distance between them. “Need you,” he groaned. “Please.”

“Draco, listen—”

“Please, Granger. Need you, I need—”

Her hands faltered. He screwed his eyes shut, forehead pressed against hers, drawing in ragged breaths. She felt him shaking, trying to reclaim some semblance of control.

And then he surged forward, overwhelming her senses, hands skimming her and mouth devouring her like water in the desert. She parted her lips to reason with him as he broke away, his tongue and teeth following the path down her neck he’d mapped two days prior, but then he found the place beneath her ear that made her vision spot white and her

no.”

A long pause.

“Excellent,” Lucius said dryly. “Your eloquence continues to impress, Miss Granger.”

Hermione pressed her eyes closed as he brushed past her, wishing her embarrassment could swallow her whole.

“One last thing.” Hermione took a deep breath before turning to face him. “I expect you to take preparation for Friday evening seriously. If my son is unable to focus”—he looked her up and down, as if he couldn’t find that believable in the least—“I’ll have your bedroom moved. Next to my study.”

She stood, dumbfounded by his meaning, until suddenly it dawned on her. She jerked forward. “Of course we’ll—”

Lucius silenced her with a raised hand. She bit her lip, her cheeks burning impossibly hot. And then: “To your room, Miss Granger. I expect to find you fully Occluded the next time I lay my eyes on you.” His eyes dropped to her bare knees. “And fully clothed.”

Her face was on fire as she scurried through the door, relishing her dismissal and longing for the days when Lucius Malfoy was in Romania.



The next morning, three new Occlumency books arrived on her breakfast tray. There wasn’t a note. There didn’t have to be one. She knew better than to seek him out, so she locked herself away and studied. The only breaks she took were to force down a few bites of each meal, as Mippy had charmed the tray to start nudging her if she ignored it for too long.

On Friday morning, after countless careful hours of meditation and mentally slicing pages out of books, Narcissa came to visit her when Hermione was deep in her Occlumency.

“I know you must be nervous for this evening.”

Hermione nodded, her mind beginning to prick with reemerging

memories. Grey eyes and rolling hips, a silky voice and hot wave of embarrassment—

She blinked, tucking them away.

Narcissa moved through the sitting area, crossing to the windows.

"I always thought of my sister as *eccentric*," she said. "But most don't have the luxury of seeing her that way." A long sigh. "These days, she is unpredictable and dangerous — even to me. But I do promise that I will do everything in my power to manage the situation this evening."

A book shivered on a high shelf, and Hermione gasped as her pages fluttered open to freckles and spearmint and the Gryffindor common room. She screwed her eyes shut, breathing steadily until it closed.

Her eyelids flickered open, and she found Narcissa staring at her, her expression soft and concerned.

"I've heard that Ron Weasley is being kept at the Lestrangle Estate," Hermione said dully.

Narcissa took a sharp breath. "Mr. Weasley is being held at Rabastan's property. You won't see him tonight."

She nodded and tucked the information away, staring out her windows. The heavy, earthy tome smelling of spearmint was still.

"Hermione," Narcissa said gently. "Just try your best. My sister already has a sense of your accommodations and your treatment, and I'm sure she's told her husband as well. If anything slips through, I will handle it."

She nodded again, eyes fixed on the pond outside. The calm waters that rippled with the breeze.

"In fact," Narcissa continued, "the one thing she cannot find out is that you have learned Occlumency."

Hermione blinked. A shelf collapsed in her mind, and she flinched when another nearly followed.

She turned to find Narcissa's shrewd eyes on her. Hermione rubbed her temples, tumbling the idea around her sore mind.

"Because then she would know that my magic isn't suppressed," she

"Don't—"

"Let's go. Draco, we're going."

She stood swiftly and dragged him up by the collar. He stumbled against the fireplace, tugging to undo his topmost buttons.

"*Accio Floo powder*," she whispered, and magic sang in her blood as a small ornate jar shot into her hand. She grabbed a handful and turned to him.

He was sweating, his hair damp and his fingers scratching at the buttons of his shirt.

*Over-heating. Drowsiness. Dizziness. Obsessive euphoria at skin contact.*

And that was the old version.

"You'll"—her voice shook—"you'll need to take my arm. To take us over the boundary."

He laughed, the sound as manic as his aunt's. "That's not an option, Granger."

She wrung her hands. "Or you can summon your father. Conjure a Patronus?" She winced at the glare he sent her. He didn't have one. "I can't send mine. They'd—they'd know about my magic." Her teeth worried her bottom lip, and his eyes watched the movement with a thick hunger. She looked down the dark hallway. "I can go find them and tell them you're sick." *Walking wandless through a Death Eater's manor*—"Or I can go back to Flint and Rabastan, and demand they—"

He pushed off the mantle of the fireplace, bracing himself as he stood tall. He loomed over her with black, hooded eyes, and she resisted the urge to step backward.

"Stun me as soon as we're through."

She swallowed at the threat in his words. "I know you won't hurt me—"

"Stun me. Is that clear?" He stepped closer to her, and she could feel his breath on her face.

She knew she wouldn't. She couldn't risk leaving him unconscious in

Draco's hands reached for her, eyes wild and starved, before he jerked them back to his sides. He slapped his hands on the wall behind him, squeezing his eyes shut.

The room spun as she stared at him, dread filling her veins. Somehow, Flint or Rabastan had procured a strand of her hair.

"We can make an antidote," she said, fighting to sound calm.

He let out another moan, and Hermione jerked into action. She ran to the fireplace, searching for the Floo powder.

"We have to get back to the Manor—"

"You need to leave. You go. I can't be with you—"

"Draco." She spun to him, holding out her tattooed forearm. "I cannot go *anywhere* without you."

A whimper was wrenched from his chest. The heels of his hands pressed into his eyes as he slid down the wall to a crouch.

Hermione spied his wand against a far corner. She darted for it, snatched it up, and turned back to him.

A quivering warmth spun up her arm, sliding into her veins and igniting her soul. Hermione gasped and stared down at her hand, vibrating with the sensation of holding a wand for the first time in months. The hawthorn hummed for her, ready to be useful.

Her heartbeat echoed in her ears.

She could go. She could find Ron. She could fight her way out and run. There were four people to kill — and three Malfoys to stun. She'd have to take Draco with her for the tattoo to let her leave. Ron must have a tattoo as well. Perhaps if they took Rabastan's body—

A thump drew her eyes up, and she caught sight of Draco on his knees, bracing himself with his hands on the floor, panting.

Her heart thundered even louder, her guilt and conscience tugging her both ways. After another half-second's hesitation, she ran to him. She pushed him up by the shoulders, careful not to touch him, and his eyes fluttered open. His gaze was like black glass.

surmised. "That you haven't been giving me the potions."

Narcissa nodded. "She's kept several things to herself, but her willingness to look the other way depends on her believing you're under lock and key."

Narcissa broke off, asking her something, but Hermione couldn't process the words. Her body felt flimsy and numb, her brain dizzy. Her knees began to buckle, and Narcissa flew to her side, helping her sit in a chair. She called for Mippy, and Hermione pressed her eyes closed, her head pounding. Mippy returned with a potion, and Narcissa helped her drink it. Once Hermione's vision stopped blurring, Narcissa poured them both tea and took a seat across from her, perched on the edge of her cushion.

"So what am I supposed to do when she tries to read my mind?" Hermione set down her saucer and curled up in her chair, etiquette giving way to exhaustion.

Narcissa sipped her tea. "What technique are you using? A box? A drawer? Perhaps a sealed cave?"

"A bookshelf." Hermione sighed, rubbing her temples. "Books of memories. Pages of moments."

"Very useful," she said. "And you are taking pages out?"

Hermione nodded.

"I know a thing or two about that." Narcissa's voice was quiet and low, lulling. "Would you like me to assist you?"

The air left Hermione's lungs as she turned to look at her. Narcissa's blue eyes were warm and open. Steadying. Slowly, Hermione nodded again.

Narcissa hovered her teacup and saucer over her lap, her spine held straight. "Perhaps it is time to create a new book," she said on a low hum, the words carrying to Hermione on a platinum thread, looping through her eyes and entering her mind like gossamer. "Perhaps," Narcissa said, "you can visualize only the things you want to present."

The words whispered into her mind. A slow thread without a needle

wove through her bookshelves, tapping at covers and rustling pages. Hermione breathed deeply, relaxing in her chair.

A leather cover appeared in front of her bookshelf, open and barren of pages. Untitled. Pages fluttered down to fill it, drifting slowly. The platinum thread curled through them, prodding some to the side, beckoning others forward.

*Nott Sr. catching her eavesdropping — his cane under her chin.*

*The One O'Clock Gun at Edinburgh.*

*Voldemort hovering over her on the Malfoy's drawing room floor.*

They all fluttered down, down, nestled into the leather cover.

The thread tumbled through the pages of Draco throwing her on her bed, ripping her slip open. Hermione tried to close the book, terror and humiliation and pained sympathy flooding her library, but the thread tugged more insistently, and the pages fell, joining the others.

More of Edinburgh. The dinner parties, the Lounge. Half a page of Cho kissing her while Draco watched.

Hermione's entire body tensed as the thread slithered through the pages of Draco pinning her hands to the wall, his thigh sliding between her legs. His hands on her hips as she straddled him on the chaise — her gravity flipped, back thrown on the cushion as he slipped between her legs. The platinum thread paused over his muttered, "Okay?" and as if on a needle, it wove through the page — over, under, cross stitch, over, under, cross stitch — erasing the word from history until just a pattern of platinum remained.

And finally, the thread zoomed through her shelves, turning pages, skimming words, before stopping over a memory.

*Dolohov and the Medivitches*

From far away, Hermione felt her legs jerk.

The thread cut the page away from its book, letting the memory tumble down to join the others.

Hermione twitched in protest. Wouldn't it be dangerous to know what

Hermione stared after him, stunned.

"Draco, come back! We'll miss the show!"

He wrenched open the door and stormed through. Hermione stood and ran after him, ignoring Flint's protests as Penelope moved to straddle him. Draco whipped around a corner as she stumbled out of the room, and she darted after him.

"What in the world—?" She rounded the corner and found him at the fireplace they'd come through, one hand bracing himself on the wall as he hunched over, heaving. "Are you ill?"

No response, except for the rattle of his breathing. She approached cautiously, reaching for his hand. A soft brush of her fingers over his wrist— And he jerked backward, his wand clattering to the stone floor. Hermione gaped as it rolled away.

He groaned, sucking in a sharp breath. "We have to— You have to go."

"Draco. What's wrong?" She reached for his face—

"Don't touch me," he panted, pressing himself against the wall. There was horror in his eyes. "You can't touch me."

"Alright." She raised her hands in surrender. "Just let me get a better look." She moved closer, frowning. His pupils were blown wide, his cheeks and neck flushed, his mouth panting with ragged breaths. His gaze dropped from her face, skating over her exposed neck, fixating on the curve of her breasts, the dip of her waist, the swell of her hips.

Hermione felt an iced chill run over her skin, freezing the air in her lungs.

They'd dosed him. Rabastan and Flint. With the lust potion.

*This one's a new concoction—*

*We'll miss the show!*

Her mind clicked into action. She flipped through her memories, thinking back on the notes she'd made that day in Draco's laboratory.

But they would need her hair for that potion. A more general lust potion didn't necessarily mean he was dangerous to her—

## THE AUCTION

"No wonder he misses her." Rabastan chuckled, shaking his head. "Merlin, I'll never forget that night. Back when we still could serve these."

He tapped his Lot's empty glass. "Never seen a girl drop to her knees so quick. Getting fucking hard just thinking about it."

"Well she's a professional, isn't she?" said Flint.

They both laughed. Draco took a sip from his glass.

"You know, Granger, I've always wondered," Flint's voice drifted to her. "Do blow jobs get you wet? Certainly looked like it."

A lake with still waters. A sloping mountain range. Geese floating across the water, creating ripples.

"I wouldn't mind seeing a bit more of her. Now that your father's back, you might need some more privacy, eh, Draco?"

"Come off it, Rabastan. You know he doesn't fuck unless the curtains are drawn around his four-poster. Or his Lot's. Isn't that right?"

Draco shook his head with a wry smile. He tugged at his collar a bit, and sipped his drink.

Hermione looked over at Flint, and found Penelope starting to kiss his neck, pressing her legs together. The other girl appeared dizzy and flushed, sitting several feet away from Rabastan and staring at him longingly.

Hermione let the chatter wash over her, glancing over at Draco to gauge how much longer they would stay.

His face was tight and his cheeks were pink. She leaned into him to whisper, "Should I sit in your lap or—"

The arm around her shoulder disappeared. He sat forward, drawing away from her sharply and placing his hands on his knees. He pressed his eyes closed, like he might be sick.

"Everything alright there, Draco?" Flint lifted.

Draco's eyes flew open to glare at him. In a heartbeat, he was standing and moving to the doors.

"Granger. Come."

## CHAPTER 22

Narcissa had done? If Bellatrix knew Narcissa had Obliviated a member of the Dark Lord's inner circle—

The platinum thread shimmered through the memory, finding the moment a green light rose from her fertile ovary. Hermione watched as the thread snaked forward, twisting around the green light, twirling tight like a ball of yarn, obscuring it — and then burning red. As if the test was negative.

The thread fell away, and a red light remained.

The page sliced in half, and the moments following the reveal of the green light fluttered away. The top half fell into the book.

Weaving the spine together, the thread pushed through the pages, cinching them tight. The book glued itself together, and closed with a soft snap.

The platinum thread tapped against the front cover, weaving a title into the leather: *Afternoon Tea*.

She felt the thread unwind, slipping backwards, pulling away from her shelves, sliding through her eyes and returning to a pale blue gaze.

Hermione blinked, her lungs dragging in air. Narcissa Malfoy studied her, then brought her teacup to her lips, relaxing against the cushion.

Her eyes roved around the room. The walls were pink, the sun setting. The clock indicated that it had been three hours since Narcissa entered her room.

She turned back to her, mouth open. "You're a Legilimens."

Narcissa settled her teacup silently on its saucer. "It runs in the family. The Black-Rosiers are very strong with it."

A well of emotions bubbled in her chest. "Are you... Do you use it often?"

"No. Very rarely, in fact," she said with a smile. "I try to afford people their privacy." She paused halfway to her next sip. "I hope you don't mind my assistance with... several of your more private memories."

Hermione's ears burned red-hot. Narcissa had seen her and Draco

together... and... well...

She looked down at the carpets. “No, I understand why those memories should be sewed in. That was... very helpful.”

There was a thick silence before Narcissa spoke again. “It will remain between us, Hermione. I don’t think any differently of you.”

A pause as Hermione tried to shove aside her burning embarrassment and say something in an intelligent language—

“If you think there is a need, the elves can stock your cabinets with Contraceptive Potions.”

Hermione’s eyes snapped up, “No! No, no. No. Um...” She swallowed as Narcissa looked at her innocently from behind her teacup. “I mean to say, yes that would be necessary if we were... But we’re not and... because I don’t want to”—she gestured awkwardly to her stomach—to become... Of course.”

Narcissa’s mouth twitched, and Hermione caught a glint in her eye before she nodded. “Of course.”

“Yes.”

“If the need should ever arise, please don’t hesitate to ask. Mippy will be happy to assist you.”

Hermione tried to wave her off, but all she managed was a croak.

“Well, I didn’t mean to fluster you, dear. Please forgive any assumptions.” Hermione flushed even brighter as Narcissa stood and looked at the clock. Her brow furrowed. “We leave in two hours. You should have some time alone to meditate.”

The reminder made her stomach drop. Narcissa gently touched her shoulder before slipping from the room. Hermione breathed deep, fling away her mortification.

She took a bath and stared at the water, clearing her mind. She focused on the book *Afternoon Tea*, letting everything else fade to the back of her shelves. Whenever a memory inside shuddered her, she concentrated on the platinum thread woven through, holding her thoughts together,

drank their champagne, tipping their glasses back and swallowing like they’d done it a thousand times before.

Hermione tried to Occlude, but her mind groaned in protest, still depleted from Bellatrix’s attack. Her knee began to bounce, and Draco placed his hand on her thigh, calming her.

“Well, gentlemen”—he quickly stood—“Never been much of voyeur myself, so we’ll just see ourselves out—”

“Relax,” Rabastan smirked, pouring three tumblers of Firewhisky. “This one’s a new concoction I’ve been helping Marcus with. Takes some time to kick in, but once it hits, it gets stronger until you scratch the itch, if you catch my meaning. I like to watch her writhe a bit beforehand.” He strolled to Draco, offering him one of the glasses of Firewhisky. “Have a drink, take that chip off your shoulder, and enjoy yourself.” He shoved the tumbler into Draco’s hands and smiled, a crooked front tooth glinting in the candlelight, before pushing him down on the couch. Flint laughed and settled into his chair with Penelope.

Draco schooled the irritation from his features and settled next to her.

“Granger,” Flint called out. “Your boyfriend’s quite the screamer.”

She felt her entire body grow cold. Her vision narrowed to Flint’s smug smile as he sipped from his glass. She tried to breathe deeply.

“Tell me. Did he scream like that when you used to suck his cock in the Gryffindor common room?”

Rabastan laughed. She blinked, her shelf rattling and groaning.

“Draco, you should have seen him when I told him she was here,” Rabastan crowed. “Screaming her name, throwing himself at the bars, trying to Apparate without a wand or magic.”

The taste of blood in her mouth. She’d bitten the inside of her cheek. Draco’s ribs barely moved next to hers as he took a sip of his Firewhisky and said in an empty voice, “I’d love to see that one day.”

She focused on her breathing, pushing through the pain until she could see still water in a large lake. A mountain range surrounding it.



Draco shrugged. "The night is young. Maybe we'll catch the end of the Ring March. I hear Finnigan is back."

"Draco, come catch up," Rabastan coaxed. "I never get to spend time with you. And I haven't had a proper look at your Mudblood."

Flint wrapped his arms around Penelope's waist. "*No one* gets a proper look." He grinned. "Come on, Draco. An hour at least. Don't tell me you're as much of a prat at a family dinner as you are at Edinburgh."

She watched Draco's jaw tick before he smiled tightly. "Twist my arm, why don't you?"

Rabastan laughed and jerked his head in the direction of the door. Draco pushed in his chair methodically and grabbed her elbow to lead her out. She brought her other hand up and squeezed his fingers, thinking about the way Bellatrix had touched him. Her mind drifted to Switzerland, but she forced it aside.

They were led into a small sitting room, just as dark and ghostly as the rest of the manor. Flint and Penelope dropped into an armchair while Rabastan went to the drink cart. His Lot took a sofa, and Draco led Hermione to the other matching sofa. She let him sit first, then tucked her legs on the couch and leaned into him, trying to look comfortable.

"Can I get Miss Granger anything to drink?" Rabastan turned a smile on her. "Perhaps some wine with a splash of something else?"

He pulled a small bottle of clear liquid from his inside pocket and shook it tantalizingly.

Flint laughed. "Draco doesn't need that potion, Rab. His slut is *wild* for him without it, isn't that right?"

Hermione said nothing, feeling the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Draco made a noncommittal noise as Rabastan popped a bottle of champagne, poured two glasses, and split the potion between them. Flint joined him at the cart, and they each added a hair to a glass before offering them to the girls.

Draco stiffened besides her as Penelope and the other girl obediently

keeping them safe.

At ten till seven, she descended the stairs in a small, simple shift dress with flat shoes. She was to be a slave tonight and nothing more.

Draco and Lucius stood near the fireplace, speaking in low tones. They stopped when Lucius caught sight of her. He whispered one last thing to his son, and turned a lazy expression on her.

"Miss Granger," he greeted.

She nodded to him, and glanced at Draco. His eyes were on the fire, cold and distant.

Clicking heels caught their attention, and Hermione turned to see a very stern expression on Narcissa's face as she approached, wearing a structured black dress.

"We're leaving after an hour," she clipped, raising a cool brow as Lucius appraised her. "We've survived worse."

A *pop* sounded from behind Lucius. "Master!" a voice squeaked. "An urgent letter from Madam Lestrangle!"

Lucius plucked up the note, and shook it open with a flourish. Hermione held her breath as his eyes danced across the page. A snarl pulled at his lips.

"A change of plans," he said. "Your sister's manor is 'inhospitable' at the moment. She's asked us to meet her at Rabastan's estate for dinner."

Narcissa snatched the letter, eyes narrowing as she read. "Absolutely ridiculous," she hissed. "If that's how she's going to play it—" She broke off, looking up at Hermione, her features clouding with concern.

There was a ringing in her ears, her blood moving quickly. Ron.

Hermione gave a shaky nod, then closed her eyes, pushing the earthy tome back even farther.

The clock chimed seven. Lucius tossed the Floo powder and called out the destination. Narcissa stepped through, followed by her husband.

Once the green flames had died, Draco moved for the first time. He reached into the bag, tossed the powder, and silently extended his hand.

Hermione moved beside him and presented her arm, his tattooed signature glimmering in the firelight. His fingers were cold as they wrapped around her skin. He called out for Rabastan's estate, and they stepped through.

The first thing Hermione noticed was a lack of light or warmth. The fire at their backs vanished with a hiss, and she shivered violently as the chill of the entryway crept over her.

They stood in a gothic manor house — the hallway stretching before them narrower than Malfoy Manor's, but the ceilings still dizzyingly high. The smoke from the fireplace dissipated, and the black walls closed in like a void swallowing her air. The paintings on the wall started hissing at her, muttering about her dirty blood as Narcissa glared daggers at them.

Draco dropped her arm and stepped slightly in front of her. Lucius spared them a condescending sneer and continued inspecting his fingernails.

Hermione's eyes roved the ceilings. Ron was in this house, somewhere beneath these black, deadened walls. She blinked and shook her head, refocusing.

Rabastan was the younger brother — possibly in his mid-thirties. All Hermione knew about him was that he was an unmarried Death Eater — likely mediocre in rank, given how little she'd heard about him. Rabastan, Rodolphus, and Bellatrix. She'd face three enemies tonight.

Small, tittering footsteps grew nearer, and all four guests turned to see a beaten little elf limping toward them.

"Jik takes you now. Dinner this way."

Hermione scowled as Jik turned in a circle, his right knee pivoting with difficulty, and limped toward a dark hallway. There was blood trickling behind his ear, dripping down to his neck.

She felt her chest burn as she followed Lucius and Narcissa. Jik had clearly been freshly tortured, and then told to retrieve the guests. She'd never seen an elf in poorer shape, and that included the beheaded ones on

"Enough," Lucius snarled. He shifted to Narcissa. "I will speak to the Dark Lord. Switzerland is in a delicate situation after your sister's many mistakes, and I will make it clear —"

"It's already settled, Lucius. The Dark Lord has agreed." A pause. "I'll keep him under my protection, of course."

Before he could reply, the doors swung open, drawing Hermione's eyes and startling the room. Rabastan, Flint, and the girls were back. Hermione hadn't even realized the screaming had stopped.

"It was quick this time," Rabastan said. "He passed out early."

Hermione swayed on her feet, bracing herself on the wall.

Narcissa's face was pale with rage. "Gentlemen, you'll excuse my sister and I, and our husbands. We have a private matter to discuss. Rabastan, may we use your study?"

Rabastan nodded his acceptance and she moved briskly to the doorway, Lucius just behind her. Rodolphus abruptly stood and followed, grabbing his wine.

Bellatrix pushed back from the table with a screech of wood. She dropped Draco's hand and patted his cheek. Hermione kept her eyes down as she passed, tucking the sound of fresh screaming into a heavy, earthy tome.

Once the door closed behind the four of them, Flint said, "Well, I have to inform you Rabs, but your elf can't cook worth shit." He clapped Rabastan on the back. "Shall we just pass through then?"

"I have a sitting room just across the hall," Rabastan said, grabbing several empty wine glasses. "We can get comfortable." His hand slid around the waist of his Lot.

Hermione's heart raced. She hadn't thought this evening would be anything like the Lounge. Draco stood abruptly, straightening his collar. "I should get going."

"You can't be serious." Flint shook his head. "Where do you have to be?"

appalling soup I've ever had the displeasure of tasting. Excuse me, but it's ten past the hour I agreed to suffer through."

Bellatrix cackled, still grasping Draco's hand.

"Always so quick to get to it." She turned to Narcissa. "I knew he wasn't one for foreplay." Lucius stood stiffly, refusing to take the bait. Bellatrix's face fell into a mock pout. "All I wanted was to spend a little time as a family before Draco goes to Switzerland."

A thick silence settled over the room. Hermione could count the heartbeats between them all, hardly daring to breathe.

"Switzerland," Lucius repeated incredulously. "I thought Switzerland was your project."

"Yes, well the Dark Lord thinks that a Malfoy's political cunning may be just what we need over there. And since you just returned from such a long assignment, Lucius, I thought this would be the perfect opportunity for Draco to rise to the challenge."

Narcissa stood, icy rage radiating off her shoulders. "So, because you've failed to infiltrate the Swiss Ministry, you're dragging my son into your mess? Holding him ransom for — for what?"

"Failed is a strong word, love," Bellatrix cooed, flashing her teeth. "I'd prefer to call it a little delay. And on the contrary, I'm taking your son under my wing. We're going to *strengthen* him." She shook Draco's hand, and Hermione could see his white knuckles clenching hers.

"This is preposterous—"

"I think we can all agree that the Dark Lord would be most pleased with the Malfoy family if Draco helped secure Switzerland." Her voice dropped. "Pleased enough to overlook certain weaknesses — which I'm sure we all hope will remain a secret."

Bellatrix's eyes suddenly slid to her, and Hermione shivered, her skin hot and itchy. She quickly turned her gaze to the floor.

"I'll help you, Draco," she heard Bellatrix hum. "Your father's blood may be weak, but you're still half a Black."

the walls at Grimmauld Place—

Cold fingers tapped her wrist. She looked up to see Draco, fully Occluded, staring off after his parents.

"Focus, Granger." The only words he'd spoken to her in days.

She nodded, and his fingers drifted off her skin before he began moving again. By the time they caught up to Lucius and Narcissa at two large doors, Hermione was thinking only of a lake with still waters, and a book laid open on the shore titled, *Afternoon Tea*.

The doors pushed open with a tortured creak, and Jik stepped aside. The party paused at the entrance. Hermione's eyes caught on a grand chandelier with burnt-down candles and dripping wax. Similar sconces decorated the black walls, and there was a massive oil painting sprawling the width of the far wall. The magical landscape depicted a battle from Roman times with soldiers running through the field and slaughtering each other.

Narcissa moved first, followed by Lucius. Once Hermione's vision cleared, she found a large table set for a formal dinner. A branching candleabra lay in the center like an overturned Acromantula, its candlelight illuminating the rest of the room. Hermione steadied her breathing as she skimmed the faces staring back at them — more than she'd expected.

Chairs scraped.

"Ah," a sing-song voice called from the head of the table. "The Malfoys, ladies and gents."

Bellatrix LeStrange stood in an opulent black ball gown, complete with puffing sleeves and cinched waist. Her curls were carelessly pinned back, her arms opened wide in a mocking welcome.

"Good evening, Bella," Narcissa said coolly. She looked her sister up and down. "My. But it seems we are underdressed."

Bellatrix's plum lips twisted in a tight smile. "Only full evening dress for a dinner with the Malfoys."

"Dear me," said Lucius, stepping past his wife. "Is this your evening's

best? I didn't realize how much Twilfitt and Tatting's is suffering."

Bellatrix's eyes narrowed dangerously before flashing a wolfish smile. "Mind your manners, *brother*. We have a special guest tonight."

Hermione blinked, eyes flying over the room.

The two Lestrage brothers sat across from Bellatrix — Rabastan at the foot of the table, and Rodolphus to his right. A young girl in a thin dress was against the wall behind them. And across the room, beneath the Roman painting, Marcus Flint smirked at her from his position at the sideboard. Penelope stood next to him, her eyes downcast.

Draco's shoulders tensed from his position slightly in front of her.

"Ah," Lucius drawled, his eyes on Flint. "How curious that you described this as a 'family affair.'"

Bellatrix leered, her lips pulled taut. "Things change, Lucius." Abruptly, her features brightened, and she swept backward, inviting them in. "Apologies for the change of location. Thankfully, Rabastan was happy to oblige."

None of the Malfoys moved.

"Marcus," Draco said, a sharp edge to his voice. "What brings you here?"

Flint's eyes glinted even in the distance. "Business with Rabs. Your aunt was generous enough to invite me to stay for dinner."

Narcissa smoothed her hair over her shoulder and offered a papery smile. "Shall we sit?"

Bellatrix gestured for Narcissa to sit next to her at the head of the table. Lucius approached Rabastan and Rodolphus, shaking their hands with barely-concealed disdain. Hermione assumed a blank expression as she sidestepped against the wall, following Draco.

"Draco, darling," Bellatrix sang. They both froze. "Come sit next to your auntie." She patted the place setting to her left.

Draco's jaw ticked before he slowly pivoted and crossed the room to take the chair across from his mother. Lucius sat to Narcissa's right.

"Are you threatening my son?"

Bellatrix scoffed. "Don't be absurd. He's the future of the Blacks." She grabbed Narcissa's wrist, pulling her hand close and weaving their fingers together. Then her anger seemed to vanish. She sent her sister a soft smile that sent chills down Hermione's back. "I can protect him and his weak heart. And I'll do it for you, Cissy."

She reached for Draco with her other hand, plucking up his limp wrist and clasping their fingers together. She tilted her head, pressing her cheek to their clasped hands. "Until he's strong enough to kill it," she whispered. Bile crept up the back of Hermione's throat. She directed her attention to Lucius, watching carefully across the table, seething.

Another scream from below, choking off and then garbling into a wild pitch. Hermione looked down, imagining Ron's bloody and beaten body thrashing in pain. Blinking rapidly, she breathed in and out. *A lake, clear and calm*—

Narcissa peeled herself away from her sister. "We have very different ideas of what makes a weak heart, Bella."

Bellatrix looked down at her empty right hand, like the sight of it offended her. Her eyes turned to ice. "Perhaps we do. Your need for affection outweighed your sense of loyalty long ago. Now, you're no better than our mother — a simpering housecat whose purpose is to host tea during the day, spread your legs at night, and pop out children nine months later." She snatched her wine glass, lip curling as she brought it to her mouth. "And you weren't even particularly good at that, were you?"

"That's *enough*." Lucius's voice shook the room, his tone so low, Hermione had to search for the source. The plates and glasses trembled with his restrained magic.

"Ooo," Bellatrix giggled, stretching to whisper into Draco's ear, "Daddy's home."

Lucius pushed back his chair and rose to a looming height. "You have threatened my son, insulted my wife, and, frankly, served the most

her elbows. “I’m sure you wish for someone to ask, ‘What went wrong in Italy?’ So I will ask it.”

Hermione could see Narcissa and Lucius plainly, Bellatrix’s profile, and the back of Draco’s head from this vantage point. She watched Draco’s shoulder blades twitch before his ribs expanded.

“I did my task. The Minister is alive. The insurgents were disabled—”

“Twenty rioters and would-be assassins Stunned, and not a single Killing Curse cast.” Bellatrix tutted mockingly. “I *did* show you how to cast one, didn’t I? In the Manor basement on the rats and vermin?”

A pause.

“Of course, Aunt. I was being cautious. No need for a massacre in a volatile country—”

“The Dark Lord approved any and all force necessary to protect Minister Romano.” Bellatrix’s fingers circled the rim of her glass, like a cat playing with dinner. “In fact, he would have been quite pleased to learn that you disposed of a group of violent dissenters. Instead you left that honor to Dolohov.” Hermione saw Draco’s left fist clench in his lap. “Of course, you’re like your father in that regard,” she continued lightly. “Far more interested in elbow-rubbing and politics than in getting your hands dirty.”

Hermione dared to look up at Lucius. He was perfectly still, his eyes flitting back and forth between his sister-in-law and his son. Only his lips moved as he lilted, “We all have different strengths.”

Bellatrix tilted her head. “Are you sure the Dark Lord would agree that Draco’s — *timidness* — is a strength?”

A scream from below their feet — somewhere in the bowels of the manor. Hermione’s air constricted and she jumped violently. She knew that scream. She looked up at the family — not a single brow arched in interest. Not even Rodolphus took his eyes off his wine glass. She dug her fingers into her palms.

Narcissa lifted her chin off her hands, stared her sister down, and said,

Hermione kept her eyes down as she moved toward the wall behind Draco.

As soon as her gaze flicked up, she caught Narcissa’s cold eyes. Narcissa looked away, turning to Rabastan’s booming laugh, and Hermione quickly did the same. But she could feel two black, predatory eyes boring into her even as she studied her shoes.

Hermione’s stomach dropped at the sudden realization of the purpose behind the night’s twists. Bellatrix and her husband were aware of her treatment at the Manor, and had kept the information from Voldemort for some reason. But with other witnesses — Flint, Rabastan Lestrangle — the Malfoys couldn’t protect her tonight.

She quieted her fear with deep breaths, focusing on the dark wood.

“Mudblood!” Hermione jumped.

The first course had appeared on the table: a murky soup that Lucius was currently sniffing at with a curled upper lip.

“Fetch the bread basket.” Bellatrix didn’t spare her a glance, but Hermione knew the command was for her.

Her eyes frantically scanned the table. When she found nothing, she looked to Narcissa, but she was staring at her soup, her lips in a thin line as her sister watched her. Then Lucius caught Hermione’s eye, and looked pointedly at the sideboard — where the bread basket sat.

Hermione scurried around the table and maneuvered the giant basket into her arms. Stepping carefully to Bellatrix’s side, she reached for the serving tongs. A sizzling pain shot up her fingers when she touched them. She yelped before she could stop herself, nearly upending the basket.

Bellatrix turned to glower at her, but quickly cackled, giving the game away. “I forgot about the curses on the silver to keep dirty little thieves away.” Bellatrix turned to Draco and whispered, “Can’t have a Mudblood mucking up our things, can we?”

Taking a shuddering breath, Hermione turned back to the sideboard, grabbed a spare serviette, and gingerly wrapped it around the tongs. She

moved back to Bellatrix and steadily plucked a piece of bread to set down on her small plate.

Bellatrix gasped loudly, and Hermione's chest lurched.

Every mouth and hand at the table froze. Even Rodolphus, who hadn't spoken more than ten words, turned to stare at her.

"You *dare* serve a guest before the lord of the manor?" Bellatrix breathed, placing her hand over her chest. "Where are your *manners*, Mudblood?"

Hermione bowed her head and took a shaky step backward, chest still thumping. She could vaguely hear Flint and Rabastan giggling into their napkins.

"Pardon her ignorance," Narcissa clipped. "We've always found ourselves to be superior table servants."

Hermione walked the length of the table to where Rabastan sat, still chuckling.

"How unfortunate," Bellatrix responded. "I'm sure she could learn quickly with the proper motivation."

Hermione swallowed, and served Rabastan, feeling his gaze slither down her body. Her dress was conservative, but the fabric was too thin, catching her curves when she moved.

"I will discipline her as I see fit, Bella," Narcissa said, smoothing her napkin.

She stiffly moved counterclockwise, to Rodolphus next.

Bellatrix gave Flint an apologetic pout. "Unfortunately, my sister and I have always disagreed on the topic of 'discipline.'" She sighed. "It's the same with my dear brother-in-law, I'm afraid."

"Few can afford your methods of 'discipline,' Bellatrix," said Lucius. "What elf are you on now? The eighth?"

"Ninth," Rodolphus grunted. Bellatrix glared at him, but he didn't look up.

"A terrible waste, if you ask me," Narcissa said primly, letting her

She felt the skin of her knees knitting back together. A slight brush of his hand on her ribs when she swayed, steadying her — and then he was gone, taking his seat.

"Speaking of *pets*," Bellatrix sang, "Rabastan, Marcus, why don't you go check on yours? We need to have a little family chat."

Hermione's eyes blinked open, the room still spinning, but coming back into focus. A throbbing pain behind her temples, but not nearly as bad as she'd expected.

It had worked. Bellatrix had fallen straight in their trap, and was none the wiser for it —

Chairs scraped backwards.

"Take the whores with you. I'm sure the Mudblood would delight in seeing her old boyfriend again."

"She stays." Hermione lifted her head to see Narcissa's cold blue eyes boring into her sister's, her posture rigid with anger. "She goes nowhere without Draco."

Bellatrix sneered and turned to her brother-in-law. "Go on, then. But be sure to let the ginger know who our dinner guests are."

*Ron.*

Hermione listened to the shuffling of feet as her blood raced. She was so close to him, but so impossibly far away.

The doors clicked closed. She was alone with the Malfoys, Bellatrix, and Rodolphus. There was a stilted silence before Bellatrix spoke.

"I see Draco is finally enjoying his plaything. It's an improvement, I suppose, but if you ask me, the boy is still far too soft." Bellatrix took a deep sip from her wine, eyeing Lucius over the rim. Lucius stared back at her impassively. "I must confess myself quite disappointed with his performance in Italy."

Time seemed to slow. The pain behind Hermione's eyes faded, and she watched the entire family stare at each other as if wands had been drawn. Narcissa shifted, folding her hands beneath her chin and leaning on

"Speaking of brats—" Bellatrix reached up, grabbed a fistful of Hermione's hair, and tugged her down. The bottle slipped from her fingers and crashed to the floor, splattering blood red wine everywhere.

"Bella—!"

"You can't serve like an elf, you can't cook like an elf. But surely you're useful for *some* things," Bellatrix hissed in her face. "Looking forward to a long life on your back, darling?"

And then sharp claws dug into Hermione's mind. Black tunnels she couldn't see the end of bore into her.

The page of *Afternoon Tea* fluttered. But they were the only pages that did.

Bellatrix flew through her memories. Dolohov and the Mediwitches, the light turning red above her hip. Draco tearing her slip open. Trembling on the stones at Voldemort's feet. Draco pressing her against a wall, grinding against her on a chaise.

The claws in her mind threatened to shred the platinum string binding her together, but it held firm. Distantly, she heard a whimper she recognized as her own; a spoon clattered into an empty soup bowl to her left.

Bellatrix retracted, scratching on her way out, and Hermione's body was dropped to the ground as a satisfied laugh grated her ears. The glass from the broken bottle was nothing to the shredding of her mind, the pages of *Afternoon Tea* bleeding through its spine.

She tried to refocus, her eyes hazy and seeing red. The wine and her own blood coiling together on the stone floor beneath her cut knees.

A disgusted sound from above her. "Draco, come clean up after your pet."

Silence.

"What are you waiting for?" the voice hissed.

A cold hand on her arm shocked sensation into her. Draco hauled her up and muttered a spell to banish the blood, wine, and glass. He roughly pushed her to lean against the wall when she couldn't stand on her own.

spoon drift through her soup. "Servants thrive under order and a certain degree of respect. Such draconian measures are unnecessary."

"Respect?" Bella sneered. She turned back to Flint just as Hermione arrived at his elbow. "Marcus, dear. Tell me, how do you discipline your whore when she forgets her place?"

Hermione glanced at Penelope, whose eyes were fixed on the floor. Flint chuckled. "An excellent question, Mrs. Lestrangle. But she doesn't forget. Not anymore."

She moved to Draco next, who had been completely silent since he sat down. He'd had a few spoonfuls of soup, but his wine goblet remained untouched. Hermione chanced a sideways glance and found him staring at his bowl, his eyes glazed over.

"And tell me," Bella said, "does your whore sleep in the dungeon? Perhaps your closet, like Rabastan's?"

A muscle in Draco's jaw pulsed as she set the bread on his plate.

"Well, she sleeps in my bed now. But in the beginning, when she misbehaved, she had a cage down the hall." He smirked. "Close enough for convenience, but too far to hear her rattling it."

Hermione gripped the basket tightly to her ribs.

"Of course," Bellatrix cooed. "And does she have her own room?"

"Not yet," said Flint, grinning, "but I've heard some inspiring stories about Draco's 'dungeon.'"

Rabastan chuckled.

"I meant some place safe and warm," said Bellatrix, leaning forward. "Does your little Mudblood have her own four-poster and en-bathroom suite?"

Hermione's feet stumbled.

Flint laughed. "She's a slave, not a house guest."

Bellatrix cackled, the sound shooting down Hermione's spine. Then she snapped her fingers, pointing to her bread plate.

Hermione slowly approached her left side and served her a piece of

bread. Before she could retreat, Bellatrix seized her wrist. Hermione

gasped, dropping the tongs with a clatter.

"Such pretty scars, Muddblood!" She yanked her closer and ran her fingers over the markings on Hermione's arm. Another tug, and her black eyes locked on Hermione's. "I have more designs in mind. We could make a work of art out of you."

Hermione stared blankly back at her, even as her heart pumped furiously. Bellatrix's nails started curling, cutting into her skin.

"I, too, would like some bread," Narcissa said icily. "Whenever you're done playing with the help, Bella."

One last dig, then Bellatrix released her. Hermione grabbed the tongs and scrambled away.

Bellatrix raised a derisive brow. "Who are you fooling? You never ate bread in your life." She tore into her roll with the grace of a wild cat, dipped it into her soup, and chewed slowly, never breaking her sister's gaze.

Narcissa's lips curled.

"Unfortunately, the bread is the only edible thing on the table," Lucius cut in. He turned to Flint before Bellatrix could reply. "So. Looking forward to the ceremony next week?"

"I am, sir," Flint replied. "It's a great honor."

Draco's head snapped up. "What's this?"

Hermione placed bread on Narcissa's plate, her breath shallow.

"I'm receiving the Mark next week. Along with Theo and Greg."

"Congratulations," Draco said coldly. He turned back to his soup.

"I'm surprised you didn't know," Flint said innocently. "Theo and Greg are such close friends of yours."

Draco's spoon paused above his bowl. "I've been a bit preoccupied with the efforts in France and Italy." He swirled his soup. "And there's no news-letter between us all, as you'll come to find out."

Having placed bread on Lucius's plate, Hermione moved to return the

basket to the sideboard.

"Muddblood!" Bellatrix called. "Refill the wine."

Hermione froze, fighting the urge to look at the two other slave girls against the walls. She blinked, filing her emotions away as she exchanged the basket for the wine bottle.

"I think it's high time," said Bellatrix. "You'll make an excellent addition to the Dark Lord's elite, Marcus. As for the Goyle whelp, well, that remains to be seen. I suppose he can't be worse than his father. I heard Gringotts finally declared him dead."

Rodolphus grunted in assent.

Bellatrix rolled her eyes and took a long dreg of wine. "And I know Ted is anxious to see Theodore take the Mark. He thinks offering up a capable son might help the Dark Lord be more...patient with some of his own shortcomings. But apparently his heart isn't in it at all." She smiled over at Lucius. "There's nothing quite like your only heir disgracing the family name. Isn't that right?"

Hermione reached Rabastan at the head of the table again.

"It would be devastating, indeed," said Lucius, lazily reaching for his wine. "Not that you or Rodolphus would know anything about heirs."

Narcissa shot him a heated glare.

"I suppose not." Bellatrix's smile widened as she leaned in. "You see, I chose power over children. Infinitely more satisfying."

Hermione moved to refill Rodolphus's glass.

"We seem to have differing views on 'power,' Bella," Narcissa said sharply. "The last time I checked, you still answer to a man."

Bellatrix's eyes whipped to her sister's. "The second you push a man's child out of you, you're his *slave*." She nodded at the two silent Lots on the wall. "No better than any of these girls. My only master is the Dark Lord."

She drained her glass and slammed it on the table. Slowly, stomach twisting with dread, Hermione approached Bellatrix with the bottle.