

Hermione for talking.”

Her mouth went dry. Hermione extricated her legs from underneath him, standing and smoothing down her clothes. Draco stood swiftly, straightening his clothes as well, and stepped slightly in front of her before gesturing for Boppy to lead the way.

Boppy wrung his hands. “Master says *only* Miss Hermione.”

She felt Draco simmering in front of her. He opened his mouth to snap at his elf, but she placed her hand on his elbow. “It’s alright.” She moved around him and looked up into his eyes. “I’ll be back shortly.”

He sighed an aggravated breath, and his jaw slowly relaxed. Hermione squeezed his arm and followed Boppy out the library doors. Her mind started spinning about Switzerland, and Narcissa, and why Lucius would first ask to see *her* after being gone for almost two weeks—

She blinked, trying to suppress her thoughts. It was harder than usual this time. She’d been neglecting her Occlumency practice lately, too distracted by Draco and their research.

The small elf shuffled down the hallway in front of her, and Hermione was surprised to see they were headed to the kitchens. Boppy led her down the short set of steps, and gestured for her to duck under the tiny doorway and into the kitchen before he popped away.

Lucius Malfoy towered over the elves chopping vegetables at their tables, his head almost scraping the ceiling as he peered down at a long scroll of parchment that looked like a menu for the week. Remmy stood next to him on a stool, waiting for instructions or notes. He said nothing as Hermione paused awkwardly in the doorway. He was wearing a thin-rimmed pair of glasses, and the sight of them might have made Hermione giggle if she wasn’t so nervous.

“Miss Granger,” he said, whipping the glasses off his nose. He studied her briefly, letting his narrowed eyes drop to her bare legs. “I see you’re still having trouble fully clothing yourself.”

Her cheeks flushed. Remmy jutted her chin up in approval.



Every step on the stairs down to the laboratory echoed against the stones, making it sound like a dozen people were at Hermione’s heels as she rushed down the twisting staircase.

Instead, there was just one. He moved slowly, but every time she paused to look back at him, he was three paces behind her, as if tied to a string. His hand slid across the wall as he moved, his gaze always fixed at a point over her head.

She began running once he descended, following the memorized route to the laboratory and shoving open the door. There was no time to catch her breath as she ran to the shelves, slamming jars onto the lab bench and tearing leaves from potted plants.

Her mind tumbled with the memory of decoding the previous lust potion. She needed Gurdyroot, and Wiggentree Twigs, and — her eyes snapped up to the door. Draco hovered against the frame, every inch of him coiled and tense.

The skin on the back of her neck prickled. “How do you feel, Draco? What are your symptoms?”

He was still, his hands buried in his pockets, his gaze locked on one of the candles on the stone wall. “My symptoms...” he repeated.

Hermione nodded slowly, taking him in. Sweat was beading at his temples — she could see the perspiration on his black collared shirt. And although his eyes were still vacant, she didn’t miss the clench in his jaw. Silence.

“Alright. I’ll just get started, then.” Squaring her shoulders, she stepped up to the cauldron, facing her first problem. She needed to light the fire—

There was a shuffle forward before she could ask. She kept her eyes fixed on the cauldron as his long, pale fingers placed his wand delicately on the counter. A sharp intake of breath — and then he moved away, stepping back to the doorframe.

“Thanks,” she mumbled. The magic in his wand thrummed in her veins as she quickly lit the fire, filled the cauldron, and charmed the elm spoon to stir clockwise. She set to work, summoning tools and ingredients, inspecting the color and texture as the mixture bubbled. After a few minutes, she glanced up to find him watching her, his eyes dark and glassy.

“Draco”—she cleared her throat—“I need to know what’s different about this potion. What’s it doing to you?”

She began chopping the Wiggentree Twigs to avoid holding his eye.

“Overheating, dizziness...” He trailed off.

She darted a glance through her lashes and found him staring at her lips. She’d been biting them.

“And arousal, obviously,” she muttered, tossing in the Wiggentree Twigs. “Intense arousal, as it’s been exacerbated by skin contact.”

“It’s...”

She looked up when he didn’t finish. “Yes?”

He shifted, leaning heavily on the doorframe. “It’s getting worse the longer it goes on.” His eyes dragged over her body before closing tightly. “I didn’t see that with the other potions. Before.”

Hermione jerked a nod and cast her eyes down on the potions ingredients in front of her. She needed twenty minutes to cobble together an antidote. And she could only *hope* that it worked properly. The Bulbadox juice and daisy roots were her best guesses to counteract the increasing intensity, but she couldn’t be sure without a sample.

There was nothing to be done for it. She just had to hope for the best. She flicked his wand and conjured a chair near the doorway. “Take a seat.”

She tightened her arms around his shoulders and nodded. He pressed their foreheads together and watched her face as he nudged one of her thighs open.

*A pop!* from a foot away.

As she knew it would. As it had every day since her birthday whenever their snogging escalated.

“Master is excusing Boppy, but—!”

“Go. Away,” Draco gritted out, screwing his eyes shut.

Boppy gave a pitiful whine. “But—but—!”

“Boppy, I swear to Merlin—”

Hermione giggled. The expression on Draco’s face was achingly familiar. Like he’d been beaten to the Snitch or watched Crabbe steal his last treacle tart at dinner.

She was beyond embarrassment at this point. Two days ago, Draco’s knee had just slipped between her thighs when Plumb popped in with tea service, two hours early. Yesterday, as she’d sat on the table with Draco standing between her legs, she got as far as running her hands up under his shirt as he palmed her breasts over her top. But just as he’d leaned her backwards across the table, Remmy appeared to list the dinner menu for Draco’s approval.

“But Boppy comes to say that Master Lucius is home, and is wanting a word—”

Draco’s eyes flew open. The heat that had been boiling inside of her abruptly disappeared.

His throat bobbed as he stared down at her. “Tell my father I’ll be there in thirty minutes—”

“Not with Master Draco! With Miss Hermione!”

They both whipped their heads to look at Boppy, who was dancing from foot to foot anxiously. Draco pulled away.

“Regarding what?”

“Master didn’t say!” Boppy squeaked. “Master says to fetch Miss

Draco Malfoy's hands on her arse as he pushed her back against the stacks, kissing her fiercely.

But today she'd chosen the shorts again. And the way his eyes had dropped to her legs when she entered the library had been worth it. But now, as his fingers rubbed circles into her inner thigh, his lips nipping against her throat, she thought maybe she was the one being seduced.

The productive parts of their day seemed to be getting shorter and shorter. "Draco—"

His mouth latched onto the dip below her jaw — his favorite spot. She'd been covering the bruises every day, and it seemed he was making it his mission to keep them there. Her eyes fluttered closed, and she sighed. The Tolbrette journal dropped to the floor with a thud.

Draco's own book snapped shut, and then his hands were twisting her on the couch, coaxing her to recline against the armrest. His lips never left her neck as the hand between her legs rose higher and higher, his other palm running over her waist.

He hovered over her, catching her lips and kissing her deeply as his fingers reached the hem of her shorts. She moaned low in her throat and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. Draco slipped his palm under her lower back, pressing her close.

They should be working. She should insist that they set some kind of boundaries, no snogging before three—

His fingers slipped to the hemline of her shorts, and her mind went blank as he played with the material. Like he knew she'd worn them to test him. He teased the skin there, rubbing slow circles and inching under the fabric. His tongue dove into her mouth, dragging sighs from her chest.

He released her lips, and she murmured his name, searching for him. When he wouldn't kiss her again, her eyes flickered open, and she saw him staring down at her.

His fingers slid an inch under her shorts. "Can I?"

The cauldron simmered into a bubblegum pink. She ran through the ingredients in her head, trying to account for the color.

"When you made this for Pansy, did you stir clockwise eleven times? Or thirteen times counterclockwise?"

The texture evened out. The color shifted into a pale baby pink. So close now. She picked up the Gurdyroot.

"You can't use that."

Her head snapped up. The doorframe was supporting him now, his back flush against it, and his knees weak underneath him. His eyes were squeezed closed.

"What?"

"The Gurdyroot will counteract the Ashwinder shells, negating—negating the effects." He took a shuddering breath. "You need to use willow bark."

Her heart thrashed in her chest until her ribs hurt. Willow bark had to be added at room temperature, and its effects only released properly if it was slowly, gradually brought to a boil. Another fifteen minutes, at least. Steeling herself, she banished the flames, summoned the willow bark, and began cracking it into fingernail-sized pieces.

"I'm sorry," she said numbly. "I should have started with the bark. It's going to be a bit longer. You—you should sit."

She chanced a look up at him as he stiffly lowered himself into the chair she'd conjured. He was clammy and flushed, a bead of sweat trickling down his temple. Unable to either look at him or stand still, she began clearing up her station, darting around the room and putting things away by hand.

Five excruciating minutes later, the potion was cool enough. She sprinkled the willow bark into the cauldron and lit the flames, chewing the inside of her cheek while she waited.

He was quiet and still for the next ten minutes while Hermione worked, adjusting the temperature as she peered into the cauldron. If she

## THE AUCTION

hadn't seen his chest rising and falling out of the corner of her eye, she would have assumed he was catatonic.

"How are you feeling?" No response. She wiped her brow, then waved away the smoke. "I can brew you something for concentration—"

"Stop talking," he bit out. Her eyes darted to him. He stared at her darkly, sweat dripping from his temples. "Your voice—"

He tore his gaze from her. She nodded, pointedly ignoring the way he adjusted himself in his trousers. She continued easing the castor oil into the cauldron, one teaspoon every ten stirs.

"Stop biting your lip," his voice snarled.

She jumped. "Sorry. I didn't realize..."

He dropped his head into his hands and groaned. "How much longer?"

"Not long."

He stumbled out of the chair, standing to press his back against the cool stones. He tugged at his shirt, fanning himself with the material, and his eyes slid over to her again.

Her heartbeat fluttered as she blinked away, doubling her efforts. She could feel him staring at her hands as she worked, making her fingers shake and the knife slippery in her grip.

The cauldron bubbled into a deep blue as soon as she added the crushed daisy roots, the consistency exactly right. She just needed to wait five more minutes for it to simmer.

"You should Stun me."

Her eyes jerked up to see him closer to the table, still pressed against the wall. His gaze was on her neck and chest.

She swallowed, her throat thick. "Just a little bit longer."

"Stun me."

She focused back on the potion, wiping her brow again, trying to ignore the way his eyes slid over her. "I don't think you should be unconscious in this state. Putting you into a stasis could—"

"Then bind me," he growled.



Draco's lips dropped kisses against her neck, his hand tracing circles on her knee as her eyes read the same sentence for the sixth time.

Something about Jeremiah Jones and his brother.

She should have known from the moment that he joined her on the loveseat, innocently flipping pages in a textbook, that she wasn't going to get any work done this afternoon.

They'd made progress over the last three days, identifying seven clusters of characters and six ancient runic languages Jones had borrowed from. They were still looking for the source of the seventh cluster.

But usually after lunch, Draco would decide he'd had enough studying.

He sucked the soft skin below her jaw, and her eyes fluttered shut.

"Anything interesting, Granger?" he hummed into her throat.

"Huh?" Her fingers curled into the cover of her book. "Um, just that... Jones's brother disapproved of his views. But there's nothing about his travels, or where else he might have—"

"What a shame." His hand slid up her thigh, warm against her skin.

Hermione had chosen to wear the shorts again today. Yesterday she'd worn one of the tighter, lower-cut tops in her new wardrobe, and it had taken Draco thirty minutes of "reading" before he'd ripped the book from her hands and set her on the edge of the table, his hips slotting between her legs as his lips devoured her.

The day before, he'd been fascinated with the Muggle denims she wore, but she supposed that had something to do with all the excuses she'd found to bend for books on bottom shelves. She'd found herself with

table.

"Later. We should work. You mentioned that you'd found something on Tolbrette's journal?"

"Not later. Now," he said. Her eyes slid to him. "You can miss a day of research. It's your birthday."

Her mouth opened and closed before she settled on a smile. "It is. Thank you."

He jerked his head toward the exit. "Go read. I'll have Mippy bring lunch to your room. She made pumpkin soup for you."

Reaching up on her toes, she kissed his cheek before he could stop her. She raced to her room with the memory of the blush on his cheek where her lips had been.

Hermione shivered. "Maybe four minutes—" Her voice caught when she turned to address him again. He'd gotten even closer.

His expression darkened when their eyes met, and a slow, catlike grin spread across his lips. He took a step closer to her, almost at the table, and Hermione's eyes darted to his wand — now closer to his reach than hers.

"Maybe you want me to lose control." He tilted his head at her. "Maybe the little lioness wants to be hunted down, chased through the Manor."

She stood frozen, unable to tear away from his obsidian eyes as he leaned forward on his palms, shoulders curling like a predator. She willed her heart to slow its pounding.

"You certainly like to tease." The black fire in his eyes bloomed, expanding and collapsing like a supernova. "Do you want me to break, Granger?" He smirked, the curve of his mouth cold and cutting. "I think it's my turn to play."

"Draco—"

"Go on. Run. I'll give you a head start."

She didn't move a muscle, even as her impulses screamed to do exactly what he'd told her and *run*. She gave up no ground as he leaned closer, her blood pounding so frantically she could hear it rushing in her ears. Taking a deep breath and lifting her chin, she looked into his eyes.

"This isn't you. I know who you are, Draco." His eyes flickered, the black fire wavering. "Look at me."

A held breath — and the fire vanished. Draco flinched violently, like she'd slapped him. A gasping breath crashed into his lungs, and he stumbled backward until his back slammed into the stone. His eyes were wide and horrified before he covered them with his hands, sinking to the ground and curling in on himself.

"It's okay," she said, her voice shaky. "You're okay. Three minutes. Count in your head."

She snatched his wand and set a timer on it, her fingers clutching the handle tightly as she slowly backed to her side of the table.

Draco breathed harshly, eyes still closed, his breath rattling on the exhale. He was shivering, his face ashen, and his collar drenched with sweat. After a second of debate, Hermione inched closer and cast a quick diagnostic over him. Orange and maroon throughout his chest, but a disturbing deep green across his hips and thighs. Bright spots of red fired through his brain. Pomfrey would have already sent him to St. Mungo's based on his temperature and hydration levels.

She checked the timer on the wand, trying to focus amidst the panic in her chest. Two more minutes.

The potion was thickening like it should. The color dissolving from midnight blue to sky blue, which would then move to a clear—

A vicious thump sounded from her right, and she spun to find Draco crumpled on the floor.

Her legs raced to him before she could remember— She stumbled back, filled a vial with the antidote, and ran to him, praying it was ready.

His eyes were fluttering under their lids, his fingers twitching. She grabbed a handful of fabric from her dress and used it as a barrier between their skin as she pried open his jaw and poured the potion into his mouth.

He coughed. It sprayed up and onto her face.

She screamed for another vial, and the magic shot through her fingers. A second later, a full vial was in her hand.

He was shaking, his eyes rolling back in his head.

"Draco?" She kneeled on his chest to keep him still, grabbed his jaw, and poured the potion into his mouth, covering his lips with her palm to force him to swallow. She watched his throat bob, his body shuddering beneath her.

She looked up at the diagnostic spell still hovering overhead. His temperature was dropping rapidly, returning to normal. She hadn't expected the potion to work so quickly—

A moan from below her. And she looked down just as Draco covered

curled against her skin. She jumped, pulling back, her mind crashing back into its skull.

"Your mother has her spies out. We should... we shouldn't be..." she stammered.

"My father's spies, more like it."

Draco looked down on her. His eyes were bright — an excited grey instead of the possessed black pupils from the incident last week — and they roved over her features, skating across her jaw, curving across her cheeks, dancing with her own eyes.

"I—I mean to say, I'm glad that we..." She gestured helplessly to their bodies, currently pressed up against each other. "But maybe we shouldn't... That's not to say, 'not ever,' but—"

Draco smiled. And the sight of it took her breath away. He pulled his lip between his teeth, and she felt his fingers shift on her waist. He leaned into her ear and whispered, "Stop your babbling, Granger."

He left a kiss there that made her eyes flutter, just before stepping back.

"Don't you have a book to read?"

Her eyelids shot open to find him smirking at her. "I shouldn't," she muttered. "We have research to do..."

He gave a lazy shrug. "Did you read the title?"

Her eyes widened, and her fingers itched. "I did."

"Hmm."

She cleared her throat. "Do you think it will be anything like the *Undesirable* series? Did he say if there would be seven books again?" She pulled away from the shelves and moved back through the stacks. "*The Hall of Prophecies*. I wonder whether it's going to be focused on the Ministry. Or if we'll see any of the *Undesirable* characters again—"

"Granger, just read the bloody book."

She spun to him. He lifted a brow, grinning at her as he followed her down the steps from the landing. She blushed and picked up the manuscript with gentle fingers. Her eyes caught on the books spread across the

before he grabbed her wrist and dragged her to her feet to follow him. He tugged her up to the landing, twisting between the stacks and weaving them to a small alcove with a window seat overlooking the pond. She had half a second to enjoy the view before he pressed her against the shelves and devoured her again.

He muffled her squeak of surprise, his fingers on her waist and his body flush against hers. She grabbed his elbows as he kissed her slowly, deep and seductive kisses that spun her mind in circles. The hands at her waist were under her shirt, rubbing her sides and chastely brushing thumbs over her hipbones. She ran her hands down his elbows, over his wrists, and to his hands, giving him permission to touch more of her.

His knee pressed forward, slipping between her thighs. And the most embarrassing moan poured from her throat into his mouth. Before she could pull away, he angled her head back and kissed her like she was the answer to his thirst.

His thigh connected to her core just as his hand reached her bra. Her hips rolled forward and he groaned, pressing his hardening length against her hip. His fingers tightened in her hair, and his thumb rolled her nipple, squeezing her and flicking at her and slipping the lace down so he could feel her—

*A pop!* from right next to them. Hermione jerked.

“Remmy brought the scones.”

Draco’s body — which had been deliciously pliant against her — tensed. A frustrated sigh blew across her face.

“I told you we didn’t want any.”

“Remmy insists. Remmy brings anything else?”

“No.”

There was a pause. Hermione turned her face to the right, seeing the round, older elf standing there with her hands on her hips.

“Remmy asks again later.” And she disappeared.

Hermione stared at the spot Remmy had stood until Draco’s fingers

his hand with hers and held her skin to his lips, kissing and sucking at her wrist. His other was on her knee, sliding up, up, up.

Relief washed over her as she checked the scan, her arm yielding to his demanding mouth. The dark green had replaced the angry orange and red. But she couldn’t tell if this was the antidote working or the contact with her skin—

“Hermione.”

Her eyes snapped down to him. He was kissing her arm, murmuring her given name against her skin. Her jaw went slack with the sound of the syllables from his lips. He was under the thrall of the lust potion now.

The hand crawling under her dress reached her hip, and he tugged her to straddle him. He was still hard, twitching under her, his tongue lavishing against her wrist.

She blinked, forcing herself to stay clinical as he groaned her name again. It was soft and needy. Nothing like the desperation at the fireplaces. If she could keep him sated with this, maybe it would give enough time for the antidote to begin working.

If it would ever begin working.

He pulled on her wrist. Her torso fell forward onto his with a squeak from her throat, and his lips were on hers before she could draw breath.

“I need you,” he moaned, when he finally broke away.

She looked into his eyes. Not feverish anymore, but still wild. “I’m here,” she whispered.

Something flickered behind the grey, and he kissed her — slow and deep, his arms wrapping around her waist, one hand pushing her hips into his. He ground up against her, pressing himself against her core. Her eyelids fluttered closed, surrendering as he dragged her dress up her back, his hands roaming her skin. *He needed this*, she told herself, as his tongue tangled with hers, as his fingers found the clasp of her bra and opened it with a quick twist—

Hermione’s eyes shot open, coming back into her body. She tried to sit



up, to redirect his hands, but he was gripping her so tightly that the movement only ground her hips onto him.

“Oh fuck.” His head rolled back, his jaw hanging lax. “Just like that.” She tried to reign in her breathing as she shifted again, trying to move her hips away. His hands snapped down to her waist, sliding around to her mostly bare backside and kneading the skin. Her breath hitched, and she flushed, embarrassed at the fire spreading through her.

She finally managed to sit up, pulling his hands from her hips as he started to thrust up against her. But he merely followed her, sliding her into his lap and holding her hips as his lips kissed her clavicles.

She shivered and tilted her head back, looking up at his diagnostic scan. The dark green had faded. A natural, earthy green like leaves in the autumn covered his entire body.

He was nuzzling against her breasts, kissing them through her dress. His hands were stroking her hips, teasing circles into her backside with his long fingers.

She threaded her hands in his hair and tugged his head back to look into his eyes.

Dark like slate. But she could see his irises.

“How do you feel?”

The hands on her hips froze.

His eyes blinked. Clearing into a cool grey.

A gasping breath, and he was tearing away from her.

“Draco—”

He slid out from under her, crawling away, panting and heaving. Hermione scrambled up, quickly clasping her bra and straightening her dress. She turned back in time to see him vomiting onto the stones, his hand braced on the wall. She started toward him, then froze.

Reaching for his wand, she banished the sick without looking.

“You did so well, Draco.” She bit her lip. “It was... I don’t blame you for any of this—”

that crashed through her. His tongue laved over the spot, and she quivered, arms shaking and core throbbing.

His arm slipped lower around her back, dragging her forward to the edge of the table and connecting their hips. She sighed and pulled his head back to her mouth. He obliged, moving his lips over hers and dragging her under in a current of ecstasy. She realized her breath was leaving her throat in a heady pattern of moaning sighs.

“Thank you,” she murmured against his lips. “Thank you. I love it.”

He squeezed her closer, breathing harshly in her ear. His hand moved to the back of her head, fingers twisting in her hair, and then he was tugging, pulling her neck open to him. His lips crashed against her throat, sucking and biting before they slid down, sucking on her collarbones.

One of his hands slithered over her shirt, rising up higher and higher until his palm covered her breast. Her thighs tightened around his waist, and her back arched, pressing her chest into his hand. His teeth nipped her clavicle as she moaned. His thumb passed over her nipple, and she felt her whole body respond.

A *pop!* from behind them made her jolt. And a high-pitched, bored voice said, “Miss wants scones?”

Hermione slapped a hand over her mouth. Draco froze, his hand still on her breast and his lips hovering above her chest.

They tilted their heads to find Remy glaring at them.

Hermione’s thoughts were empty except for mortification.

“No,” Draco said, point-blank.

Remy pouted her little lips together, narrowed her eyes, and said, “Remy maybe brings scones. For later.”

“That won’t be—”

Remy disappeared with a *crack!*

Hermione could breathe again, and let out a high-pitched, nervous laugh. But Draco didn’t join in. He pulled himself back, still panting, his pupils black and intent. Her stomach barely had a moment to flutter



moving carefully over his, begging him to let her continue, to express her thanks, to express her affection—

His lips pulled away. His hands landed lightly on her hips, shifting her back. His eyes hot and dark and searching.

She winced, remembering how he needed space, how he needed time.

"I'm sorry." She pressed her eyes closed. "I'm sorry, I know you don't want to, but I—"

His mouth found hers again, harder, softer. She gasped, and his tongue was in her mouth quickly, searching and dancing and dragging surprised sighs from her lungs.

The hands on her hips squeezed her close, fingertips digging into her sides and pressing her to his front.

Her arms wrapped around his neck, pressing her chest close to his and clinging to him as his breath turned heavy against her mouth.

One hand slipped down, rubbing lightly over her backside. He moaned against her lips and she gasped, eyes blinking quickly to stare up at his dark gaze.

"I'm sorry," she repeated. "We don't have to. I don't want to push you—"

"Stop talking, Granger."

He spun them, lifting her swiftly from her ribs and setting her on the edge of the table. She squeaked, and he swallowed the sound, wrapping his arms around her back and curving his spine to lean down to kiss her.

Her hands slid through his hair, threading her fingers and clutching his face close. His tongue slipped into her mouth, probing and tangling with hers. When she couldn't breathe any longer, she pulled away, gasping for air, and he switched to her neck faster than she could offer it to him.

One of his hands slid down her ribs, tracing her hip and skating down her thigh. He gave a soft push to her knee, and she immediately obeyed, opening her legs and inviting him to step closer. His teeth scraped over her neck, and she squeezed her eyes closed with the sharp sting of pleasure

He retched again. Hermione turned to stare at the cauldron, her hand pressing into her trembling lips as she listened to him heave.

She banished the mess again, and before she could say anything, he called out, "Mippy!"

The elf popped into the laboratory. "Master Draco!"

"Take Granger to her room."

She blinked at his back. He still leaned against the wall, facing away from her.

Mippy tottered over to her, and Hermione drew back her hand. "No. Mippy. Take Master Draco to his room. He is unwell. He needs fluids and a quarter vial of this potion once he can keep anything down—"

"I'm fine, Mippy. I need her out of here."

"Well, I can walk on my own! Which is more than I can say for him!"

Mippy's green eyes bounced between the two of them like tennis balls.

"Mippy is not knowing—"

"Get her to her room—"

"Look at his diagnostic scan, Mippy. He's dehydrated and recovering from a dangerous fever—"

"Mippy thinks maybe we all go upstairs?" the elf squeaked.

The door banged open, and Narcissa Malfoy flew into the room.

"There you are." She quickly halted, taking in the scene. "What happened?"

"Draco is ill! He needs fluids and rest—"

"I need her out of here. I need to be away from her right now—"

"Mippy was called, Mippy waits for missus to tell her what to—"

"Look!" Hermione gestured to the diagnostic. "He was poisoned, and we managed to get him an antidote just in time." She took a rattling breath. "He Occluded himself into a coma, and his fever was life-threatening a few minutes ago. He needs rest and monitoring and he *needs to listen to me*."

She looked wildly between Narcissa and Draco.

“Mother—”

“Hush.” Narcissa was pale, staring down at Hermione’s hand.

Hermione looked down. Draco’s wand was still in her hand. The Hawthorn humming.

“Did anyone see you used a wand this evening, Hermione?”

She shook her head. “No. He dropped it, and I helped him through the Floo—”

“The same fireplace we arrived in?” asked Narcissa.

“Yes, but...” Hermione’s eyes widened, and her hand slapped over her mouth. “The portraits,” she whispered. “In the entry hall. I summoned the Floo powder in front of them.”

Hermione quickly dropped the wand on the table, her heart pounding wildly again. How could she have been so foolish?

“Don’t fret, Hermione,” said Narcissa quickly. “Rabastan and Marcus are preoccupied. I encountered them when I was looking for you two.” She looked nauseous at the memory.

“But Bellatrix—”

“Gone as well. Lucius left to speak with the Dark Lord, and my sister and her husband insisted on accompanying him.” A shadow of fury passed over her face.

Draco took an unsteady step forward. “Mother, what—”

“Mippy,” said Narcissa, her voice deadly calm, “take Draco upstairs. Check his vitals and begin any necessary treatment. I’ll be there shortly.”

Mippy dropped the ear she was twirling and quickly tottered over to grab Draco’s wrist. His eyes caught Hermione’s just as they vanished, and the anguish in them hit her like a blow to the gut.

Narcissa moved quickly to the cauldron, grabbing a vial.

“What was he poisoned with?”

Hermione dragged in air, steadying herself. “A lust potion.”

Narcissa’s eyes flickered back to her, scanning over her rumpled dress, skating up to her wild hair.

landing on the pages in her hand. Scratching his jaw absently, he turned to the shelves behind him, searching through the books there with deliberation. She couldn’t be sure what was fascinating him so much, as Hermione knew that section to contain information on the dung beetle.

“Nothing, really.”

She blinked at him, watching the back of his neck turn pink. She moved to the table and slapped the manuscript down. “It’s... It’s an unpublished draft. It’s not nothing. How did you get it? Why is it... How did you—”

He interrupted her stammering with a shrug, still facing the dung beetle books with rapt interest. “I wrote to Gainsworth. Told him you were a fan.”

Hermione moved toward him, begging him to face her. “But why would he—”

Draco turned away, his cheeks spotted pink, and his eyes cast down on a book about dung beetle reproductive behaviors that he took over to their Scourer research table.

“I just... I told him you were a fan. Asked if he had anything he could sign and send for Hermione Granger’s birthday.”

He flipped through a few texts as she stared at him, her lips parting slowly.

She hadn’t read the paper in days. Rationally, she knew it was September, and that her birthday was coming up. Today was her birthday. She had forgotten it. But Draco hadn’t.

“I did nothing,” he was mumbling. “Just wrote a letter really. You can borrow my owl if you’d like to send a thank you—”

Hermione reached for his shoulders, turned him to her, and rose up on her toes to press her lips to his.

He’d remembered her birthday. He’d known her birthday in the *first place*.

Her fingers stretched to tangle in the hair behind his ears, her lips

## THE AUCTION

*in the wind.*

*The world changes, the light grows dim, but stories and*

*characters are always there to help illuminate the way.*

*Keep*

*typing.*

*Love Gainsworth*

Her fingertips squeezed the pages, itching to flip through. To devour the story and make sure she wasn't imagining the book in her hands. Her mind swam with questions.

Sucking in a sharp breath, she spun and raced for the door. Running the few paces to Draco's room, she banged on the door, pounding bruises into her fist. No response.

She darted for the stairs, flying down to the library. Throwing the doors open, she found him standing over the long table, leaning onto his fists and staring down at one of the many books lying in a heap.

"Morning," he offered, before she could open her mouth. "One of these runes appears on the cover of Tolbrette's journal. Did you notice that yet?"

She clutched the manuscript between her fingers, breathing hard, and opening and closing her mouth.

"There's coffee there," he said, gesturing flippantly to the side table between the couches. "I wasn't sure if you wanted to work today or not, so I told the elves to hold the extra scones. We can call them—"

"What is this?" she interrupted. She held the Gainsworth manuscript out, shaking it at him like it had bitten her.

He looked up at her for the first time. His gaze traced her body before

## CHAPTER 23

"I'm fine," Hermione managed. "Really."

Narcissa pressed her lips together and filled a vial. "Who?"

"Rabastan and Flint. They drugged his drink."

Narcissa capped the vial, and Hermione saw her fingers shake only once. She swept from the room, and Hermione followed, rattling instructions as she strained to keep up.

"He should be monitored for at least twenty-four hours," Hermione wheezed as they strode through the entrance hall. "Flint said this was a new batch, something stronger. I believe the antidote worked, but there might be complications from prolonged exposure. He had a fever of almost thirty-nine degrees, and his hydration levels were dangerously low."

Apart from an occasional nod or hum of understanding, Narcissa was silent. Once they reached Draco's bedroom door, she spun to her.

"Hermione, *thank you*. For everything." She placed a hand on Hermione's elbow. "I know you've been through a lot this evening."

Hermione opened her mouth to say that she was fine, that she was only concerned for Draco—

"Please don't visit him tonight." Her voice was gentle, but firm. "I don't think he can bear it."

Hermione blinked at Narcissa, then at the floor. Her eyes slid to his door, her throat thick and vision blurring. She took a breath, and nodded.

Narcissa took her hands. "And we will keep this between the three of us." She glanced down the hall, as if her husband could appear at any moment. "Lucius needs to focus on keeping Draco out of Switzerland, and not murdering Rabastan Lestrange." Narcissa's lips tightened. "Keep this between us. And leave the portraits to me."

Hermione nodded again, her eyes wide. With a final squeeze of her hands, Narcissa rushed into Draco's room, closing the door behind her. Hermione stared at the emerald eye for several long moments before slowly turning and trudging back to her room. As she kicked off her shoes, she caught sight of herself in her long mirror. Her hair was mussed,

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her lips bee-stung. She slipped off her dress, and found a lovebite just above her breast. Her cheeks flushed.

She ran her hands over her face, trying to force the tension of the evening to melt from her skin. All things considered, the night had been a success. Not the least of which was saving Draco from doing something he never would have wanted to.

Sighing, she began collecting her dirty clothes. She'd also survived dinner with the Lestranges. Her Occlumency had worked. Bellatrix had seen only what she wanted her to see, and she hadn't cracked when—

Her hands seized, her shoes tumbling to the carpets. The memory of a scream rising up from below her feet, rattling her, cutting through her mind, slicing her insides. Ron was still there. She sank to her knees, breathing deeply until she managed to slam him back inside his book. When the shelves in her mind were finally still, Hermione crossed to her bathroom, turned on the taps, and sank into a warm bath until her muscles relaxed and her mind was empty.



The next morning, Hermione was in the library, burying herself in research to keep from fixating on the fact that Draco was not at home.

She'd tried his door when she woke up, but he hadn't answered. The elves had told her he was out, and so was Narcissa. Lucius still hadn't returned from the previous evening.

Hermione had spent half an hour panicking about their absence, and Draco's health, until her guilt found her. Then she'd trudged down to the library, reviewing all the reasons it would have been foolish to try to rescue Ron last night.

Fifteen minutes of meditation later, and she was ready. In a firm voice, she asked the catalog to pull down all the books on Scourers. After some debate, she'd decided to keep them in the library, or else she ran the risk of someone finding out what she was researching.

## CHAPTER 23

dragged her armchair over to the window so she could watch for Draco's bedroom light. Something tugged deep in her conscience, but she brushed it aside. His help was invaluable, and she needed him to be safe. She stayed up until three in the morning, nodding off here and there before giving up her watch, and tucking herself into bed.

She woke up the next day well after noon. Her body was sore from her futile armchair vigil, and she took a hot shower before changing into some comfortable clothes. Her breakfast tray was sitting on her coffee table, magically still steaming. She plopped down into her chair and poured her coffee.

She was halfway through munching on her piece of toast when she noticed a thick pamphlet poking out from under the tray. Hermione frowned and pulled it free.

UNSPEAKABLE: THE HALL OF PROPHECIES  
BOOK  
BY LANCE GAINSWORTH

She stood, gaping at the words. Her fingers drifted through the pages, flipping through what seemed to be a manuscript. It was coverless, simply bound with a Sticking Charm.

Turning over the first page, she gasped. Written in a messy blue ink on the second page, she found a dedication.

*Miss Granger,*

*Thank you for your support of my previous series. No  
desirable. This, my first draft of book one in my new series,  
will be published next summer, as long as there's no change*

had borrowed from every ancient language of runes in existence. They'd already identified over a thousand unique characters. At this rate, it might take years to decipher.

She bit back her disappointment as she dutifully pulled out her parchment, making a note about the translation. It would be so much easier if they had a shortcut. A key of some sort. She let her mind wander to Nott Sr. again.

She cleared her throat, the sound echoing in the silent room. Despite spending the last five days together, they'd hardly spoken. "Are you close with Theodore? It's hard to tell how much of the teasing is real."

His eyes slid to her from over the journal he was reading. "Not really."

"You used to be close, yes?"

He snapped the book closed, pressing his lips in a thin line. "What are you getting at?"

She bit her lip and shook her head. "Nothing. Just... wondering about the Initiation tomorrow evening."

She looked down at her notes again, feeling Draco's hot eyes on her. Now was not the time.



He didn't come to the library on Friday. He'd told her as they were turning in the night before that he would need to prepare for the Initiation.

"What does it entail?" she'd asked, her hand on her door knob as he hovered in the hallway.

His jaw had clenched. And he'd told her in sparse detail about a ceremony that all the Dark Lord's servants attended. There was typically a party afterward, followed by hours of debauchery and destruction.

She spent all day Friday writing out the code, burying herself in work to forget. She and Draco had now translated fifty-four unique characters within Jeremiah Jones's journal. Still at least a thousand to go.

When the clock chimed ten, Hermione returned to her room and

One of the Scourers, Jeremiah Jones, had written his entire journal in that code she'd found scattered in other journals, amidst torn-out pages. They appeared to be like a cross between runes or hieroglyphics, but the sheer variety of characters was like nothing Hermione had seen before. She'd set Jeremiah Jones's journal aside weeks ago, focusing on the other journals instead, as they at least contained entries in English. But she'd carefully combed through the last of them, and was still no wiser about the magic leading to the tattoos.

So she reopened Jones's journal and studied the strange shapes and lines. Her fingers traced the remnants of a chunk of torn-out pages at the center of its spine, feeling the loss in her bones. It was like trying to translate Russian to English using a dictionary written in Mandarin. If only she could crack the cipher, she could translate the fragments of code in the Scourers' journals. And something told her that this journal was key.

She was so deeply entrenched in her study of the strange runes that she didn't hear the library doors open. A throat cleared near her table and she jolted, nearly upending her inkpot over the centuries-old texts.

Draco stood several feet away, his hands behind his back. She jumped up from her chair to meet him, fingers curling into fists to keep from reaching out.

"How—how are you?"

He was pale, his eyes rimmed with dark circles and his jaw tight.

"Marcus Flint won't be bothering us again."

She felt a chill crest over her skin. "Why? What happened?"

He rolled his shoulders, and she listened to his bones pop.

"He enjoys being alive." He took a deep breath, looking at a point over her ear. "I told him the next time he so much looks at me the wrong way, I'll go straight to the Dark Lord and inform him that he and Rabastan are still dealing the potion at Edinburgh."

Hermione gasped. "They've—?"

"Yes. Since the beginning. The idiot thought I didn't know. Then he

tried to insist I wouldn't betray my uncle's brother." He sneered. "He is banned from Edinburgh for the next month."

"Banned? On whose orders?"

Draco looked at her, his eyes a deep, swirling grey. "Mine. Marcus has forgotten his place since the fall of Potter. I'll endeavor to remind him of it."

He stood tall, arrogant and cold. It reminded her of Hogwarts.

She shook away her memories and wrung her hands together. "I take it your temperature is normal this morning? Did you run any diagnostics?"

The look he gave her told her that asking about his health was futile.

His eye twitched, and he took a deep breath. "We need to end our 'practicing.'"

She heard her heartbeat in the silence. She'd suspected things would go this way.

"I understand how you feel," she said slowly, "but I don't think returning to stiffness and visible discomfort is a good idea."

"The practice sessions are a distraction. For both of us." He cleared his throat. "I let my guard down around Marcus last night. I could have seriously harmed you—"

"Last night wasn't your fault," she rushed out, stepping closer to him.

"You did everything within your power—"

"Granger—"

"—and you stopped yourself! You had remarkable control over your mind, despite what it cost you, and—and I just want you to know that you don't have to avoid me, or stop the progress that we made, because I trust you, Draco. I truly do. And even if—"

"Granger." She paused her frantic pacing and met his eyes. He said quietly, voice raw with exhaustion, "This is me tugging my ear."

She blinked at him. *Tug your ear, or something*. If he felt uncomfortable, or if she was asking too much. And she'd promised she would stop.

matched those of ancient Arabic runes, but others were distinct. They'd also identified matches with ancient Egyptian, Sumerian, Sanskrit, and Aramaic runes.

They continued much like this for the next several days. With Lucius and Narcissa gone, there was nothing to interrupt them. Hermione didn't know what part of her argument had convinced him to help her, but she didn't dare question it, too content to have his company and help.

She learned that they worked well together, just as she'd expected. It was nothing like working on a project with Ron and Harry. No need to nag him or cross-check his work. Draco was usually at his brightest in the mornings, so he would scribble furious notes until noon, letting his tea go cold while he devoured the textbooks and journals. Hermione hit her stride in the afternoons just as he settled into a chair and flipped idly, staring off and thinking.

More often than not, she would look up to him with an idea or a question, and find that he would already be watching her — staring at her finger trailing over a page, gazing at her mouth as she sucked on the end of a quill, watching as she stood and stretched. That was another difference from her other study partners. How attentive he was.

She ran over to him one afternoon when she thought she'd narrowed one of the symbols down to a Sumerian rune for captivity. Her hair fell over his shoulder as she leaned over him, pointing to the rune to compare.

Draco stood and moved away under the guise of reaching for other books, and she realized with a wave of embarrassment that her breasts had been brushing his shoulder, her arm pressed against his. His cheeks were spotted pink when he came back to her, and she suspected hers with the same.

She was tucked into the couch on Thursday evening, flipping through a text on ancient Latin, looking for any symbols in the pages that looked like the ones in Jeremiah Jones's journal. About a quarter through, she found a match. She sighed, rubbing her temples. It seemed the Scourers

flushed, embarrassed from his intense gaze. The silence stretched as she waited, hoping, praying—

And he abruptly turned back to the table. Flipping open the nearest book with a lazy gesture, he cleared his throat. “What’s the problem, then?”

Her heart leaped. She blinked at the floor, fighting the urge to cry, or laugh, or both. Slowly, she came to stand at the table next to him, reaching for Jones’s journal. “We should start here.”

Several hours later, she was watching him read an old journal with a quill bit between his lips, his eyes scrunched in disdain. The elves had brought the tea service with a fresh pot of coffee for her, and she was nibbling on a biscuit as she watched him read.

She was working on listing every character of the foreign alphabet, writing them out on her scroll as she happened upon them. She was up to twenty-nine. When Mippy came to force Draco to eat dinner, Hermione agreed readily, insisting he stop for the evening.

“I’ll be here tomorrow as well,” she said, turning over her shoulder as she paused in the library doorway. “If you’d like to keep working with me.”

His throat bobbed, and he looked away. “Possibly. I’ll have to see.”

She nodded and retired to her room, spending the rest of her night Occluding and saying thanks for Draco’s assistance while it had lasted.

The next morning, she was just settling into a Scourer journal when the library doors burst open. Draco flew in, his hair still wet from a shower.

Her mouth fell open.

“I was thinking this morning,” he said, pacing back and forth as she tried not to stare. “What if it’s not a Germanic root? What if it’s Arabic?” He disappeared into the stacks as she blinked after him, before returning with a book of Arabic runes.

It turned out that Draco was partially right. Some of the characters

“I see.” She turned her gaze on her shoes, feeling her ribs contract in towards her heart. “No, of course. That’s your right.” Her eyes slid up to him again. “But you should know that I’m not tugging mine. My ear, that is.”

He swallowed, and his jaw tightened. His eyes drifted over her jaw and lips before dragging away. Nodding at her in goodbye, he turned on his heel.

Her stomach twisted. If he left... if he walked away now, free to avoid her and wallow in self-loathing, she’d have to work twice as hard to win him back. And a partnership with him was what the Order needed.

It just happened to be what her heart wanted as well.

“Was your father successful?” she called out. “In speaking with Voldemort about Switzerland?”

He froze, then turned slowly, looking her over. Sighing, he ran a hand through his hair. “For now. Mother received an owl this morning. Father has convinced him that politics shouldn’t be the top priority, given the current state of the country.”

She nodded, something knotted unraveling inside of her chest. “And where is he now?”

“Working on a new strategy for the Dark Lord’s approval.” He hesitated. “My aunt’s not happy. Mother has gone to stay with her for a few days.”

“What?” Hermione blurted out. “*Why?*”

Draco shrugged. “To keep her distracted.”

“I see.”

He glanced at the door, and she knew she had a handful of seconds before he disappeared.

“Wait—” She moved back to the table, shuffling papers and organizing books. “I’m looking into something that I would love a bit of help with. It’s... a lot of work, and I could use a—partner.”

She looked up to him again, and his eyes flashed. There was a thick



silence.

"If you're not too busy," she whispered, the words floating across the distance to him.

He stared at the books, tilting his head to read a sideways title. Close enough to show interest, but too far to be hooked. She counted her heartbeats in the moments that followed, the brutal silence overwhelming. If he walked away—

"What are you working on?"

A breeze of relief swept through her veins. She smiled nervously at him and began to explain the Scourers. Slow enough to not overwhelm him, but quick enough to keep his interest. Her chest pounded faster as he moved toward the table, listening intently. She inched forward as well, still rattling facts and history.

"And when did you first learn about them?" he suddenly asked, turning to look at her.

"Um—the night with the Spanish Minister." He frowned at her, watching her lips form the words. "Nott Sr. mentioned them."

His eyes dropped to the ink on her arm before he turned again, stepping resolutely up to the table. He picked up the closest book, flipping through a few pages.

"So you are researching how to escape. And you want my assistance with that." He let the spine snap closed, tucked his hand in his pocket, and turned to look at her coolly.

Her brows knitted together, and she swallowed. "How to get around the boundary lines, yes, but—"

"What do you think happens to me if my Lot runs away? To my parents?" He leaned back on the table, feet crossed at the ankles.

Her jaw clicked closed. "It's not just me, Draco. I'm working to free all of us. This is so much bigger than any one person—"

"So you're going to take off—without a wand—and meet up with 'the gang,' wherever they are—to attempt to destroy the most powerful

wizard of our time, succeeding where Harry Potter failed." He crossed his arms over his chest. "And you'd like my help in opening your shackles. Me. A Death Eater."

She glowered at him. "I know your family hates Voldemort."

He stared at her lazily. "*Dislike* doesn't mean we're willing to get ourselves killed in a pointless attempt to overthrow him."

"The point is," she said calmly, as if she hadn't heard him, "I know why I'm here, Draco."

His ribs ceased moving, his eyes locked on hers.

She took a deep, steady breath. "I'm well aware that I'm... insurance for the Malfoy family. A bargaining chip, if you will." She lifted her chin. "I don't hold it against you. It was a clever decision, and you've treated me far better than I could have ever imagined. But don't act like it's foolish to try to defeat Voldemort when it's a possibility that you and your family prepared for."

He blinked, searching her face. His eyes slowly narrowed. "I suppose you have it all figured out, then."

She ignored the bait. "Of course I can't say when it will happen. But this regime isn't going to last. Nothing like it ever has in history." She took a cautious step forward. "I know why you've protected me. Why you've helped me. And although I'll tell anyone who will listen, I can't promise it will be enough."

He simply stared at her, his lips slightly parted.

"It may not be good enough in the eyes of a war tribunal." She took a shuddering breath. "But help me do this, and when Voldemort falls and the Order triumphs, I'll make sure they know you and your parents were the reason why."

A pause. Then he snapped to his full height. "How magnanimous of you, Granger," he sneered. "Now if you'll excuse me—"

"Please." She bit her lip, holding his gaze. "I'm asking you to help me." The air between them cracked. She refused to back down even as she