

the sound of the chaise squeaking, its wood groaning.

His tongue swirled on her neck.

“Draco... I—”

His hand lifted to her waist, bunching the fabric of her top and tugging it out of her shorts.

“Okay?” he rasped against her throat.

“Yes. Please—”

His hand was under her top, sliding along her ribs, his hips jumping against hers, thumping that spot she rubbed last night while thinking of him, thinking of exactly this—“Oh, dear,” a silky voice cut through her haze, freezing her in its familiarity. “That chaise is from the 16th century.” Draco was off her faster than lightning, tumbling to the floor, hiding his groin behind his hands. Hermione bolted upright and met the amused gaze of Lucius Malfoy from where he stood in the doorway.

“Father,” Draco groaned. “It wasn’t... We haven’t—”

“It’s practicing!” Hermione squeaked, yanking her top down, pulling at her shorts. “For... for Edinburgh. It was my idea—”

Lucius simply lifted a brow at the two of them as they attempted to stutter their way through. “Do spare me your flimsy excuses,” he smirked. “From what my wife has told me, it seems we need to get Miss Granger on some form of contraceptive.” He glanced her over. “And soon.” Hermione’s cheeks flamed, and she slapped a hand to her mouth. “No. No, I promise we were just—”

“It’s for Edinburgh,” Draco repeated, having stood up and put as much distance between himself and the chaise as possible.

“Well, that won’t be necessary,” Lucius said, an unpleasant expression crossing his face. “You won’t be visiting Edinburgh this Friday.” Draco shot a look at her, panic in his eyes. But before Hermione’s mind could process, Lucius said, “We are to attend dinner at the Lestranger estate this Friday.” Lucius turned his eyes on Hermione, his eyes dangerously amused. “All of us.”

more heartbeats, and it exploded. She tore his hands from her shoulders.

“And what did your sixty-five thousand Galleons get you, Malfoy?” She pushed his chest, but he didn’t sway. “Am I everything you hoped for and more?”

She pushed at him again and his hands snapped up, grabbing her wrists and pushing them back against the wall next to her face. He stepped into her.

“You wanna know what my Galleons bought me, Granger?”

“Get off me—”

“An ungrateful little shrew with a hero complex—”

“You arsehole—”

“—who only aims to make my life more complicated—”

“You have no moral code, Malfoy—”

“—has given me nothing but *torture* for months—”

“My apologies for being such a *burden* on you! If it’s been such torture having me here, then why do you care what I do with my life?”

His jaw dipped downward, as if he was about to reply. She waited, panting harshly, ribs expanding to brush his chest. When no answer came, she looked up, finding his gaze on her mouth, her parted lips.

Her stomach twisted and her heart pounded.

He blinked once, eyes clearing as they locked on hers, looking like he’d quite forgotten what they were talking about.

But he didn’t step back.

She looked at his mouth, hoping wildly, inexplicably.

With just the smallest movement, she lifted her chin, and watched his eyes drop to her lips again. Her air left her in a puff, and he breathed her in, like he’d finally found the surface after years of being underwater.

His mouth tilted downwards, and with a final flicker up to her eyes, he was pressing his mouth to hers softly, like one of them could break at any moment. She pushed her lips back, hearing her heartbeat in her ears.

And like a slow-rolling wave growing larger and more dangerous, he

kissed her — his lips closing over hers, his chest pushing forward until he was surrounding her, his mouth opening when her lips parted and his tongue pressing forward like they'd been doing this for months.

She sighed into his mouth, and his hips rolled forward, pinning her to the wall. She rotated her wrists in his grasp, aching to touch him, but his fingers tightened their hold.

His head tilted to the side and his mouth devoured her, drugging her, dragging her down. His lips were quick and clever and his tongue was gifted.

Her head was spinning before she realized his knee was nudging hers apart, slipping between her thighs—

Just as she'd seen him do with Pansy in the corridors.

She gasped, dizzy with want as his body pressed up against her, his thigh pushing forward to be closer to her, slipping higher and higher to press against her core.

When she moaned a plea against his lips, his fingers dug into her wrists and his mouth panted into hers.

And like a rubber band snapping, he was gone.

Her eyes fluttered open, and her body tried to follow him, magnetized. He still held her wrists to the wall, but he'd pulled his chest and hips far away. She caught her breath as he looked at her in shock. And she saw the panic color his eyes and shiver across his skin.

"I'm sorry," he breathed.

She tried to use her voice to reassure him, but he stepped away from her.

"I'm s— I'm sorry. I'm—"

His eyes were wide and frightened. She started to reach for him, but he turned quickly, striding to the exit.

The door slammed behind him.

She stood alone in his bedroom, her lips still warm and bruised from his mouth. Her mind was numb and her skin too warm. Moving briskly

drawing moans from his lips.

He stared into her eyes, his hair falling over his forehead, rumpled from her fingers. She bit her lip, keeping the millions of things she longed for inside of her chest. She had to watch, had to see his face as she moved. Had to know if his eyes rolled back or glazed over—

She brought their hips together again, and both of their mouths fell open, eyes wide and needy.

He groaned, and she gazed down at his lips. She thought maybe if she could have this moment forever, it could make up for the thousands of missed kisses and lost opportunities and unfulfilled pleasure that—

His lips pressed against hers. She moaned instantly, wiggling against his front, trying to press closer through their clothes. His tongue was in her mouth again, and she lost control of her hands. They slipped down his chest, running across his ribs, sliding down and around his waist. His hands grabbed her face, holding the hair behind her ears as his hips began to thrust up into hers.

Something rolled against her just right, and she cried out into his mouth. He tried to recreate it as her hands squeezed his jumper in her fists, and her eyelids fluttered, her breath panting into his mouth as his lips passed over her. He found it a third time, and she gasped, "Draco," against his mouth, and then she was tilting sideways and dragged down by a current until her back slammed into the soft cushions of the chaise beneath her. Draco was above her, slipping between her legs so his hips could continue rolling against hers. His mouth dropped to her neck again, moving quickly, roughly, claiming her skin as his own. His hips thrust against hers, and it was so much like how she thought sex could be, how overwhelming, how it rocked her, that a high-pitched sigh left her throat.

One of his hands grabbed her knee, his fingers squeezing the bare skin of her calf and thigh, running smoothly over her. His other had a fist full of her hair, running her plait, tilting her head to the side as he sucked at her neck. She could hear her heavy breathing in the room, accompanying

shoulder, kissing the open collar, moving his lips expertly over her skin.

Was she any good at this when she'd been the one mouthing at his skin? Did it feel like this for him every time?

His face turned, and she heard a harsh exhale in her ear before his lips pulled her earlobe into his mouth—

She moaned, her thighs slipping open, sliding herself right up against his front.

He was hard again. Hermione felt music in her veins.

He tried to push her back, tried to create space between them, but it was too late. She already knew.

She tilted her head back and found him grimacing, eyes screwed shut, hands still squeezing her hips. Hermione waited. And then tentatively wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

"We're both adults here," she said. Their breath was hot, mixing between their faces. "Adjust your trousers and get on with it."

His eyes shot open, glaring at her. She looked down at his lips, and widened her thighs again, so his erection pressed against her core. He gasped, and before he could move, she rolled her hips forward like she'd seen the girls do.

Draco's head flew back, smacking into the back of the couch. "Fuck."

She dipped her lips to his exposed neck, kissing along his throat, trying to replicate what he'd done to her. Her teeth scraped against him, and his arms slid around her waist, pulling her closer. Her hands sunk into his hair. She tried rolling against him again, her tongue licking beneath his ear, and a low groan rumbled from his chest, vibrating against her, shivering her.

She tilted her lips to his ear. "Am I doing this right?" She rocked her hips forward again, and a low sigh filled her ears. He was hard and twitching against her.

She pulled back to look at his face, wondering what Draco Malfoy looked like when she was grinding her body against his, debauching him,

to the door, she threw it open to find an empty hallway — Draco already gone.

She wandered back to her own room slowly, mind reeling. She kicked off her heels and put them away in the armoire, catching sight of herself in a mirror for the first time in hours.

A girl with smoky eyes, lustrous curls, scarlet lips, and a red dress stared back at her. She'd almost forgotten what she looked like tonight.

She turned away and unzipped with shaking fingers, letting the dress pool on the floor. And as she walked to the bathroom in just Pansy Parkinson's red lingerie, she wondered if maybe Draco had forgotten who she was tonight as well.

If maybe he'd kissed the girl with the red lips and tight curls and lacy red knickers instead



CHAPTER 21

She woke up exhausted, limbs leaden, head groaning in protest. Watching the golden morning light creep up the walls, she lay in bed, grogginess fading as her mind began cataloging the last twenty-four hours.

He'd kissed her.

He'd kissed her, then ran, like he couldn't escape her fast enough.

Hermione took a shuddering breath and slapped both palms to her forehead, pressing her eyes together and banishing the images. Directing her attention to where it should be.

She'd gotten the information to Cho. The key to killing Nagini was in transit to Ginny — Ginny, who she could only pray would be able to do something of value with it. And they hadn't been caught.

Exhaling in relief, Hermione tried to celebrate her success.

— *has given me nothing but torture for months* —

She groaned and turned over under her covers, yanking the fluffy comforter up to her ears. But her mind grew only more obstinate as she burrowed deep in darkness.

The way he'd stared at her lips. The feeling of his chest against hers. His tongue sweeping sinfully through her mouth, coaxing, then demanding. His knee slipping between hers, pressed against her core, feeling his body surrounding her.

Hermione squirmed, a strained embarrassment flushing her. She rolled onto her back and ran her hand over her face.

There had been something dark in him last night. A cord pulled taut and dangerous. And instead of restraining herself, she'd tugged, tumbling

the edge of something — the same cliff that beckoned her, pulling her in.

Swallowing, heart beating loudly enough to drown out her screaming logic, she slowly arched a brow. "I don't know."

Heat coursed through her, dizzy and overpowering, pushing her forward as she slipped one leg out from underneath her and tossed it over his lap. Slowly sinking to straddle him, holding his gaze. "Prove to me that you aren't."

She noticed how dark his eyes had become, almost black to the edges. A sharp inhale, then he lifted his hands and placed them on her knees. She felt her thighs tense. He slid his palms up, running over her exposed skin, rounding her hips and holding her there.

She braced herself on the back of the chaise, and before she could prepare, he was leaning forward, stretching to connect his lips to her jaw.

Her mind went blank.

His lips parted, and kissed her skin.

Viktor had kissed her jaw before. She hadn't liked it. His shaved beard had scratched at her, and she'd pulled away, claiming to be ticklish.

But Hermione's mouth fell open now, feeling a skilled pair of lips work their way over her jaw, towards her ear. Her eyes were glazed over, and beginning to flutter closed.

She leaned forward into him, and felt him relax back against the couch, her torso gravitating towards him and her neck tilting open.

The first scrape of his teeth against her neck had her hips shifting. Her gasp was silent, but she knew he felt it because he did it again, and again, and again —

Suddenly his hands held her hips in a punishing grip, and only then did she realize she'd been rolling them against his thighs. She froze, flushing with embarrassment, but then his tongue laved against the spot his teeth had abused, and she sighed into his ear.

His hands slid up to the dip in her waist. His mouth moved to her

“What are we ‘trying?’” he grumbled, coming to sit as far from her as possible.

She pulled the table with the food and wine close to them. “I thought we’d start fresh. That chair has... history. Besides, I doubt we’ll always sit in that armchair in the Lounge. There are couches as well.”

He rolled his eyes but said nothing as she moved closer. He seemed momentarily pleased that he could eat his potatoes without reaching around her hip to do so. But that quickly vanished when she tucked her legs up onto the chaise, tilting her knees toward his thigh. He glared down at her bare legs once before continuing to chew.

Hermione watched him from the corner of her eye as he ate. His wrist was light but firm as he handled his knife. He always finished chewing one bite before starting to cut the next piece of meat. She watched his pointed jaw work, remembering the taste of him there.

She drank deeply. And stared at her empty glass until he finished.

Setting his knife and fork down, he shifted the small table away from them and stared down at his hands, waiting. She put down her wine glass and offered him his full goblet. He declined.

She took a deep breath. “We should practice you initiating things.”

He swallowed slowly. “Initiating.”

“Yes. You...kissing me instead.” He opened his mouth, and she cut him off. “Not on the mouth.” She refrained from rolling her eyes. “But other places.”

He cracked his neck. “What we do is enough, Granger.”

“No, it’s not! Flint *always* touches Penelope. Pucey is practically attached to Mortensen’s neck. And don’t get me started on Goyle.” She climbed to sit on her knees next to him, facing his profile. “None of the other men seem afraid of their Lots but you—”

“Think I’m afraid, do you?” he growled, suddenly turning to face her. She stared into his hot eyes, watching the way they flashed at her, lazily tracing her eyes and lips. Her breath hitched, finding he was hovering on

right over the edge with him when it broke.

She’d been too needy. She never should have tilted her face to his and pushed her tongue into his mouth like she needed to breathe his air. Should have ignored his thigh and how she wanted to rub herself against it.

His panic as he pulled away from her. Had she done something wrong? Perhaps her lips had been dry, or untrained. Or maybe he’d simply recovered, remembering himself, remembering her. Remembering all they’d been through.

He’d been so hesitant to touch or even look at her since the day he’d thrown her on this bed and ripped her slip open. It had taken months for them to recover, but they’d finally reached an understanding — a partnership, even.

And then all their careful control had melted away last night when she let herself become the girl in the red dress with red lips and red knickers.

A wave of heat crept over her as the memories drifted to the surface. She tried to shove it all aside — the feeling of his lips on hers, her body pinned to the wall, his groans into her mouth, continued to assault her psyche.

Would it be so bad for her to give in? If they both wanted the same thing—

Huffing loudly, Hermione rubbed her eyes, refocusing on her canopy. She couldn’t—*wouldn’t*—forget herself. Today was no different than any other day, and she had research to do. Beginning with the tattoos.

She threw the covers off herself and stood. Frowning at her unmade bed, she wondered where to start today. And then Nott Sr.’s rant last night slammed into her head like a punch.

Not even the Scourers could succeed where we have!

Her breath hitched. She rushed to the bathroom, splashing water on her face and tossing up her mangled hair.

Scrambling through her books, she pulled out the volume on magical

North America that she'd only just started. Her trembling fingers flipped to the index.

Scourers, 240, 394-395

Her heart pounded. Three pages. Only three. Hermione blew out an exasperated breath as she flipped to page 240. She could do this. Information on Horcruxes had been scarcer when she was on the run, and she'd still managed to crack them.

Timothy Smithstone was later captured and executed by the *Scourers* in Massachusetts before his request of copyright could be answered by the *Wizengamot* in Britain.

Hermione blinked down at the page. Timothy Smithstone was a blip in the radar about the creation of the Calming Draught. She quickly turned to page 394, praying she'd find something more helpful.

The Scourers were a corrupt group of vigilantes and eugenicists operating in the New World in the absence of a magical government. They deemed themselves the enforcers of magical law in the colonies, and took on the role of bounty-hunters, chasing down accused criminals and conducting their own trials and executions.

They were infamous for their systematic violence against the Native American magical community, and later the African American magical community. Indigenous and African American peoples showing signs of magical ability were either killed or captured and enslaved by the *Scourers*, who believed that European magical blood was the highest of purity and should remain untainted.

The Scourers flourished when the slave trade began in North America in 1619, moving freely in Muggle circles to acquire largely Muggle-born African American witches and wizards. They experimented with and developed spells on their victims, going to great

and finished getting ready.

Draco had differing opinions about the shorts.

"The hell are those?" he said when he entered the sitting room to find her sitting on the chaise, waiting for him with her legs crossed.

She looked down at herself. "Shorts?"

His lips curled. "And might I ask why you're wearing an over-large pair of cotton knickers to dinner?"

She lifted a brow. "Because it's warm outside. And these are easier to move in." She followed his eyes as they ran down her legs.

He glared at her, eyes flicking down to her knees before moving away.

"Wait." She quickly stood. "I'm sorry about last night. About all the nights, really—"

He opened his mouth. Then snapped it closed.

"I had no clue that you were uncomfortable," she rushed out, blood racing through her ears. "I wasn't aware of this issue."

"Granger," he said dryly, "I will walk out of this room right now if you don't stop talking."

"Please. I just..." She took a deep breath. "I know this is hard for you—" She flushed at her poor choice of words. "But if there's a signal you could give me — tugging your ear or something — then I'll stop. I only ask that you try. I won't be upset if... if it happens. Alright?"

He'd shut his eyes during her speech. If it weren't for his pink cheekbones, she'd have thought he hadn't heard her.

Then, after what felt like ages — a tip of his head.

"Good." Her lungs dragged in air again.

His eyes flew open, and he quickly moved towards his usual chair.

Swallowing, Hermione stopped him with, "I thought we'd try something different today."

Draco paused and looked back at her like she was about to unleash a Blast-Ended Skrewt on him. She sat, patting the cushion next to her on the chaise.

Did he have an erection then as well?

Hermione stared out the window, drifting her fingers across her collarbone, thinking.

No! She needed to focus. She shook her head vigorously to clear it.

She'd sat in Draco's lap, and any touching had been initiated by her. What she'd seen from the other couples in the Lounge was...far more involved. She remembered seeing Carrow Girls straddling laps, hands drifting to discreet places, and lips on girls' necks.

And since kissing on the mouth was a strict boundary of Draco's — one they had conveniently ignored last month — she would need to encourage him to put his lips...in other places.

Hermione felt her neck heat, imagining all the other places he could —

Jumping from her chair quickly, and giving her cheeks a few light slaps, she called for a house-elf to tell Draco that she would meet him in their usual spot at seven that evening. And then drew herself a chilly bath that she would *not* enjoy herself in.



She spent the better part of a half-hour braiding and unbraiding her hair into a single plait to lay over her shoulder. Approaching her armoire after finally deciding in favor of the plait, she roved her eyes through the dresses and skirts Pansy had added to her wardrobe. Hermione frowned at herself. She was *not* about to wear a dress to her practice session with Draco.

The pairs of shorts swayed on their hangers, begging her attention. Perhaps she could try something different. Her stomach flipped pleasantly at the thought of her bare skin on him, but she shoved it aside. She was wearing shorts tonight because the fabric was flexible. And if she was going to end up on the floor this evening, at least she'd have a better chance of catching herself. Hermione plucked a matching top from the wardrobe

magical lengths to secure their "property." Slaves were sterilized and often sold to magical families who had integrated into the Muggle colonies' plantation economy.

Refusing to acknowledge the severe human rights violations they inflicted on the men and women they forced into slavery, the Scourers argued that their victims were not fully human, referring to them as "acquisitions." More informally, they called their male slaves "pigeons" and their female slaves "doves."

Hermione braced herself on the bookshelf, her skin tingling all over. "Hello, little dove," Nott Sr. had said to her, tilting her chin up with the handle of his cane.

She sucked in air like it was disappearing. For weeks, she'd been looking through the catalog's results for the word "slave" and its variations. But the Scourers didn't call them slaves.

And from this bare minimum of information on these bloodthirsty mercenaries, driven by prejudice and greed, it was so easy to see where the Death Eaters might have taken their inspiration.

Hermione tugged on a pair of leggings and the first spare shirt she could find, running down to the library barefoot. The doors groaned open with her shove, and she stood at the library catalog, pulse racing.

"Show me all texts containing the phrase, 'the Scourers.' Cross-reference with 'acquisition,' 'dove' and 'pigeon.'"

The book finder glowed. And ten, twelve...fifteen green lights drifted out of the catalog, each leading to a text slowly pulling off the shelves, suspended and waiting for her.

A laugh burst out of her throat — such sweet relief spreading through her veins. She slapped a hand over her mouth and stared at the hovering books.

The closest book to her was a thin leather journal. She reached on her tiptoes to pluck it from the air, and found the name Tobias Tolbrette

THE AUCTION

inside the cover. It was from the 1600s.

Bounding to each row, up each ladder where they hovered, she pulled all the books down, examining their covers, their years. So many handwritten journals and history books that had been published hundreds of years ago. Her volume on the history of magical North America was only a decade old.

This was the key. Nott Sr. had been careless last night, and now all she had to do was follow the breadcrumb. She sat down between the stacks, surrounded by piles of books, picking up one after another and skimming as quickly as her exhausted brain would allow. It would take her weeks to read them, but for now, she couldn't help but devour the pages like a starving man at a feast.

Her eyes widened and her stomach churned when she flipped to a page halfway through Tobias Tolbrette's journal.

And each night before I take her in my chambers, I force her to stare down at my name burned into her skin. The brand of me on her shoulder, like the brand on my oxen.

The tattoos. The Scourers had also used magical skin branding. But Nott Sr. claimed to have made advances. If she could decipher what the Scourers had done with their brands, she'd be one step closer to knowing what Nott Sr. had done.

She uncurled her legs, standing to ask the catalog for a cross-reference of "brand" in the texts she already had.

The library doors creaked open.

She froze, then peered through the shelves to see Draco stepping slowly into the library. A wave of rapid emotions tumbled over her, and she moved out from behind the stacks. The room was silent as their eyes locked. His gaze flickered down to her bare feet, and she shifted self-consciously until it returned to her eyes, her open mouth.

A flash of heat seared through her at the memory of the night before.

CHAPTER 21

Hermione groaned into her pillow, chastising herself for letting her mind wander to places she couldn't follow. Because she could not. She ought not.

Has he ever thought of me while touching himself?

Something spun low in her belly, begging her to continue.

His eyes hot as fire on hers in the seconds before he kissed her.

His lips, soft and hesitant at first, and then passionate and demanding.

His knee opening her up, pressing between her legs...

Hermione turned on her back, parting her thighs. Her hand slipped down to cover herself, feeling through her knickers that she was already turned on. She groaned in embarrassment. And then bit her lip when she pushed the lace to the side.



Hermione sat ramrod straight at the breakfast table the following morning. Draco hadn't joined them, but simply being in his mother's presence made her feel awkward and guilty. She'd felt like every eye of every portrait was on her as she walked downstairs, all gossiping about the harlot who'd touched herself in the Malfoy's guest room.

She couldn't meet Narcissa's eye for the entire morning, and dreaded running into Draco in this condition.

When she got back to her room after breakfast, Hermione paced the floor and considered.

Despite this mess, they *had* to continue practicing — for a variety of reasons, none of which included Draco's erection or Hermione's still buzzing skin. She just couldn't think of what those reasons were until she sat and focused. So she did.

The Lounge wasn't just sitting on laps and watching the boys banter and drink. The Lounge was far more active — less than her first visit, of course, but still a cesspool of lust. In the few times she'd been to the Lounge, she'd sat in Draco's lap and—

Snapping open, his eyes locked on hers. Heated greys and bottomless pupils.

“Satisfied, Granger?” he hissed. His fingers dug into her hips, pulling her tight against his crotch. “That makes one of us.”

He swiftly removed her from his lap, placed her on her feet, and was out the door before Hermione could take a breath deep enough to clear her head.



She laid in bed that night, staring up at her canopy with wide eyes. It was after midnight, and her mind was still racing.

Perhaps Draco Malfoy was just very sensitive about his neck. Or he had instant erections when his neck was kissed.

Or maybe he was remembering their kiss as well. Maybe he couldn't stop imagining the girl with the red lips in the red dress—

But no. He was shoving her off his lap well before she'd ever put on those knickers.

Hermione huffed and rolled to her side. She thought of his eyes on her legs whenever they had left for Edinburgh. Even months ago, on the night he'd taken her to Hogwarts to stand before Voldemort, she'd been in a thin, short slip, and his eyes had dropped.

A warmth in her chest blossomed. Perhaps he did find her attractive, even though he claimed he'd “forgotten himself” that night. Something deep inside her, hidden away for years, preened. Like a flower feeling sunlight again after a frozen winter.

Her mind drifted to the way he'd looked at her when she was only in those red knickers and red bra, seemingly about to engage in lewd acts with another girl. She hadn't been able to meet his eyes, but she wondered now if he'd even spared Cho a glance.

The way his knuckles had brushed against her ribs as he helped her zip her dress.

His lips and his chest and his thigh.

She could tell him about what she'd just learned. They could go through the books together, and when she finally asked him about last night, he might silence her with a kiss—

“I'd like to apologize for last night.” He slipped his hands into his pockets, and her breath left her. She squeezed the book closer to her chest, pressing indents into her fingertips. “I quite forgot myself. I lost control, and it won't happen again.”

She blinked at him. He was stoic, with cold eyes and clipped sentences. With finality. Her heartbeat quickened as the words sunk into her skin, chilling her blood.

He regretted kissing her. Of course he did. Hermione swallowed, suddenly awash with guilt and shame. Not an hour ago, she'd thought it was a memory she could hold and return to whenever she wanted.

It won't happen again.

She really was a stupid girl.

Focusing on the numbness in her fingertips, she nodded, blinking at him. “I see.”

A pause before he moved into the room, inching closer. Like a coiled spring begging to go the other direction. Looking over her texts on the floor, he pressed his lips together before glancing up.

“It was completely inappropriate of me.” He cleared his throat. “I'd understand if you'd like to discontinue our practice sessions.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes, anger suddenly constricting her chest.

“That won't be necessary.” She turned back to the bookshelf, plucking out a volume at random and flipping through its pages. “We absolutely need to keep practicing. I'd say we're nowhere near as comfortable as we should be.”

An uneasy shuffling behind her. Before he could speak, she silenced him with a snap of the book's spine.

“There's no need to fuss. I don't intend to draw suspicion on myself

over a stupid mistake caused by one too many glasses of wine.”

She spun on her heel and walked out of his sight, back to her piles of books. Nothing had changed between them. He’d made a mistake, and so had she. Now that they’d both acknowledged it, they could continue as they were.

A sound of careful footsteps up to the landing as she methodically collected her books into her arms. She whipped her head over her shoulder to glare at him.

Draco stood hovering near a shelf, watching her silently. A flicker in his expression before his throat bobbed. “Are you sure that’s wise? To continue practicing?” he finally asked.

She stood straight and lifted a brow at him. “Why not? We both agreed that it was a mistake and that it won’t happen again. Pretty straightforward, really.”

He blinked at her, his left eye twitching.

“Let me know when you’re ready to pick back up again, Malfoy.” She pushed around him, carrying her books with her back upstairs.

She managed to make it behind the locked door of her bathroom before she began crying, running the tap to drown out her sobs.



The rest of her day was consumed by Occlumency. She tried advanced techniques, finding ways to softly tear pages out of her mental books and let them gather and bind into a new text, tucking it away on a back shelf in the Restricted Section of her mental library.

She severed pages: his darkened eyes, warm lips, and gifted tongue. A firm thigh between her legs, long fingers gripping her wrists — all sealed and tucked away.

Added to the new restricted book were the images of her red lips, tight curls, and lacy knickers. She didn’t want to think about the costume that had made him forget who they both were.

with a belabored huff. “Just a few more minutes, and we’ll call it a night, alright? Just think of — of something else.”

His nostrils flared — but then he blinked, and the eyes that opened back at her were a cool grey. He jerked a nod.

Grumbling, she moved closer, and he steadied her on his lap, holding her still while he sat stiffly. Slowly, gently, she let her fingers trail over his collar as she kissed at his neck. Tracing a path through the opened top of his collar, she paused at his ear before cautiously running her teeth over his earlobe.

He hissed and tried to push her back again. And her blood erupted in anger.

“Stop acting like I repulse you—”

“You bloody witch—”

“—so stiff and *uncomfortable*, it’s a miracle the entire room hasn’t noticed! And if you keep pushing me, I’m going to fall off!”

She shifted onto his lap, pulling herself tight to his body, sitting sideways across his groin. And she felt it at the same time Draco groaned.

He had an erection.

Hermione’s eyes popped wide, her face still buried in his neck. His fingers were digging into her hips, holding her very still.

Her heart started racing, and the heat in her body boiled. Her fingers were squeezing his shoulders before she could stop them. She begged herself to use her brain.

He was experiencing attraction of a...sexual nature. But she didn’t have on Pansy’s red dress or knickers. She was bare-faced and wild-haired, in just a jumper and denims.

And suddenly she remembered every other time he’d pushed her off his lap — even the first time she’d kissed his neck — *weeks ago*.

Mouth open, she pulled back to look at his face.

His eyes were pressed closed, lips tight, breathing quickly through his nose. The blush on his neck had spread to his cheeks.

blinked up at him, stunned. “This idea is beyond stupid,” he hissed.

“How is it any stupider than Cho?” she snarled, her anger flaring.

“Theo is *gay*, which you refuse to let sink into that stubborn head of yours—”

“Then let me get alone with him and be the judge! I fail to understand why you care so much!”

She spun on her heel and stormed out of the room, relishing how good it felt to be the first one to leave for once.



Hermione was in a foul mood into the next day. She considered slipping back into Pansy’s costume for that evening’s practice session, just to prove a point — *Remember the girl in the red dress?* — but she refrained.

She met him down in the sitting room at seven o’clock, determined to set aside her simmering rage and embarrassment at the conversation the previous evening. Letting him finish his dinner in relative silence except for a few questions about Italy, she sat and drank her wine as he spoke.

When he was halfway through his meal, she leaned close to his body again, tucking herself into his side. Her lips moved to his jaw, and she trailed light kisses down to his shoulder as he swallowed his wine. Her hand reached for his opposite shoulder, fingers gripping the fabric of his shirt.

His throat bobbed.

One of her hands ran through the hair at the base of his neck, and she kissed just under his ear, letting her tongue gently glide along the skin.

His fork clattered to the plate, and then his hands were on her hips, pushing her away.

“That’s enough, Granger—”

She scowled at him as she wobbled, bracing herself on his knees. “That was barely anything, Malfoy.”

He glowered back, jaw tense. She finally broke their glaring contest

There was an invitation to dinner at some point, a woman’s voice spoken softly through the door. By the time she noticed the cold plate on her coffee table, six hours had passed, and the sky was black outside her window. Even the moonlight was too bright for the pressure behind her eyes, so she drank her Sleeping Draughts and fell asleep before she’d fully slipped between the covers.

Hermione woke up early on Sunday and spent the extra time meditating and Occluding. There was research to do, and she couldn’t lose another day on silly distractions.

She ran into him twice that day, staring sullen and blank-faced at her in the halls on her way to the conservatory, and then again when she was just leaving her solitary dinner.

By noon on Monday, she was almost done with her first book. She read the *Prophet* over lunch, catching a small article on Page 3 about rioting in Italy. And not an hour later, Mippy appeared with trembling eyes and her afternoon coffee, telling her that Draco had been called away.

Narcissa came to her two days later, gently inquiring about her well-being and pressing a letter into her hands that updated the “household” on the situation in Italy. Hermione cross-referenced the little information in Draco’s note with what Skeeter had been printing, and deduced that he’d been sent to control unrest fueled by the disappearances of Antonio Bravier’s former council members. He wouldn’t be able to write again while he was away, but he claimed to be safe and begged his mother not to worry.

Once she was finished with it, Hermione crumpled his note in her palm. There was nothing worth saving in those words, and she already felt foolish holding onto a few scraps of paper from before. She crossed the room to the jewelry box on her bedside table and reached for the other notes from him, ready to toss them all into the flames — but something paused her. She smoothed and tucked the latest letter in the jewelry box, and then stared out her window for the next hour, watching the horizon.



The weeks dragged on in Draco's absence, and Hermione threw herself into her research. The journals pulled by the catalog seemed critical, but she'd mostly found fragments and riddles. Some spells were clearly relevant — a "lightning barrier," for example — but its directions listed strange ingredients and symbols that were clearly in code.

It would be so much easier if she had a hint or two. Someone to point her in one direction or another. In the evenings, as she applied the cream Pansy had forced on her, she would consider Theo Nott, wondering how she could glean information from him about his father's work on the tattoos.

As August stretched to a close, Hermione began seeing Narcissa for daily meals again. Narcissa seemed to intuit that something had happened, because she never mentioned Draco by name. Hermione was grateful for it, and for her company. They were welcome breaks from her research and Occlumency.

One morning, they were having breakfast together when Hermione looked down at the *Daily Prophet* and found a picture of the Hogwarts Express. The date on the paper read *or September*. She gasped, her fork clattering on the china.

Narcissa looked up from her plate with wide eyes, caught mid-bite.

"Hogwarts reopened?"

A shadow flitted over Narcissa's face. She finished chewing and gave a single nod. "For pure-bloods, yes."

Hermione's eyes sped through the article, snatching on words like *Headmistress Dolores Umbridge*, *Dark Magic*, and *Introduction to Interrogation*. Her stomach turned in disgust.

"This is hardly an *education*. They're training child soldiers!"

"Things have changed... significantly, Hermione." Narcissa set down her cutlery and closed her eyes, exhaling. "Parents had the option to

Maybe wear something he'd find appealing. Nothing serious, of course. You could break it up like we did with Cho."

Draco's barking laugh jostled her. She stared at him wide-eyed, feeling mortification creep up her neck as his chest rumbled.

"What's so funny?" she demanded.

"As much as I would love to see you try, Granger," he said, still smirking, "your charms won't work on him."

"And why not?" The tips of her ears were burning. "I wore a tight red dress last time, and my 'charms' seemed to work on *someone* we both know."

His smile immediately died. His ribs were stiff and unmoving against hers.

She scoffed and turned her face away, grabbing her wine glass.

"Granger, you're not his type," Draco said softly, still a bit of amusement in his voice.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Yes, I know you think he's gay. But clearly, your eyesight is failing you, because he was *very* intimate with his Carrow Girl last time. It's called being *bisexual*, Malfoy. Surely you must have heard of it?"

His eyes snapped to hers, and his scowl deepened. "Regardless, the answer is still no."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "And why not?"

"Because he'd see right through you. It would never work."

"I disagree. Theo's desperate to prove himself. He loves attention and praise. I think it would be easy if he was drunk enough—"

"I said no." Draco's eyes and mouth were hard. "Everyone would want to know why I'm suddenly Sharing you. It would open the floodgates."

The breath left Hermione's lungs. He had her there.

"That is a problem. But I still think we could find a way."

"What part about 'no' don't you understand, Granger?" And then she was pushed from his lap, and they both were standing upright as she

His mouth moved wordlessly before she rushed ahead of him, practically bolting up the staircase. She didn't turn around, but she could feel him glowering at her back the whole way.



The small sitting room in the eastern wing had a variety of chairs and couches. The elves had conjured a small table at Hermione's request so they could simulate a dinner at Edinburgh as closely as possible.

On Monday evening, he sat in their usual chair and picked at his dinner while she grilled him on Italy. He'd spent the entire time in Rome, protecting the new minister.

"Like a bodyguard?" she asked.

"I guess you could say that." He cut into his steak, one arm around her waist. "More of a babysitter, really. Making sure Romano is following the instructions the Dark Lord set for him."

"What kind of instructions," she said, tearing her eyes away from the way his lips closed around his fork.

"Magical education reform. A Muggle-born registration."

She nodded, having expected both. She waited for him to be almost done with his dinner before she said, "I need a favor."

His jaw froze, mid-chew. He lifted a brow and shook his head at his plate with a frustrated sigh. "Go right ahead, Granger."

"I need your help getting time alone with Theo."

He dropped his utensils, turning to look at her. "Why?"

"His father designed the tattoos, didn't he?"

He glanced quickly down to his initials on her arm. "Yes—"

"Maybe he helped his father. Or maybe he knows something—"

"And how in Merlin's name are you going to find out? Ask him nicely?"

"Not exactly." Hermione cleared her throat, suddenly feeling hot all over. "I thought I might be able to flatter him a bit — cozy up to him."

educate their children at home, but all will be tested on the new curriculum at the end of the school year."

Hermione's veins tingled with dread as she stared down at the Hogwarts Express, thinking of how majestic it used to seem to her. Full of promise and possibility. She'd met Ron and Harry for the first time on that train.

She'd met Draco on that train...though she couldn't be sure he remembered. He'd been quite rude to her when she asked about Neville's toad.

She blinked and shook her head, refocusing. It was September the first, and the Hogwarts Express was taking children back to school. The world had continued spinning, although darker than before.

"Is the Dark Lord still at the castle?"

Narcissa nodded slowly. "There are far fewer students arriving, so they're confining them to the towers and upper floors."

So any attack on Hogwarts would endanger the children inside. Hermione sighed, rubbing her brow. It must be a waking nightmare for returning students. How many of the old staff and teachers were dead? She worried for the poor house-elves in the kitchens, too, but they at least were unlikely to be killed. Servants were still necessary for the school to operate.

A memory sparked in her. Kreacher.

Hermione's eyes slid to Narcissa as she took delicate bites from her toast. Grimmauld Place had been a property of the Black family before it had passed to Harry.

"Narcissa, I hope you don't mind me asking..." Hermione cleared her throat. "But I wondered if you knew anything about the house-elf, Kreacher?"

Narcissa blinked, caught off guard. Then her lips pulled into a tight smile. "I seem to remember that he's a grumpy little thing. My sister used to chase him around when we would visit our cousins." She set her teacup down without a sound, and said, "Why? Has he been bothering you?"

"No. But I did see him last week." She fiddled with the napkin in her lap. "And I was just curious who his master is?"

Narcissa nodded. "Grimmauld Place is now in Draco's name," she said simply. "Once the dust settled at Hogwarts, I went to Gringotts and filed the paperwork. The property fell to the Black family, but as my eldest sister has no heirs, the estate passed to Draco, the only male heir in the Black line."

Hermione's mind spun on its axis. Grimmauld Place belonged to Draco. *Kreacher* belonged to Draco. Pansy must be hiding at Grimmauld Place. Her breath hitched — but still, something tugged at Hermione's mind.

Harry. Grimmauld Place had been *his*.

"And...and the goblins at Gringotts.." she stammered, searching for the right words. "How did they decide to strip Harry of the property?"

Narcissa tilted her head, brows knitting in confusion. "When Potter died without a will, the property was left ownerless. The goblins have magic tracking these things."

Hermione's face felt tight. Her skin was buzzing — she could hear it in her ears. If she hadn't already been sitting, she would have needed a chair.

The goblins at Gringotts — the most by-the-book species in the magical world — had approved paperwork declaring that the previous owner of Grimmauld Place was dead.

A hand touched her wrist.

"Hermione, are you alright? You're as pale as a sheet."

Narcissa's voice seemed far away.

Hermione focused on her breathing, pulling air deeply. She thought of a lake with still waters until her heartbeat returned to normal, and her breathing regulated.

When she opened her eyes, Narcissa had pulled Hermione's chair out and was kneeling in front of her. A cool hand was on her face, the other

ache.

Her gaze slid back up, preparing to close the book that cataloged the softness of his eyes and the way his shirt hugged his torso. He might have been doing the same.

"I promise to keep you informed." She moved closer to the stairs. "I promise to do everything in my power to not get you or your mother killed. Or your father, if I must." She chanced a half-smile.

A muscle twitched in his jaw. "And what about getting yourself killed?"

"Yes, yes, protecting your investment and all that." She blew out a quick breath. "I promise to try to avoid that, too. I'm not a big fan of the idea myself."

"Then I expect you to act like it." He dropped down the first stair to meet her. "And I expect you to keep your word."

She nodded. And when her stomach flipped at his gaze, she broke away, stepping backward.

"Practice tomorrow, then?" she asked.

He made an impatient sound at the back of his throat. "I really don't think—"

"And I really do. Edinburgh is five nights away, and we can barely stand to be in the same room as each other because—" Her cheeks burned, and she looked at her shoes. "Because you've been away so long."

Silence. And then: "You're a horrible liar, Granger."

"Fine," she fumed. "Because we kissed. Because we both had a terrible lapse in judgment and we kissed. But I'm trusting that we can both just buck up and behave like adults about this."

He lifted a brow at her. "Adults?"

"Yes." She huffed and curled her fingers into fists. "Just because we had a 'moment' doesn't mean we should throw away all our hard work."

His lips pressed together. "If you really think..."

"Wonderful. I'll see you at seven tomorrow."

THE AUCTION

to move around there. I need to—" She swallowed. "...to play the game a bit better." She thought of Cho and Charlotte. Of Pansy's insistence that she wasn't just another prize to bid on, but *the* prize. She tilted her chin up. "My place shouldn't be in the background."

His eyes jerked up from her clavicles. "So what does that make me? Your little pet who runs around cleaning up your messes?"

"Don't be impossible," she snapped. "Clearly *I'm* the pet in this situation, and both of our lives depend on people thinking that."

He said nothing, glaring at her.

She sighed and slowly uncrossed her arms. "Listen, Malfoy. You knew who I was when you bought me." His throat bobbed. "The fact that I want to help the Order shouldn't surprise you."

His gaze tumbled over her neck and shoulders again, before sliding back up her eyes.

"You know who I am just as well," he said, and a hint of that old Hogwarts arrogance slipped over him like a cloak. "It shouldn't surprise you if I stand in your path. We have opposing interests, after all."

She blinked at him. A slight sneer on his face, as if he'd slithered back into the persona he tried to wear for so many years. It looked strange on him now.

"I'd like to think I know who you are." Her voice was soft, drifting over to him like a breeze across a field. Even at Hogwarts, she'd thought she knew — thought she'd seen a piece of him he tried to keep buried. "I'd like to think...that our interests aren't as opposing as you'd let me believe. Why else would you help me with Cho?"

She watched the slow movement of his ribs, watched his eyes skate over her face. He didn't deny it. He just stared back at her, his fingers paling as they gripped the marble banister.

She thought she could maybe survive the absence of his affections if he continued to help her and speak openly with her about the war. She thought that maybe, if she could have that from him... it could ease the

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squeezing her hand. Mippy hovered in the doorway, twirling her ear anxiously.

"I'm very sorry, dear. I didn't realize that this would be a shock to you." Hermione shook her head, feeling her body sway slightly in her chair. "It's not. I just..." She swallowed and looked into Narcissa's warm blue eyes. "I had hope."

The pity in Narcissa's gaze was almost too much to bear. Narcissa took her hands and brought them to her lips, kissing her knuckles.

"I was the one to check the body, Hermione," she said softly. Hermione felt a tear plummet from her eyes to their joined hands. "He wasn't breathing. There was no heartbeat." Narcissa slowly freed a hand to brush a curl behind Hermione's ear. "He walked into that forest bravely, and died just the same."

Her throat choked back a sob as she nodded. She squeezed Narcissa's hands in thanks, and then used her napkin to dry her eyes.

Narcissa understood when she excused herself to her room. Hermione buried herself in research and Occlumency that day, trying to forget that she'd met Harry exactly seven years ago on a magical train that took them to a magical school where she'd finally found belonging.



Draco still wasn't back that Friday. But he had appeared in a picture in the paper that day, standing stoically behind the new Italian puppet minister as he gave a speech. Hermione's heart had skipped a beat, taking in the sharpness in his jaw, the bags beneath his eyes. But even as she'd blinked away, she kept seeing grey eyes instead of a lake with still waters.

One morning, Hermione stepped out of her bath, wrapped a towel tightly around herself, and moved to her *armoire*. She opened it and gasped.

An unfamiliar assortment of colors. Patterns. Silks. A quick pull to her drawer found that all her comfortable underthings had been replaced

with mere scraps of fabric. A small folded note lay on top, and she snatched it up.

McGonagall requested her knickers back. There are some new additions I think you'll enjoy.

— P.

Hermione flushed. Pansy was trying to kill her. She scrounged through her drawers to find any trace of pale cotton, but she'd replaced them all. Running a hand down her face, Hermione huffed loudly, and chose a pale pink pair.

There were still denims in the other drawer — *thankfully* — but her jaw dropped when she also found shorts. Hanging up in the closet were skirts shorter than her Hogwarts uniform, low-cut blouses, and a few dresses.

Hermione scowled. Perhaps she could send Pansy a doll for Christmas. It would be the same principle.

She slid on her denims after staring too long at a pale blue dress, and chose a new grey t-shirt that seemed innocuous enough — until she realized the neck dipped lower than she'd expected.

Rolling her eyes, Hermione stomped to her bathroom and began drying her hair. She spent the whole day in the library, yanking up her t-shirt, though no one was looking.



Draco returned on Sunday evening. Hermione had allowed herself a long walk in the late summer air to organize her thoughts. She was just coming in from the outdoors when the Floo burst to life. She yelped, jumping as the fire roared, and a figure stepped through it.

She stood frozen as he parted down his robes and ran a hand through his blond hair. Then his head turned.

“Granger.” His hand dropped away. His fingers twitched. She blinked back at him. “Malfoy.”

He took a step towards her, his eyes running over her quickly, landing on the breezy knee-length skirt she was wearing.

“What’s that?”

She looked down at herself, fingers brushing the fabric. “A skirt.”

“Where did you get it?”

She arched a brow at him. “Pansy replaced my wardrobe. Against my will.”

His eyes popped. “All of it?”

“Just about.” Irritation pricked her skin as she watched him frown down at her. “Are you a purveyor of women’s fashion, Draco? Should I run my wardrobe choices by you?”

His eyes snapped to hers before looking away, a blush rising to his cheekbones.

“Not at all. I was just..” He waved his hand. “Caught off guard.” He looked around the entrance hall, searching for an escape. “I’m going to find Mother.”

“You’ll fill me in on Italy tomorrow, yes?” she called after him. He stopped on the first stair.

“I’ll find you after breakfast,” he said, still not facing her.

“I meant during our practice session.”

An expansion of his ribs, then a slow turn back to her, as if meeting the executioner. “Granger, you can’t be serious about continuing—”

“Absolutely I am.” She waited for his reply, folding her arms. His eyes dropped to her skirt once.

“Look,” she said tightly. “I know going to Italy wasn’t your choice, but I’ve been locked away for *months*. I know you think I’m a stupid Gryffindor with a hero complex—”

“Granger—”

“Please, let me finish.”

His gaze flickered, and he closed his mouth.

“What I mean to say is that I need to be at Edinburgh. I need to be able