

different Carrow Girl waiting quietly to pour the wine. Her eyes scanned, but still not a trace of the strawberry-blonde. The disappointment in her stomach twisted more heavily.

"Be still my heart," a voice called out as the door shut behind them, and Hermione turned to find Marcus Flint with bowing dramatically at her. "My lady approaches."

She cast her eyes down, ready to play her part.

"Not your lady," Draco snapped, part warning, part playful edge to his voice.

"Oh, Love," Flint crooned, "did Draco whomp you good and proper after last week? Never one to share, our boy. Why don't you bend over my lap so I can kiss it better?"

The boys laughed as Draco took his seat, his jaw barely tensing before it loosened in a grin. More greetings and conversation as she assumed her position in front of the window. She took an inventory of the girls around the table, starting at her right: several Carrow Girls who usually rotated around Higgs, Derrick, and Warrington; Susan behind Goyle; and Penelope behind Flint. But Mortensen was absent from her place behind Pucey's chair, replaced with a Carrow Girl.

She cataloged the information and moved on before losing her breath at the sight of the Italian Minister's niece standing behind Zabini's chair. Giuliana Braveri looked so small. Her eyes staring down at her shoes, her wrists thin and crossed submissively in front of her stomach. Hermione's heart ached, bile rising in her throat at the reminder of what she'd been through, followed by sharp anger. So much for her "not appearing anytime soon." But then, perhaps Draco hadn't known she would be here tonight.

Ten girls stepped forward, pouring wine into crystal glasses, and before she could return to the wall, Draco's arm was around her waist, guiding her to his lap. Other than Zabini lifting a theatrical brow at them, no one else said a word about it. Hermione was quite pleased with their

what your father was researching in my library." Theo opened his mouth. "And don't feed me any bollocks about the Apparition Line," Draco continued, cutting over him. "I saw him lurking in the other sections."

A stillness swept over the table. Theo's face flushed at being put on the spot, and clearly not in a way he enjoyed.

"I'll take that bet," Flint said with a glint in his eye. "Especially since Theodore is panicking."

The table chuckled. The strawberry-blonde cooed into Theo's ear and rubbed his shoulders as he scowled. Hermione felt her pulse spike, feeding off the intrigue, and she quickly looked down at the table to hide her eagerness.

Theo scowled, drumming his fingers on the table. "Well, I'm only in if Draco tells us where Daddy Malfoy has been."

Draco's ribs expanded against hers, and she saw the corner of his mouth lift. He made quite a show of looking down at his cards, weighing the options.

"What do you think, Granger?" he lilted. "Think my cards are good enough?"

She blinked at his hand, not sure how to answer, but knowing it didn't matter — he was only buying time. She thought of the other girls' hands trailing through the boys' hair or sliding down collar bones — the ways in which it was typical to flirt and touch and tease.

Hermione plucked a card from the middle of Draco's hand and replaced it on the end. She leaned closer, and loudly whispered, "I think Theo's about to spill all his secrets."

The boys burst into laughter — more raucous than the quip warranted. It wasn't terribly witty, but perhaps they were amused that it was said by *her*. That she was playing their game.

"*Now* the game can start!" Flint yelled over the din. "I wondered when you'd show up, Granger!"

"About time. Not nearly as *cozy* as they were last week —"

“Finally warming up over there—”

“—back to that swotty posture again, probably aching for a shag with Malfoy gone the last week—”

Hermione let the words wash over her, straining a tight-lipped smile down at Draco’s cards. Pansy had been doing something different. Something *cozier*. And they’d noticed the difference.

She tried to relax back into Draco’s arm and shoulder, tilting her body towards him. He was still as stone again, no help at all. Fighting back her irritation, she wiggled closer, trying to get as cozy as Pansy might have been — only to be stopped by his hand squeezing her leg in warning. As they tossed cards back and forth, she allowed the arm resting on the back of his chair to drape across his shoulders.

She tried not to feel stung, knowing he hadn’t been this cold with Pansy last week. Perhaps she simply needed to try harder. Let him know that she was comfortable.

Theo won his hand, allowed to keep his secrets for a bit longer. Draco spread his cards on the table, and Hermione inferred that he had won as well.

She felt her heart pounding in her chest as she decided to try something else — celebrating his win. Pressing her forehead to his temple, and painting on a coy smile, Hermione tilted her face up, reaching for his mouth with hers.

The barest brush of her bottom lip across the corner of his mouth— And Draco jerked his face back, the smallest movement of his neck, like he’d dodged the swing of a sword.

She froze, feeling his entire body seize up, his ribs no longer moving against hers.

Embarrassment flooded her chest and neck, working its way to her cheeks. She’d tried to kiss him, and he’d rejected her. She didn’t dare look at him, staring at her lap as her face burned. He continued shuffling his new hand as if nothing had happened.

itely with guilt and embarrassment in every place that had just been in contact with Draco’s body.

“Very well, then. Enjoy the rest of your dinner.” Narcissa glided out of the room with a cheeky wink.

Hermione dropped her head into her hands as soon as she turned the corner. “Oh god,” she groaned.

Draco shifted on his feet before excusing himself with an unintelligible mumble, leaving her alone in the dining room with only her burning skin and guilty conscience.



On Friday, they followed the now-familiar path to the courtyard, though she fell in step with him easily this time. She refrained from playing with her collar as best she could, but she felt the note burning her skin. She’d debated about it all day Thursday, but still didn’t feel like she should tell Draco about the note yet. She could only pray that she’d have another opportunity moment alone with the strawberry-blonde.

When Charlotte greeted them with champagne, Hermione studied her carefully. But the brunette simply smiled and toasted them as they passed, her eyes quickly flitting away. Hermione tried to keep eye contact, tried to communicate with her, but the curtain closed on them while she turned to greet another guest.

She found Cho hanging off of Mulciber’s arm across the Great Hall, smiling as his hand drifted lower on her back. But Hermione’s interest was elsewhere, her eyes wide and alert for any sign of the strawberry-blonde. Before she could get a decent look around the room, Draco was leading her up the twisting steps, passing Harper’s check, and through the doors to the dining room. Hermione swallowed her disappointment, wondering if she’d made a mistake by not telling him.

The first thing she noticed was Blaise Zabini laughing jovially at something Nott had said. Her eyes darted behind Nott’s chair and found a

forward, letting his volumes flutter open to vibrant colors and patterns.

It was dangerous, she knew, given her history of feelings for him — but she couldn't see a way around the need to build trust. A solid connection with him, if not a friendship. She ignored the niggling voice in her head that told her she didn't *want* to find another way.

On Wednesday, she picked off his plate while sitting against his chest. He fought her for the last of his potatoes, his fork jabbing at her fingers when she reached for them. Her pulse thrummed as she smiled and tried to offer him the potato, pressing it to his lips. He rolled his eyes and turned his face away.

That's how Narcissa Malfoy found the two of them — with Hermione in her son's lap, his arm wrapped around her waist, and her trying to feed him as he dramatically twisted his head from side to side.

"Oh," Narcissa said.

Hermione gasped, tumbling out of Draco's lap. Draco jumped up, knocking over his wine glass.

"We weren't—"

"This isn't what it looks—"

"It's only that—"

"Couldn't have *knocked*, Mother?"

"My," Narcissa hummed, and Hermione felt her face turn beet red at the barely concealed grin spreading across her features. "Don't let me interrupt."

"You're not interrupting anything," Draco said quickly, almost shouting the words. He started to push in his chair, shoving it roughly after it skidded noisily on the floor.

"No, no." Narcissa waved her hands. "Please finish your meal. I insist." And with a sparkle in her eye, she said, "Is there anything I can bring you? More wine? Perhaps the elves can bring dessert?"

"Mother," Draco hissed in warning.

Hermione stared at her shoes, pulse pounding in her ears. Her skin felt

Soon enough, her embarrassment gave way to a boiling fury. He was going to jeopardize them. He couldn't accept a kiss from his Lot? What did that say?

Had anyone seen?

The sound in the room returned to her slowly as she lifted her head. The boys were chatting and passing cards. No eyes were on them, but there was something malicious about the way Marcus Flint grinned at the table, his fancy teeth cutting into his lip.

She felt Draco's ribs moving again, and heard him swallow. Hermione stiffened at the reminder that he was there.

They needed to talk. They needed a discussion about what their behavior was to consist of. He'd snarled at her last week, condescended at her ability to play-act, and then proceeded to sabotage her once she'd actually tried to play the game. She breathed deep, reminding herself that she couldn't show how she felt with so many watchful eyes in the room.

"Your roll, Malfoy."

Higgs slid the dice over to Draco, and she felt his arm extend to reach for them.

"You gonna let her wish you luck?" Pucey teased.

She'd seen almost every girl blow on the dice before they were thrown. A flirty smile and pursed lips before their heads bowed. And while she wished for nothing more than the freedom to refuse another opportunity to be humiliated, she knew she had to put on a show.

Draco held the dice in front of her. She laid delicate fingers on his wrist, holding him in place, and looked up to his eyes as she blew cool air across his fingertips.

He swallowed. And his eyes flashed.

A chuckle from across the table. "We all know how much Granger loves to 'blow.'"

She blinked, the spell broken the moment the words registered. She released his wrist, and he turned away as the cackling of hyenas ricocheted

off the walls.

*“Too bad, she really does need that potion to loosen up—”*

Pansy had performed oral sex while in her body.

*“I’d give you an ‘E,’ Granger. Maybe an ‘O,’ but you’d have to let me judge firsthand—”*

It had been her mouth, her tongue.

Her throat was dry as Draco brushed them off with a forced smile and tossed the dice. She sat ramrod straight in his lap while the round was played, pushing away the images until her heart stopped pounding in her ears and her breathing steadied.

Hermione had never... she didn’t know how. She could only assume that Pansy Parkinson knew what she was doing, but hopefully she didn’t make Hermione out to be some kind of *expert*.

She shook off these questions. Draco had told her that things would be much calmer — that he and Pansy had played their parts convincingly. She had to focus on the game and the secrets. She could deal with him later.

But a stray thought snuck through as the boys threw in their Galleons. What did Draco see when he looked at her now? Did he picture her on her knees, unbuckling him? His eyes had been on her mouth last Friday night, after Pansy left through the Floo. Was he remembering it?

A hand pressed lightly between her shoulder blades. Her skin jumped, and she realized she was tense as a board and angrily staring off into space. She breathed deep, pushing away these worrisome thoughts and refocusing. The boys were just offering their secrets as she relaxed back into Draco’s hand.

“I have something that has potential — now that we’re in the final round,” Flint said with a smirk. His eyes locked on hers as he said, “I happen to know the fate of one Ronald Weasley.”

A cold wave of dread crashed through her. And she knew she hadn’t been able to temper her expression. Flint’s eyes gleamed. She felt the hand

She frowned, knowing she had nothing but pure speculation.

Not wanting to push him too much after the previous evening, she refrained from asking more questions. She sat quietly in his lap as he finished his wine and ate his meal, her mind sorting through all she’d learned.

She was disappointed by how much he didn’t know — how much *she* still didn’t know — but at least it was a start. She didn’t have the sense that he’d lied or withheld information from her. More importantly, they seemed to be making progress on an interpersonal level. Despite the evening’s rocky start, they hadn’t fought, which was a significant improvement.

The next night, she ate early and finished her wine quickly, giving her the courage she needed to push their boundaries a bit farther. She spent the meal curled into his side, running her fingers through his hair as he poked at his vegetables. She noticed that he held her eye longer than usual, and she tried her best to ignore the fluttering in her chest each time it happened.

“What about the Lounge,” she asked.

She felt him breathe before saying, “What about it?”

“I’ve only been once.” She took a deep sip from her wine glass. “You said the atmosphere is calmer—?”

“This is fine,” he cut her off. “What we’re doing here”—his hand gestured between them—“will be fine for Friday.”

She lifted a brow, but kept her reservations to herself. They’d cross that bridge later, but for now, she didn’t want to upset their progress. It was still too fragile.

As the week progressed, Draco began to distract her thoughts even more than usual. She had to increase the amount of time she spent Occluding in the morning so she could stay on task the rest of the day while she scoured the Prophet and continued researching.

But at night, when it was just the two of them, she pulled his shelf

assurance that she'd be less reactive this time. At 812, she finally heard footsteps dragging across the stones. When she turned to lift a brow at him, he looked very much like a child that had been dragged with his parent to the office for the day — scowling with bored eyes, resigned to having a terrible time.

"Good evening," she tilted sarcastically.

He shuffled to his place at the table without a word. Once he was seated, she stood, poured his wine, and sat determinedly in his lap, as if daring him to object. His expression didn't change as she tugged her plate of food closer, sipped her wine, or munched on the finger food that Remmy had sent as their first course.

"I have another question," she said primly, breaking the silence. He didn't respond, ignoring her gaze boring into him as he drank deeply from his wine. "Where is your father?"

That earned her a scowl, and he plunked his glass back on the table.

"You know I can't tell you that."

"You were about to gamble that information away on Friday."

"I knew I was going to win."

"You tied. That was hardly winning." She felt his ribs expand against hers with a deep breath. "You were only going to name the country," she continued, in a gentler tone. "You can't even give me that?"

The expression that flashed through his eyes momentarily stunned her. A softness that told her maybe she could ask anything of him. She blinked at him over her wine glass, and it was gone.

Perhaps she'd imagined it.

"Romania." His long fingers toyed with the white tablecloth. "That's all I know."

"Romania," she repeated, willing her heartbeat to calm. "He's gone indefinitely?"

Draco nodded. "He can make emergency Floo calls, but he's not to be disturbed unless strictly necessary."

on her back tense as well.

"And how would you know that?" Theo sneered. "No one's heard of him for months."

Flint shrugged, still smirking. "My potion is no longer available at Edinburgh. I have to make house calls these days. You wouldn't *believe* the things I've learned in exchange for a small discount."

Hermione's heart thrummed. It sounded like Ron was alive. And Flint knew where he was being kept.

"But it is a *huge* secret, you know," Flint said with a pout. "I feel like we should up the ante if I'm going to reveal this."

Flint looked directly at Draco. Draco responded in a level voice, "I can reveal no more than the country my father is in, I'm afraid."

"I don't care to know that. Truly." Flint shrugged, his eyes falling on Hermione again. She had the sinking sensation that he was playing with them, like a cat batting a mouse. "But I will wager that secret against a kiss from the Golden Girl."

Hermione held her breath. She heard Draco's jaw click, and the weight in her stomach dropped. He would decline. And then she would have no idea what had happened to Ron.

Her lips parted before Draco could take a breath. "One measly kiss?" She lifted a brow imitating the boy beneath her and said, "That's an easy bet to take. Hardly fair for you, though."

Flint winked at her. "You sell yourself short, Granger. Perhaps that's just how madly I desire you."

Draco tensed, about to jump in, about to end this.

"How could my master refuse?" she quickly replied. "It costs him nothing if he loses."

The hand on her back lifted, and she heard the arm of the chair creak under the strain of a hand squeezing it.

The boys were silent, watching the unspoken tennis match between the two heads of the table. But the match was won, and Draco knew it.

She could feel the anger radiating off of him even as he said, “Of course. An excellent wager.”

All eyes turned to the cards as Draco and Flint played, pulling new hands and rolling the dice. She judged Draco’s success off of Theo, who had no poker face. The more disappointed he looked, the better Draco was doing.

When they both finally laid out their cards, the entire table released a breath. Hermione waited.

“Fuck,” Montague whispered, running a hand through his hair.

“It’s a draw, sweetheart,” Flint said to her from across the table, his lips twisted in an arrogant smile. “Such a shame. I would have liked to have tasted you just once.” He made a show of licking his lips at her as the boys laughed and Draco stoically cleaned up his cards. Flint leaned closer, schooling his features in a mock pout. “And I’m sure you desperately wanted to know about your Weasley. Such a pity.”

Flint tapped his chin, as if deep in thought.

“I’ll tell you what,” he said, shifting Penelope off his lap. “I’ll still reveal my secret if you give me that kiss. Good and proper, now.”

She felt her pulse in her fingertips. Then Draco scoffed and plucked up his wine glass, draining the contents and preparing to excuse them from the room.

She thought of warm blue eyes crinkling at her. A booming laugh, freckled skin, and the smell of fresh grass. She had barely seconds. But she had to know.

Hermione stood swiftly. The room was still. They watched her as she moved to Flint, who was smirking at her with hungry eyes. She didn’t spare a glance at Draco as she sat in Flint’s lap, draped across his knees, and pulled his neck down to kiss him squarely on the mouth.

She heard the table erupt in cheers and groans. She felt Flint smile against her lips before returning her kiss with a vengeance, his mouth cold and rubbery against hers. She was just pulling back when his hand slipped

She steadied herself on the table and watched him touch his neck, where her lips had just been. His mouth moved wordlessly as he stared at her. Maybe he felt like she’d contaminated him.

“I’m doing what I’m supposed to,” she snarled. “If you’d just calm down—”

“You can’t just sit in a bloke’s lap and kiss his neck, Granger!”

She blinked at him, breathing quickly as he dragged a hand through his hair.

“And why not? That is *precisely* what happens at Edinburgh—”

“That’s Edinburgh!” he snapped. “This is here, in my house!”

Her eyes were wide as she watched him move toward the exit.

“What is your problem? We’re *practicing*—!”

“You cannot be this daft,” he muttered, striding out of the dining room.

She stormed after him, stopping at the doorway.

“We’re not done, Malfoy! I expect you at dinner tomorrow evening!”

He disappeared around a corner, and Hermione cursed under her breath, throwing her arms in the air.

She stomped to the table, drained her glass of wine, and finished her plate—and his, too, in case he planned to summon it later.



After sending an elf to Draco’s room with a formal invitation to supper, Hermione spent the rest of her Monday Occluding.

She was perfectly prepared to spend another meal in his lap again, and she’d work harder to convince him of the necessity. Pushing away her stray thoughts about the scent of his skin and the warmth of his chest against her side, she focused on Ginny. She focused on how to stay in the game.

At a quarter till eight, she made her way downstairs. She was still waiting for him to arrive at 8:05, glaring into her wine glass despite her self-

close. I'm sure you'd be far more comfortable sitting in Weasley's lap—"

Hermione snorted. "I have *never* done anything like this with Ron."

His lips pressed together tightly, and the hand holding his wine glass squeezed.

"So what do I do?" she continued. "What did Pansy do differently?"

He heaved a great, laboring sigh. "Your behavior on Friday was fine. We can keep doing that—"

"Alright then." She reached up and ran through the hair on the back of his head. Brushing her fingers along his scalp, letting the smooth locks thread through her knuckles.

His head jerked away. "What are you doing—?"

"Oh, you have a No Hair Touching Rule as well?" She rolled her eyes. "Relax."

He let out a ragged breath as her fingers dragged through the hair over his ear. She saw him pick up his fork again, but do nothing with it. Brushing through his hair like silk, she curved over his ear, her fingertips rounding the shell.

As he shivered, she thought of the way Goyle and Pucey held their girls close and just watched the card game. The way the strawberry-blonde had massaged Theo's neck and kissed his jaw for luck. The way she'd seen other Carrow girls smile and whisper into boys' ears or nuzzle into their necks.

"Relax," she repeated quietly. She brushed his hair over his ear again, her fingers trailing around and down to his neck, flushed pink with the wine. She leaned forward and pressed her lips to the skin below his ear.

The earth ceased to spin in the heartbeat it took for his arm to curl around her waist, his hand splayed on her ribs. She parted her lips and kissed him again. His skin was clean and minty, and she felt his throat bob under her mouth as he swallowed.

And then in quick movements, she was pushed to her feet, and he was up out of his chair.

"The fuck are you doing?" he hissed.

into her hair, and his other dropped to her thigh, rubbing the skin. His lips moved under hers, his hand gripping her curls to hold her still, and then his tongue was against her mouth, pressing forward to get inside.

He'd barely managed it when she pushed back with all her might, breaking free of him and stumbling to her feet. The sound rushed back to the room as Flint grinned up at her, his thumb brushing over his lips. The boys pounded the table and howled.

"Your secret, Flint?" Hermione yelled over the din, staring down at him, resisting the urge to wipe her mouth.

Flint raised his hand to quiet the room, his new teeth shining proudly. "Your Weasley is alive, Granger. I saw him beaten and bloody at the Lestrangle Estate last week, but he was still moaning when they kicked him."

She felt the blood drain from her face. There was noise somewhere in the room, but she couldn't decipher the sounds.

Ron was alive, but barely. The Lestrangle Estate. Which one? Rabastan's or Rodolphus and Bellatrix's?

She tried to find the voice to ask, but her wrist was taken, an arm around her back, and then Draco was leading her out of the room. Pushing her, really. The game was over. Several others followed them out, passing Harper, moving down the stairwell.

Draco was silent. His hand on her hip was rigid as he guided her through the door, but she couldn't spare his temper a passing thought. Her mind was spinning with all the information she'd learned and the images her imagination conjured of Ron hanging on by a thread, bleeding on some manor floor. She walked the corridor in a daze, shoving her memories of Ron back into a closed book on the shelf, where he belonged.

Her mind tingled afterward, worn from the effort. She needed air. She needed space. Her lips still felt strange and dry from Flint's, and her dress felt too tight.

Draco steered her around another corner, and the sight of Charlotte waiting with a tray of drinks snapped Hermione out of her exhaustion. She was going into the Lounge. She was going into the Lounge, and she needed her wits about her. She turned to Draco and said, “I need to use the loo.”

He glanced down at her sharply.

“I am allowed to relieve myself, yes?” she deadpanned.

He glared at her and tugged her to the left, around the booths full of laughing men and painted girls, towards a hallway on the left.

“There are guards inside,” Draco said, his voice clipped. He pointed towards a ladies’ room at the end of the hall. “Be quick about it.”

Hermione paused, regretting making the request if she wouldn’t have the proper space to be alone. Then she nodded and walked away without sparing him a second glance. She pushed open the door, finding an old tiled room with three stall doors for tourists visiting Edinburgh. A male guard stood near the sinks, his eyes roving over her with interest.

Hermione blushed, embarrassed at the thought of using the toilet with an audience. She hesitated in the doorway for half a second, and suddenly the door hit her as another person tried to enter. She moved aside, turning to apologize—

The strawberry-blonde smiled back at her.

Hermione blinked at her as she passed. She swallowed and hurried to a stall, feeling the attention of the guard still on her. She used the facilities quickly — the strawberry-blonde taking the cubicle next to hers — and once she was finished and washing her hands, a toilet flushed, and the girl was exiting, joining her at the sinks.

They grabbed for a towel at the same time, and when Hermione turned to apologize, she saw the strawberry-blonde’s eyes flick to the guard. “Your collar is askew,” she said, in a thick Scottish accent.

The guard was staring at them in the mirror as the strawberry-blonde stepped forward, into Hermione’s space. She cocked her head as she

“They removed their memories after the first two times, but there were complaints that the girls were too addled afterwards. So everyone just... risks it, I suppose. The girls have been instructed to be discreet.”

Hermione frowned. Arrogant *and* barbaric. She thought of the strawberry-blonde and her intent eyes during the game, listening to every detail. The Carrow Girls may be under a tight leash, but they had access to a wealth of knowledge.

She steadied her heartbeat and asked the question she’d been fearing.

“Is there anything else I should know about the night Pansy went as me?”

His jaw tightened as he chewed. He shook his head and reached for his wine glass.

“Are you positive?” she pressed. “I was caught off guard on Friday, and it got us into a situation—”

“There’s nothing else to know,” he snapped. His wine glass clunked down on the table.

She paused. “Pucey mentioned that we didn’t look ‘cozy.’ He implied that Pansy looked more comfortable at dinner.” She took a steadying breath, reminding herself why she had to ask. “In Edinburgh, being discreet means being comfortable with each other. Tell me what that looks like?”

His ribs stopped moving under hers. She felt his stomach muscles stiffen before he took a slow inhale and said, “Pansy and I will be more comfortable with each other by nature of our past relationship. So there was—”

“You mean, because you’ve had sex.”

He exhaled sharply. “I guess, yeah.”

Her throat felt dry as she nodded. There was no logical reason for her to think they hadn’t slept together at Hogwarts, so she wasn’t sure why the confirmation made her stomach turn.

“It’s”—he cleared his throat—“it’s not just that. Pansy and I were



"I disagree. You saw that stunt Flint pulled, and he'll try it again if we keep giving him reasons to—"

"This whole idea is just childish—"

"What's childish is that you can't bear to touch me!"

"I touch you enough, it's absurd you're asking for more—"

"—and although it's quite obvious that I physically repulse you—"

A dry laugh burst from him.

Her nostrils flared. "I don't know how you behave towards girls you're sleeping with, Malfoy, but if this is your idea of intimacy, then you clearly need more help than I could ever offer—"

His hand darted out and grabbed her opposite hip, tugging her into his lap. She swallowed her squeak and steadied herself on the table, heart pounding. In an attempt to save her dignity, she lifted her chin, shifting until she could sit properly. It seemed it was no less difficult to find a balanced position in her jeans and trainers than it was in a short dress and heels.

"What now, Granger?" he rumbled, and she felt it vibrate through her ribcage.

The tips of her ears burned. "Just... behave normally. Like this is... normal." She cleared her throat and reached for her wine, stretching back to her table setting. "Eat dinner as if I'm not even here."

Draco seemed to take a long, slow breath before picking up his fork again. He pushed his vegetables around, staring at his peas intently.

Hermione refused to stare at her lap — too stiff. She had a few choices. She could awkwardly stare at his face. She could watch him play with his food. Or, the safest option: she could stare at his neck, studying the way the pink blush had spread under her gaze.

"How often do the boys play cards at dinner?" she asked softly, and she watched his throat bob as he swallowed.

"They play maybe every other week. There's no schedule," he said.

"And that's not dangerous? To have the girls as witnesses?"

reached up and began tugging at Hermione's collar.

"Oh, thank you," said Hermione, her voice thin.

"You're not supposed to talk to her," the guard barked. Hermione jumped, and the Scottish girl's hands dropped quickly.

With a sway of her hips, the girl turned and smiled at him over her shoulder. "Mmm. We don't have to *talk*, I suppose."

And with a wink, the Scottish girl stepped forward, cupped her hands on Hermione's face, and pressed her lips to Hermione's.

Hermione's brows shot up, eyes wide open. The girl's mouth moved over hers, her hands sliding around Hermione's neck as she pressed their bodies together.

Hermione couldn't move — couldn't think. This was... What was this? The girl brushed her fingers around Hermione's neck and let her tongue slide out, tasting Hermione's lips. She felt stiff and useless as the girl tugged at her collar—

*Her collar.*

Hermione gasped into the girl's mouth, granting her tongue entrance. The girl was doing something to her collar. She could see the guard shifting out of the corner of her eye, starting to come closer to them. She felt her pulse spike, gaze darting to the door.

The girl pulled back and turned to the guard. "No, no. Ya can't touch."

The guard leered at them with a mouth full of crooked teeth, and the Scottish girl giggled before taking her hand and pulling Hermione through the door behind her. Before she could catch her breath, she was pushed against the wall outside the restrooms — hands on her neck again, soft lips against hers.

Hermione gasped as she felt the girl tug at her collar again. Was she pulling it off? Wasn't Hermione able to take it off herself?

The girl pulled back, letting the collar rest on her neck again, the metal stretching snug against her skin. Planting one last slow, deliberate kiss on Hermione's lips, the girl winked and waltzed down the corridor...

...passing Draco.

He stood still as stone, his eyes tracking the strawberry-blonde girl as she passed. His lips were parted in a strange way, as if he'd been about to speak and abruptly stopped.

Hermione pressed her fingers to her lips, trying to make sense of the last two minutes. She'd followed her in the restroom. She'd clearly wanted something. Did she get it?

"The fuck was that?"

Her eyes snapped up to find Draco scowling at her, apparently recovered.

Hermione opened her mouth. Then closed it. "She was.. very friendly," she finally landed on.

As she moved to join him in the main room, he grabbed her elbow and spun them around. "Any other *friends* you'd like to make tonight, Granger?" he sneered.

And instead of leading to the couches in the Lounge, he dragged her straight to the fireplaces, calling out for Malfoy Manor and sweeping them back home.

Once they were in the entry hall, he dropped her arm and stomped toward the stairs. Hermione blinked after him for a moment before her anger found her.

"Why did we leave?" she demanded. "We weren't finished!"

"I think you had enough fun for one night," he hissed, starting to climb.

Her mouth fell open at his retreating back. "You're angry that I kissed Flint? You think that was *fun* for me?"

He spun back, several stairs higher than her. "I'm *angry* that you made me look weak."

She gaped at him. "Are you joking? Flint only made that bet because *you* refused to kiss *me*! You made us both look like idiots!"

His jaw snapped shut. Starting to ascend again, he bit out, "Kissing is

mother. An aristocratic jaw moving quickly.

"Bill and Fleur Weasley made it out."

Hermione blinked, gaze pulling from his lips. "They did?"

He nodded down at his plate. "And my aunt and her grandson."

Hermione squeezed her napkin in both palms, letting out a shaky breath of relief. Bill, Fleur, and Tonks' mother and baby were safe. She hadn't heard anything about them. Apparently Voldemort had been censoring the *Prophet's* list of Undesirables as well.

"Do you know where they went?"

"France." He drank his wine, and she watched him swallow. "They're causing quite a few problems for the Dark Lord there."

Hermione smirked into her napkin. *Good*. When she glanced back up at him, a smile still fading on her lips, he was still looking away from her. She took a deep breath and braced herself for the second half of her plans for the evening. Grabbing her wine glass and taking two huge gulps, she stood.

His eyes snapped to her. "What are you doing?"

"I think"—she swallowed, hating the reedy sound in her voice—"I think we should practice."

His fork and knife hovered over his plate. His eye twitched. "Practice."

"To get more comfortable around each other." She moved to the other side of him, reaching for the wine bottle. He didn't move an inch while she filled his glass, like she usually did at Edinburgh. Standing just to his side, she pressed her lips together when he didn't look up at her, still frozen in his chair. "I think you should pull me into your lap now."

He placed his utensils down and sucked in a sharp breath. "This is your master plan, Granger?"

"Yes. We need to be more comfortable to put on a convincing show." She twisted her fingers around each other. "We could both use a bit of rehearsal—"

"That won't be necessary."

"I couldn't say, really." He sliced into his roast with small, precise cuts. "I suppose it's because she's... quite good at what she does."

A cold suspicion crashed over her. "And what exactly does she do?" Draco's fork stopped halfway to his mouth. "*Host*. With a smile. Flirt and joke. Be seen when she needs to be seen, be invisible when she needs to be invisible."

Hermione pursed her lips as she cut her roast. The arrogance of the Death Eaters was astounding. It seemed like an awful oversight to give a girl with a background like Charlotte's the keys to Edinburgh, allowing her to move from room to room largely at will. Hermione stared at her plate as a new thought occurred to her. Charlotte probably knew almost every detail of the goings-on at the castle. Even the ones in the "other" room that Hermione had not yet been allowed in.

She filed the information away and moved to her next question.

"The tattoos. How did you and Blaise find a way around them for Pansy?"

"We didn't." She narrowed her eyes at him, and he shrugged. "A blood purifying spell and pure luck. We weren't sure if it would work. It's my understanding that if Pansy had crossed the estate line, it would have been all but impossible to remove it."

"And you have no idea how to find out a way around these tattoos."

"It's not exactly the kind of question I'd go around asking other Death Eaters, no," he said dryly. "All official slave trades are supposed to go through Yaxley or Dolohov."

"Hence why Pansy's 'dead.'"

"Yes." A muscle in his cheek twitched. "Making your grand escape plan, Granger?"

"Hmm," she said innocently, ignoring his question. "You were willing to divulge information on who escaped at Dover during the card game. Care to share?"

She watched him chew, lips pressed tight with small bites, just like his

too intimate."

Her temper boiled, bubbling over. Storming after him up the steps, she hissed, "Too intimate? Everyone else was kissing! I'm sure you kissed Pansy last week, so don't even—"

"I didn't," he spat back, half a staircase above her. "Stop talking out of your arse, Granger—"

"Oh, but you let her mouth on *other* places?" she shouted over him. "*My* mouth?!" Her voice echoed in the hall. She reached the second-floor landing just as he started up the stairs to the third floor.

"So tonight was revenge, then?" He laughed humorlessly. "You're going to go around snogging as many people as possible to get back at me?"

"Don't flatter yourself," Hermione snapped. "The girl in the bathroom was—" She didn't know if she should mention the way she'd fiddled with her collar. "Strange," she finished, "but Flint was a calculated move. He had information about Ron—"

"Oh *yes*," he snarled, spinning back to her, his face pink. "*Ron*." He dropped two steps, meeting her in the middle of the staircase. "I do wonder what your boyfriend would have to say about your method of information gathering, Granger."

She glowered at him, craning her neck up to meet his eyes. "My boyfriend?"

"Yes," he hissed. "What if your precious Weasley knew that you dropped into any lap offering the smallest crumb of information—"

"You — utter *arse*!" she exploded. "I wouldn't have to kiss your disgusting friends if you would just *tell me what the fuck is going on*!"

His jaw clenched, and he spun around to storm up the rest of the staircase.

"I answer every bloody question you ask me, Granger—"

"Merlin forbid you offer anything else!" She sprinted after him in her heels. "Like any kind of game plan for these evenings. Or having the decency to tell me about your stupid No Kissing Rule!"

She followed around the corner as he made for his bedroom door, huffing and stomping in his wake.

"You want a rule, Granger?" he yelled down the hallway, showing open his bedroom door. "Don't throw yourself at my friends!"

"Fuck off, Malfoy!"

He glared at her and disappeared into his room, slamming the door behind him. She followed suit, marching into her bedroom, fuming with the fire in her blood.

She ripped off her heels, chucking them at the wall connecting their rooms, hoping he heard. Reaching up for the collar, her fingers pried open the clasp, and the metal fell away onto the floor —

A thin scrap of paper fluttering down with it.

Hermione stared at it, her entire body frozen at the sight.

A piece of parchment, torn off the edge of something, no wider than her little finger.

She bent down slowly, thinking of the way the girl with strawberry-blond hair had squeezed underneath her metal collar. To slide a thin slice of paper beneath the gold.

Her shaking fingers reached for the scrap, turning it over. Her breath hitched.

A familiar handwriting from days at the Burrow spent giggling, notes passed back and forth about Harry and Ron and kisses and wishes. A hasty scribble in red lipstick that sent Hermione's mind reeling, her heart beating out of its cage.

*How do I kill him? — GW*

his slave.

She managed a quick nod. Retaking her seat, she focused on placing her napkin across her lap as she asked, "How was your day?"

He cleared his throat. "Fine. And yours?"

"Lovely, thank you."

She reached for her wine glass and drank deeply, trying, but failing, to think of something to break the silence. Draco filled his plate with food before pushing the serving plate in her direction, his lips in a thin line. Hermione played with her utensils, heat creeping up her neck.

They ate in silence for thirty-six seconds before she could bear it no longer.

"Clearly neither of us are ones for small talk, but I don't intend to sit for two hours in silence, Malfoy." He lifted a brow at her, and she felt the flush spread to her cheeks. "I have more questions. But I know you hate questions—"

"I don't hate questions—"

"They put you into a 'mood'—"

"They do not. *You* put me into a mood."

She scowled at him and speared her vegetables with a forceful clink.

He sipped his wine, studying her. She took a large, defiant bite of food, and held his gaze.

"What are your questions, Granger?"

She swallowed thickly. "Who is Charlotte?"

"She's descended from the Selwyn family." He frowned in thought. "Charlotte's mother was disowned for marrying a Muggle-born. The family is British, but Charlotte was raised in Germany. She lived there until her father started organizing against the Dark Lord, at which time she was taken and given to the Carrows."

Hermione's mind whirled, taking it all in. "And why has she been given so much authority at Edinburgh? You said she has more freedom than any other Carrow Girl."

## THE AUCTION

She had afternoon tea with Narcissa, and though she mentioned nothing, she did ask if Hermione wanted to join her for dinner that evening. Hermione had come up with a feeble excuse for taking dinner in her room, praying fervently that Narcissa would take her usual dinner on the veranda. Narcissa simply replied with “Certainly, dear,” and took a delicate bite of her biscuit, smiling slyly into her teacup.

The word “date” stuck in her head like glue, flustering her as she tried to prepare for the evening. Hermione had to stop herself from changing out of her denims several times. When her hands had reached for the makeup drawer in her vanity, she busied them with tying her hair into a plait to rest on her shoulder instead, chastising herself for considering something as silly as dressing up for Draco Malfoy.

This wasn’t “a date.” This was preparation for another outing to Edinburgh. She needed to get back to Ginny, and he needed to ward off suspicion.

Frowning, she studied her reflection in the mirror. She couldn’t lose her head about tonight, despite the feelings she hadn’t yet managed to bury. She caught herself fixing her hair again, and rolled her eyes at her stupidity — Draco Malfoy would never take her on a date.

At a quarter till eight, she headed down to the dining room to check on preparations. Remmy had set two places, just as she’d asked — one at the head of the table, and one just to the left. A bottle of red wine had been decanted, and the serving dishes were full of vegetables and roast.

She awkwardly took her seat at the side of the table, and only had to wait five minutes before Draco’s footsteps drew her gaze to the door. She stood swiftly as he entered, and she was glad to see his dragon leather shoes instead of his Death Eater boots. His eyes skimmed the wine and food on the table before landing back on her, quickly assessing her braided hair and jeans.

“Granger,” he greeted before sweeping to his chair at the head of the table, with the confidence of someone who usually enjoyed dinner with



inny.

Hermione stared down at the piece of paper between her fingertips.

Her bookshelves shuddered as a heavy tome pushed forward, opening to flashes of scarlet hair and mischievous eyes. Ginny was alive, and waiting for her help...

*A few do I kill him? — GW*

Her handwriting. Her words. Her fire.

Hermione screwed her eyes shut. Either the strawberry-blond girl knew Ginny, or someone with access to both girls had served as the go-between.

She took a shaky breath, stilling her trembling shelves. The note didn’t seem like a ruse. Polyjuice Potion wouldn’t allow someone to replicate Ginny’s handwriting, and the note did fit with her theories about Cho and Charlotte. Girls were quietly revolting against the Great Order, using notes at the Lot parties to communicate. But Ginny had been locked away for over a month now.

A weight dropped in Hermione’s stomach. How long had Ginny been waiting for her response? Weeks? Or were there other methods of communication that she wasn’t aware of?

Hermione examined the paper over and over, looking for anything else important, and then tossed it into the fire. She watched the parchment crackle and curl.

*How do I kill him?*

Ginny Weasley had direct access to Voldemort. “The Dark Lord’s pet,” Cirillo had called her. She was close enough that she believed she could kill him.

Hermione paced her room, thinking of how to answer. The problem was that killing Voldemort wasn’t even half of the battle.

Nagini.

Nagini had to be first. If Voldemort died before Nagini, it wouldn’t be good enough. The night the Killing Curse had rebounded, when he first tried to kill Harry, he hadn’t died because his Horcruxes kept him alive.

As the final Horcrux, the snake had to go first. And there were only three ways to kill her. Fiendfyre, basilisk venom, or the Sword of Gryffindor.

There were only two people alive that knew about the snake — her and Ron. Ginny could be the third. Dumbledore had allowed three people to know after his death.

How long had the strawberry-blonde girl been holding onto Ginny’s note, waiting for her moment with Hermione?

Hermione stopped her pacing, bracing herself on the fireplace mantle. Who was she? Who was the strawberry-blonde? She didn’t recognize her, but that wasn’t necessarily a cause for concern. Lots had been taken from multiple countries throughout Europe — some were even Muggles. And being magic suppressed and under the Carrows’ watch made it extremely unlikely that any of the girls would have access to a bottomless supply of Polyjuice Potion.

She thought back to Charlotte. Cho. The girls taking hands under the table with glass in their knees. There was a system in place — a network. And the strawberry-blonde was just a cog in the machine.

If they were going to survive this together, Hermione would have to trust her.

She raced to her desk drawers, taking out spare parchment. She ripped

“And capitalized on it,” he finished.

She nodded. Taking a deep breath and remembering Ginny — remembering how she needed her — Hermione asked the question that had brought her down here to begin with.

“Have dinner with me tonight,” she said. “Just the two of us.”

His eyes jumped to her face. He was still, except for the muscle in his jaw.

“Have...”

“Dinner.” She nodded. “I want to discuss what a successful evening in Edinburgh looks like to you. What it would take on my part to convince your friends and the other Death Eaters of the kind of relationship we are supposed to have.”

He scratched his neck, and she saw pinpricks of pink under his collar. “I’m out this evening.”

The response was swift, and it made Hermione’s eyes narrow.

“Tomorrow then,” she said. He shifted on his feet, and she cut off the excuse she knew was coming. “Or any day, really. My schedule is wide open.”

He stared a hole into his desk as he responded, “Tomorrow.”

“Wonderful. I’ll arrange everything with the elves. Just the two of us.” He lifted a brow and, with a tinge of reluctance, said, “It’s a date.”

She felt her pulse pound and her cheeks heat. She mumbled something in the affirmative before disappearing from the doorway and racing up the stairs back to her room.



Remmy had glared at her when she entered the kitchens and asked for a private dinner to be served for herself and Draco at 8PM. The elf had radiated sarcasm as she asked, “Does Miss want candles on the table too?” “Only food and wine will be necessary, thank you,” Hermione had stammered, before tripping out of the room.

A flash of something in his face — guilt, perhaps. She pushed forward, holding his gaze.

“I want to continue going to Edinburgh. I don’t want you to take someone else in my body again.”

He inhaled sharply. “Granger—”

“As terrifying and disgusting as it is, Edinburgh is the one place I get to see my old friends,” she rushed over him. “And hear a bit about the world outside.”

She paused, biting her lip. She’d decided against telling him about the note or the communication channels. Even though her heart told her that Draco could be trusted, her mind knew it was illogical. He’d kept her in the dark about so many things.

“What are you trying to say, Granger?” He stood next to his desk with his hands in his pockets, staring at her with a tilted gaze.

“We need to be on the same page at these parties. No more rows.”

“And how do you propose that?”

“Well, for starters, if I must refrain from kissing Marcus Flint in the future, I suppose I can make the sacrifice,” she said dryly.

He rolled his eyes and sighed. “How magnanimous of you.”

“I think we need to be more comfortable with each other,” she said, jumping right to the point.

His eyes snapped to hers, unreadable.

“I’m too stiff, you’re too... skittish.” He opened his mouth as if to argue with her. “Against ‘intimacy,’ whatever,” she said with a flippant gesture. His mouth closed, and she looked away from his intense gaze. “I like to go into situations with all the necessary information. I didn’t know you had an aversion to kissing, nor did I know about the details of Pansy’s trip to Edinburgh in my body” — she was quite proud of her voice for not cracking — “and both of those facts jarred me.” She tore her gaze from his desk and found his eyes staring at a point over her shoulder. She swallowed. “I believe Flint read my discomfort.”

pieces and tested their size under the collar until she had a pile to work with. After a few tries, with a sharp quill point, she figured out how to get the maximum number of words on the scrap. But as she looked down at her small print drying on the parchment with concise words, she realized the implications of her words.

*Fiendfyre, basilisk venom, Gryff sword. Nagini first.*

If they were caught... she was handing over the keys to it all. Not even Dumbledore had written it down.

Few people knew what Horcruxes were, but a catalog search of those terms would lead them straight to the subject. The point of keeping them a forbidden topic was to discourage the power-hungry from weaponizing them. If the information fell into the wrong hands...

Could she trust that the information would get to the right people without being discovered? How direct was the strawberry blonde’s access to Ginny? How many hands would carry this information?

And a dark thought as Hermione stared out her windows to the moonlit grounds — *Would it matter? Could Ginny accomplish it on her own?*

How could Ginny summon Fiendfyre, or find basilisk venom? Would the Sword of Gryffindor appear to her at the exact right moment?

Hermione shook her head, banishing her concerns away. However impossible her circumstances may have seemed, Ginny was resourceful. Clever. Hermione had to trust her; had to get her the information she’d asked for. But she’d have to find another way. A note was too risky.

For now, the most helpful information Hermione could pass on was that Voldemort may be the King, but Nagini was the Queen. Take the Queen first.

Ginny couldn’t focus on Voldemort. She had to get close to Nagini. And Hermione would have to find a way to pass the rest of the information without a note.

The image of Voldemort’s face after invading her mind swam up. The look of uncertain, complicated thought once he’d confirmed that Harry



had been an unintentional Horcrux. Hermione bit her lip, praying he hadn't created another. His soul was already unstable — hopefully he wasn't unwise enough to split it further.

It was four in the morning by the time Hermione settled on two words, clear and crisp in the quill's ink. A hint, and a warning. A thought that neither Ginny nor George nor any other living person besides Ron would think of.

*Snake first.*



She slept till one in the afternoon, letting the emotional whiplash of the previous evening run its course through her. The full weight of her problems seemed to return to her as she lay in bed, blinking at the ceiling. She grimaced and threw the covers off herself.

She'd decided on how to respond to Ginny's note, but as she poured her coffee from the carafe that had appeared on her nightstand, she knew she had a more immediate problem. It was critical for her to maintain consistent appearances at Edinburgh, making herself available for any form of communication. And to do that, she and Draco needed to cooperate better. Their row last night had cut the evening short — something she couldn't afford in the future.

Hermione took a long sip of coffee, considering. Three things had seemed to anger him last night. Kissing Flint, trying to play the part in the dining room, and letting the strawberry-blonde get close to her. Hermione supposed she could see his perspective about Flint, but she'd do it again in a heartbeat. Surely he had to understand why.

The rest of his anger made no sense.

She closed her eyes, fighting back her irritation at the impossible ridge that was Draco Malfoy. Perhaps understanding the root cause of his anger wasn't as important as making sure it wouldn't happen again. She needed to know what she could and couldn't do. Or else he might revert

back to taking Pansy in her body.

Hermione frowned into her coffee cup.

That couldn't happen. It was *her* body — only she had the right to be in it. And the girls were counting on her to be there, petty squabbles aside. She needed to make amends with him.

*Even though he was in the wrong.*

Scowling, she drained the rest of her coffee mug and went to her bath to wash up.



After collecting her thoughts, she searched the Manor for him. She found him in his study on the first floor, the door slightly cracked. There was no response after a few knocks, so she pushed the door open with her fingertips, holding her breath as it swung backward. He was bent over his desk, sealing an envelope with the Malfoy wax seal with an impassive expression on his face. She stood in the doorway and waited for him to acknowledge her.

He finally glanced up at her, glaring before his eyes raked over her jeans and trainers. He always hated when she wore jeans, she'd noticed.

She swallowed and lifted her chin. "Can we have a discussion?"

"By all means, Granger." His tone was acerbic as he stood, replacing the seal and the wax in his desk drawer.

She felt the anger that only he stirred in her start to boil before she refocused.

Saying put in the doorway, almost blocking his exit, she said, "I'd like to talk about the fact that we haven't had a successful evening at Edinburgh yet."

His eyes flickered up to her. "Successful." She nodded, and the corner of his mouth twitched. "And what would that look like, Granger?"

"You tell me," she said quietly. "I've been twice, and both times I've felt like I'm drowning."