

## THE AUCTION

realized students were using it to snack each other in the head with a well-timed request for a zooming book.

She steered clear of the catalogue, not wanting any traces left of what she was researching.

Before she could tumble into the stacks towards the Dark Arts, she found a shelf that contained only seven books, organized together in the center. Red spines glistened at her, and she reached forward, pulling the first to her.

*Undesirable No. 1*

by Lance Gainsworth

She gasped. She turned the other books to her and found the rest of her favorite modern magical book series. The red spines were from the collector's edition. She ran her fingers down the first, and pulled the cover open. There, on the first page, was a personal note.

*Draco Malfoy,*

*Thank you very much for your letter. It means so much to me to hear from you. Please accept the first five, with a promise to deliver the last two upon completion.*

*Keep fighting,*

*Lance Gainsworth*

She carefully closed the book, and replaced it on the shelf before her shaking fingers dropped it.

Draco Malfoy was a fan of her favorite book series. A very large fan, if

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Only about five wands dropped.

"Sixteen-five. Jumping up to sixteen-five, gentleman," Ludo began.

She watched as wand hands slowly descended, Dolohov and Mulciber keeping up with each other, laughing at their little game.

Her knees felt shaky, and she wondered if she would be seeing food again anytime soon. Perhaps never.

"Eighteen thousand Galleons. Do I hear—Yes, sir, eighteen thousand. What about eighteen-five?" He pointed to Dolohov. "Eighteen-five to Dolohov. Several others still in. Nineteen?"

She let her eyes glaze over, watching the unmoving Death Eater. He sat still, wand in his lap, head supported in his hand. He looked young. Thin shoulders. Tall.

"Nineteen-five? Yes, nineteen-five to Mulciber. Do we have—?"

"Twenty-five thousand." A tense voice. Hermione blinked as every person in the first three rows turned to look at her solitary masked man. He'd raised his wand, orange sparks. Had she summoned his voice by staring at him?

Whispers and shuffling. She knew that Ginny had just sold for a bit more than that.

"Er, yes. Twenty-five thousand to..."

"Twenty-six," Dolohov snarled, sending a glare back at the younger man.

"Twenty-six-five," from the fourth row.

"Twenty-seven."

"Twenty-seven-five."

"Twenty-eight!" Dolohov yelled, irritated with the boy in the fourth row.

The boy whose voice drawled out "Twenty-eight-five," like money was no object to him. The boy whose eyes she knew to be cold behind the mask. Whose long fingers twirled his sparking wand. And Hermione noticed it was hawthorn again. She wondered if he'd stolen it back from

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Harry's dead body.

Dolohov hesitated, looking up to Ludo. "Twenty-nine."

"Twenty-nine-five."

And the thought floated through her consciousness that there was an auction, and she would belong to someone in a few short minutes.

And Draco Malfoy was bidding.

The theatre was buzzing. Most of the crowd had figured out that the Malfoy boy was throwing his money against Antonin Dolohov.

"Thirty," Dolohov stated firmly, like he'd ended a game of cards.

"Thirty thousand, five hundred," Draco hummed.

A crashing wave of whispers. Hermione looked down at her feet, finding specks of blood on her Mary Janes that they'd forgotten to clean.

Ginny was left bloody and wild, Hermione cleaned and groomed. Like the prized mare.

"Do I hear thirty-one thousand?" Ludo asked, speaking up again.

Dolohov's wand shot in the air. Draco's followed.

Dolohov had been so arrogant, so firm in his beliefs that he could afford her. But he didn't have the gold to back this up. So why was he—

Her blood ran cold.

*Ginny.* Ginny's twenty-eight thousand Galleons now belonged to Dolohov.

And Luna's. And the other girls' he'd caught.

Assuming he had four virgins, he now had a lot of money to bet.

Yaxley and Dolohov had been in charge of the Lots. Their main guards. Why had they left them backstage in the hands of randy young boys who hadn't even taken the mark yet?

"Thirty-two thousand," one of them yelled, but Hermione was concentrating on her head pounding, her shoulder aching.

Did they want a riot? Seven guards against fifty girls? It certainly seemed lazy.

A howling in the balcony.

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would just open and swallow her.

"Mippy," Narcissa's voice chimed, "bring biscuits and more jam tarts for Miss Granger." And then in a theatrical whisper: "Not the poisoned ones."

Hermione blushed as the little elf shrieked and babbled, "Poisoned? Misus? *Poisoned?*"

"Shall I leave you to browse?" Narcissa asked.

Leave her? In freedom?

"I would like that very much. If you'll allow it."

"Miss Granger, I've already told you," she said kindly. "You are free to move through the Manor."

Hermione nodded. "Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy."

"Please, dear, you may call me Narcissa."

Hermione watched Narcissa Malfoy sweep to the library doors, face tingling with surprise.

"Er, you may call me Hermione. If you like."

Narcissa smiled, a gentle quirk of her lips. The doors shut behind her with a click.

She stood in the center of the lower section and spun in slow circles for several minutes, waiting for something to jump out at her. Waiting for the books to rebel at her presence and begin a nightmare crawl towards her to eat the Mudblood alive.

She took a deep breath, inhaling the smell of books, of resourcefulness, usefulness.

Narcissa made it sound like she could return here again, but still Hermione wanted to zoom through the stacks, and bleed the Malfoy library dry of information.

There was a catalogue in the corner of the room where one could ask for a subject or a title and the books would organize themselves, either by guiding you with fairy lights or bringing the books directly to you. Hogwarts had a similar system but Pince disabled it years ago when she



Hermione wasn't sure she had smiled once in the past year. Not a smile from her heart. Not a grin that began inside of her, like a star bursting apart.

The library at Malfoy Manor was the size of a small bookshop. Perhaps a large bookshop, as Hermione couldn't see to the back wall. Tall as a grand ballroom with stacks reaching high to the ceiling, Hermione couldn't breathe for the love she felt for one room. How long had it been since she'd set foot in a library?

"Oh dear. It seems I've lost you."

She turned from running her fingers across a shelf to see Narcissa smiling at her. "I'm sorry. I do like books very much."

"Yes, I've heard." Narcissa tilted her head. Hermione was surprised that this detail struck out to her after what she assumed were years of moaning and complaining from her son. Before she could consider further, Narcissa continued, "Can I bring you anything while you browse? Tea?"

A *crack* and Mippy was there at her hip.

"Mippy brings Miss tea and biscuits. What does Miss want for tea?"

Mippy twirled her ear around her waxy finger, in a way Dobby used to.

Hermione smiled in spite of herself. "Milk and honey please."

"Does Miss want three honey spoons?" Mippy's eyes blinked, lashes bouncing.

"Yes, that's perfect. Thank you, Mippy." Hermione turned back to the shelf.

"Mippy knows how to make that. That is how Master Draco takes tea too!"

Hermione's fingers slipped on the book she was replacing.

Fuck.

"Is it? How strange."

She felt Narcissa's eyes on the back of her neck. And she wished a book

"Thirty-three thousand," Draco stated.

Lust and bloodlust. It probably increased their bets.

"Thirty-three-five," Dolohov hissed.

"Thirty-four." Draco's voice, lazy and familiar, lulled her.

What did he want from her? Revenge? Status?

"Thirty-four-five."

The devil you know. She stared at Draco's mask, drilling her eyes into him, begging him to win.

"Thirty-five thousand," he said, crossing his legs again.

"Getting a bit steep for you, *whelp*?" Dolohov stood and faced the fourth row, removing his mask. "Hesitating?"

"Steep for me?" Draco laughed. "I'm surprised you can count this high."

Dolohov turned to the stage again. "Forty-five thousand Galleons."

Hermione swallowed as she listened to the hissing. She looked to Draco, still and silent.

"How much of that inheritance did daddy give you to play with, boy?"

Dolohov smirked back at him.

Ludo cleared his throat and said, "I hear forty-five thousand. Do I hear forty-six?"

Draco's wand lifted. Orange sparks.

"I can go all night, Malfoy," Dolohov said, throwing his arms out wide. "I've been saving up for this for a while now, and I just made fifty-two thousand off my Lots for this evening."

"Fifty-three thousand," Draco spat.

Dolohov laughed and turned back to Ludo. "Fifty-five."

"Sixty." Draco's voice cracked.

"Sixty-one." Dolohov grinned, yellow crooked teeth shining at her.

She wasn't sure if it was the concussion, or the stage lights, or the future bearing down on her, but she felt her lungs begging for air.

She'd known that this would happen. That she'd be leaving with

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Dolohov. She'd been mentally preparing for a week. Even so, her hope hadn't died.

She'd felt a spark of possibility when Draco Malfoy started bidding. She didn't know if she would truly be better off with him. But now, as he hesitated before yelling, "sixty-two," she wished he'd never jumped in at all. Now she would always wonder.

"Sixty-five thousand," said Dolohov, chuckled.

Ludo was white next to her as he waited. "I hear sixty-five thousand," he said at last. The crowd started twisting, buzzing with whispers. "Do I hear sixty-six?"

She didn't dare look to him. Couldn't bear the idea that if she looked, she might see indecision in the way he held his shoulders. Maybe she could pinpoint his thoughts like in Arithmancy, when he'd roll his shoulders back and reset his posture before diving back into a problem.

"Sixty-five thousand going once."

Or the way he'd stare at the chalkboard in Potions, tilting his head to the side until suddenly grabbing for his quill, jotting his thoughts onto the parchment as if they'd disappear if he wasn't quick.

"Sixty-five thousand going twice."

Or in sixth year, when he'd been removed and sullen, strained to figure out a solution, and his eyes had been distant, cold and grey. Lifeless. His posture hunched and small.

A gavel banged.

The world cracked open, and a violent sound poured into her ears like lava.

Her eyes on the "x" beneath her feet as Dolohov jogged up onstage and met Macnair in the middle. The scroll. A burning on her left arm. And then a fist in her hair, dragging her head back. Dolohov was there, grinning down at her. He licked her face and the balconies went wild.

She shoved at him. And they loved that.

He laughed, grabbing her head to push her down to the floor. When

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the Narcissa Malfoy she'd met before, nose in the air, above everyone else. "You're in no such danger here, I assure you. The Malfoy men may not be saints, but they worship their women fervently."

Hermione fought the urge to scoff. *His woman?* Was that what she was now?

Perhaps Narcissa misunderstood this situation. Perhaps Narcissa thought there was more to this than... whatever there was to this. But she seemed to genuinely believe that Hermione was not in danger here, that she was not purchased with the intention of defiling and debasing her.

Lucius on the other hand... Her earlier conversation with him gave her no answers either, and left her feeling more like a bought whore than she had the entire week prior.

Hermione stopped in front of a rose bush blooming the most perfect white roses. She bit her lip, debating whether to tell Narcissa the truth: that she had no idea why Draco had bought her. But Narcissa spoke before she could pluck up the courage. "You are welcome to come out here any time you like. You needn't have a chapterone in this house."

Hermione swiveled her head to her. "That's... That's very kind, Mrs. Malfoy. Is there anywhere I should steer clear of?"

"Besides the common decency of staying out of other's private quarters – of which I am positive you possess – nowhere is barred to you. We have no mad ex-wives in our attics."

Hermione tripped on a pebble, or something else imaginary. "You know Brontë?"

"I do." Narcissa smiled. "The Manor's library is too large to only house wizarding books."

Narcissa walked on. Hermione's heart lifted for the first time since someone else's name had been tattooed on her arm.

"That's right," she said, like it was detail she'd forgotten. "The Manor has a library."

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Granger. She will be staying with us.” Hix nodded a greeting. “Anything we can do to make her stay more comfortable, we will endeavor to do it.”

Hermione’s brows drew together, lips pursed. Perhaps Narcissa meant to lull her into complacency as she joked about wedding plans, crooned about shrubbery, and offered her tea in comfortable chairs. But there was an echo of “indefinite” in her words, and a shiver of “custody” in her tone. Reminding her of exactly where she was. Who she was.

They moved away from Hix and the bluebells and Hermione scowled at her feet. She needed to focus. She needed to find a way for Narcissa to show her the perimeter. They arrived at the bank of the lake in a tight silence. And just as she opened her mouth to question Narcissa, she spoke.

“Europe is a catastrophe at the moment.”

She looked up at the blonde woman, startled. Narcissa glanced around for eavesdroppers before continuing.

“I cannot free you, Miss Granger.” Hermione’s breath caught. “Even if I thought it would be safe for you on the run, I could not. If you were to... ‘escape,’ Draco would be punished for it.”

Narcissa Malfoy pressed her lips together, looking out past the hedges, and Hermione felt a cold wind inside of her, settling around her ribs.

“So,” Narcissa sighed, standing tall. “We will keep you under our care, and we will keep you comfortable. I am sorry for all that you’ve lost, but I cannot offer you more than the assurance that Malfoy Manor is the safest place for you.”

It wasn’t the first time she’d heard those words, and she understood them no better the second time.

Even if she were to believe that, why was *she* the one to be safe? Why was *she* special?

She took a deep breath, heart hammering in her ears. “How is that?” Narcissa looked at her, blue eyes piercing. “Because I’ve had those animals in my house, snarling and pissing and prowling. I know what they do, I know how they think.” She sniffed, and Hermione was reminded of

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she looked up from her knees, Dolohov was waving at the audience, basking in his victory, and unbuckling his belt.

She crawled back, shaking her head, rattling her bruised brain. Yaxley was smiling in the front row, screaming, “Not until I get my money!”

She couldn’t make out sounds anymore. Too much in her ears.

As Macnair wrenched her up, throwing her to the backstage guards, she chanced one last look to see the crowd on its feet, one seat in the fourth row empty.



The guards dragged her through the hallways of the Palace Theatre, taking stairs and turning corners that she couldn't possibly memorize even if she was trying.

They turned a corner and found a guard in front of a door. They passed him, and just before turning another corner and taking stairs down, she heard a loud *crack* and whipped her head around to see a small elf standing in the middle of the hall.

"Cuppy is here for three Lots," he squeaked.

They dragged her around the corner before she could hear any more. The further down they went, the more often she heard a *crack* followed by a small voice. Using elves to transport the Lots.

She supposed they weren't "Lots" anymore. Slaves? Concubines?

They pushed her into an empty broom closet. She watched as they murmured the room number to each other, one of them writing it down and tapping his wand on the parchment.

They shut the door and left her in darkness. She tried the door handle, unsurprised when it didn't budge.

She sat in the middle of the floor, hugging her knees to her chest, and waited.



*"Are there any boys at school you like?"*  
*Hermione snapped her eyes to her mother, staring at her over the bowl of cookie dough. "Mum!"*  
*Her mother laughed. "Just asking! What about Harry?"*

Hermione into taking food from her, or maybe it was because she was *just so hungry*. But Hermione bit into the corner of the tart, knowing that she shouldn't. But also knowing that she wouldn't survive long if she couldn't trust the food.

The sugar danced across her tongue as they passed the large window overlooking the pond in silence, and even though Hermione had a similar view from the guest room, she still couldn't take her eyes off the sight.

"Lucius's mother cultivated the gardens." Hermione turned to see Narcissa following her gaze. They paused in front of the window, and Narcissa pointed. "The gazebo was built for her wedding day. She took extra care to keep the surrounding plots as beautiful as possible – tending to the pond, caring for the peacocks. She was very set on having all future Malfoy weddings on the grounds in the gazebo, carrying on the tradition."

Hermione swallowed, choosing her words carefully. "I'm sure your wedding was beautiful, Mrs. Malfoy."

Narcissa stared out the window. "It *was*," she hummed. "It was at the Chateau de Chambord." Her lips quirked and her eyebrow lifted. "My family has traditions, as well."

A shocked breath pushed from her lungs as the words sunk in. The older woman sent a satisfied smirk towards the gazebo, and gestured for Hermione to continue on with her. As they descended the stairs, Hermione meditated on whether Lucius Malfoy had met his match. Perhaps Lucius didn't hold as much power as he liked to believe.

Narcissa led her out the front doors into the May morning. They turned right at the bottom of the steps, winding around the perimeter of the Manor while Narcissa showed her the flowers she'd brought over from Norway, the tree that had survived the battle on the Manor in 1643, the seam in the exterior wall where the expansion had begun.

They stumbled across an old hunched elf wedding the bluebells on the north side of the Manor, and Narcissa stopped. "Hix, dear. This is Miss

A flicker of something flashed in Narcissa's eyes, and the corner of her lips twitched. "No, dear. Please be comfortable." Hermione blinked again. It felt like she'd done something right, when in fact, she'd done nothing at all. Whatever game Narcissa was playing, Hermione was ten paces behind. She'd have to change that.

She ran to look for socks and shoes, before Narcissa could change her mind. The trainers in the closet were just her size, which was lucky. Months on the run had taught her how to pull on and lace trainers in under five seconds, and she thanked Merlin for it today while Narcissa Malfoy waited in the doorway like she was a guest in her own home.

Narcissa smiled when she reappeared, but before they could depart, her eyes caught on the tray of food. She pressed her lips together, and after a pause, said, "Are you finished with your tray, Miss Granger?"

Hermione swallowed and nodded. "I don't have much of an appetite." Her stomach growled on cue.

Narcissa tilted her head at the tray. "Would you mind if we took some of those jam tarts with us? They're my favorite."

Hermione shook her head and went to retrieve several tarts from the bowl, wrapping a napkin around them. Narcissa took them from her, saying something about the recipe, but Hermione was staring at the sugary morsels, trying to keep her knees from giving out. She was so hungry.

Hermione watched as Narcissa chewed, wondering if this was some kind of trick. Some way to get her trust. Narcissa pointed out one of her favorite paintings, and then suddenly the tarts were extended to Hermione.

"Take one, dear." Hermione reached for a strawberry tart, fingers shaking. She had no intention of eating it – just being polite. But then Narcissa said, "Excellent choice. Not a drop of poison in that one."

Her eyes snapped up to find Narcissa smirking at her before popping a raspberry tart between her lips. And maybe it was the satisfied hum from her lips around the crunching, or perhaps the clever way she had tricked

*"Oh, mother, no." Hermione rolled her eyes and grabbed a handful of dough from the bowl. "Harry's... no."*

*"Or Ron? You spend more time with his family than your own, you know." She bumped Hermione's hip as she placed the ball of dough on the baking sheet.*

*Hermione frowned. "Ron is infuriating. He's lazy and sleeps too much and he's always late." She huffed and pushed her hair away from her face. "He was so rude to me this past Christmas. I almost didn't forgive him. He's such a child."*

*Her mother chuckled and opened the oven door. "He'll grow up. I'm sure you'll turn around one day and find he's quite changed." She placed the baking sheet on the rack. "And no one else? Didn't you leave things a bit unfinished with that Vincent?"*

*"Viktor," Hermione corrected. "Viktor Krum. Yes, we still write but..." Hermione washed her hands. "I guess he wasn't quite my type. He's very handsome. But... I think I like..."*

*She stopped herself, frowning down at the suds.*

*"Yes?"*

*"Lighter hair," she settled on.*

*Her mother pushed Hermione's curls over her ear. "And is there anyone who does have light hair?" She could hear the smile in her voice.*

*"There is." Hermione reached for the dish towel and wrenched the material over her hands. "But he's cruel, and pony, and arrogant." She tossed the towel down. "And I'm a fool."*

*Her mother kissed her temple. "That handsome, huh?"*

*Hermione groaned. "His hair is so beautiful, Mum."*

*Her mother laughed.*



She had no way to count time, but she suspected she'd been locked in the closet for two hours. Strange, because others had been collected as soon as

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the Auction had ended.

The door wrenched open, blinding her with the light from the hallway. She threw her arm up, shielding her eyes and her body.

“Up.”

She crawled to her feet, staring at the outline of Yaxley in the doorway.

He stepped aside for her to exit. No house elf in the hallway.

Yaxley scowled at her and led her down the hall, the way she came. She wasn't sure what he had to scowl about. He was 65,000 Galleons richer. Not including whatever price Pansy fetched.

The image of Pansy piercing the belly of that guard floated up. His strangled yell as she bared her teeth at him.

She hadn't seen that guard later either.

They climbed the stairs she'd just descended, and her pounding head and burning shoulder made her wish an elf had appeared to relocate her. It hurt to breathe.

She heard a *crack* from down a hallway. The elves were still appearing. There were still Lots behind these doors.

Yaxley stopped in front of a door and turned to her. “If I ever see you again, it will be too soon, Mudblood.”

She raised a brow at him and gave him a look that said, *The feeling is mutual.*

He pushed the door open and shoved her inside.

She expected to find Dolohov. Maybe a cot or a chair where he'd force her down and push up her dress.

She didn't expect to find Pansy Parkinson. She hadn't expected to find her ever again.

Pansy seemed to feel the same as she sat up tall from the counter she'd been leaning on, eyes wide and hungry. They were in a dressing room with mirrors on the walls and large bulbs flickering.

Yaxley shut the door, locking them in.

A sharp burning on her left arm. Hermione's mouth opened in a silent

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balcony, she wondered if any of the other elves wanted to be free. Maybe she could use that.

To her left, another rounded balcony. Separated, but close. She tilted over the railing, looking at what would break her fall should she try to tie her bedsheets together. Some unforgiving-looking bushes and decorative stones. If it was necessary, she could make the drop.

She stood in the doorway, facing the suite, enjoying the sun on the back of her neck. Ignoring the plate of food again, she stared at the walls. And she realized there wasn't a single portrait in the guest room. A few landscapes and artistic swirls, but no immortalized tattletale to watch her every move.

Privacy.

She wondered how long that would last.

Two swift knocks on the door. She waited, hands braced on the doorframe. No elf voice announcing itself.

Hermione shut the doors to the balcony, and moved quickly to the door, heart pounding, pulling it open.

Narcissa Malfoy in flowing blue robes, like water in a lake, and a smile on her lips.

“Good morning, Miss Granger.”

She stared at her. “Hello.”

Narcissa swept her gaze down her body, eyeing her denims and bare feet. Hermione blushed.

“I was wondering if you would fancy a walk. Perhaps a tour of the Manor?”

Hermione blinked. In her twelve hours in this room, she had not once considered that she would be permitted out of it. The suite had everything she needed. A gilded cage.

“A tour? I... er, yes,” she stammered under Narcissa's shrewd gaze. A tour could be useful. Perhaps she could scour the grounds for vulnerabilities. “Shall I change into something more suitable?”



She poked her head into the bedroom, seeing she had no visitors. She dried off, twisted the towel around her again, and waddled to the wardrobe. She assumed the owner of the robes and jumpers and denims wouldn't mind her borrowing a few things until...

Until... she didn't know what. Until her new clothing was provided? Perhaps a uniform, so she could join the elves in the kitchens? That's if Narcissa's protection against "visitors" was to be believed.

She plucked a pair of light-colored jeans from the drawer, and dragged her fingers across the jumpers until she found a fabric that sung "comfort" to her. White, soft, and fuzzy. She considered for a moment, and then snatched up a pair of cotton knickers from the drawer on the right.

Tucking herself behind the wardrobe door, she dropped the towel, shimmed into the knickers, dragged the fuzzy jumper over her head, and scrambled into the jeans. She was pleased when the zip and button closed perfectly around her hips.

She twisted to look into a mirror on the opposite wall, finding a scrappy young woman with dirty hair in somebody else's jeans and jumper. It would do.

She bent to put away her towel, but it disappeared, like they used to at Hogwarts. Elf magic.

Hermione made her bed, washed the empty potion vial from the night before, folded and rehung her nightclothes, and reshelved the books she had taken down. Studying the balcony doors again, she tried the handle tentatively. It turned. The doors swept open, out to the world, and she put one foot out, testing.

She stepped through with no issues. And when the light greeted her skin, she realized she had not seen the sun since the day before the Final Battle. Closing her eyes and breathing in the outdoors, she enjoyed the daylight.

Several house elves watered the hedges that lined the lawn. She thought of Dobby and how his life would have been here. Leaning her arms on the

hiss of pain. She looked down to where *Antonin Dolohov* had been inked into her skin. The letters sizzled. She squeezed her fist and watched as the ink lifted, rearranging until a different signature formed on her skin.

*D.M.*

She blinked down at the letters, her vision swimming. It couldn't be...

Pansy was at her side, grabbing her arm.

"Ha!"

The sound jarred her. Pansy had been silenced the last time she'd seen her. Hermione was on day four.

Pansy turned away, running her nails through her hair. The mirrors allowed Hermione to see that she'd pressed her eyes closed, squeezing her lips together.

"Wow." She spun around to face her. "How much?"

Hermione shook her head, deciding that Pansy didn't need to know.

"Thirty-three thousand?" Pansy guessed, stalking toward her slowly.

"Thirty-five thousand?" she said when Hermione didn't answer. "Come on, now. I'm curious. Forty?"

Hermione turned away but was unable to find a wall in which Pansy's face did not reflect back at her. Her own face was almost unrecognizable. Deep circles under her eyes and dry skin. Her jawline stuck out unpleasantly.

"Tell me, Granger," Pansy hissed over her shoulder. Hermione met her eyes and something stormed inside of them, like the moment before thunder cracks. She watched Pansy's blue eyes flood, and she took a slow breath before asking, "More than forty thousand?"

Hermione looked away, shivering. She caught sight of the ink on Pansy's arm.

A matching *D.M.*

A crack outside their door. The two of them jumped, and Hermione's fingers twitched for a wand that wasn't there.

A squeaky girl elf said, "Mippy is here for Misses Pansy and Hermione."

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The door swung open. Yaxley stood guard while a tiny elf in a pink pillowcase looked up at them with bright green eyes.

“Misses! I take you now!”

She smiled and held out her two hands. Like they were going on a pleasant adventure together.

Pansy sniffed, blinking her eyes dry, and saluted Yaxley. “Later, Yax.” She took Mippy’s hand.

Hermione blinked down at Mippy’s outstretched hand, and glanced at Yaxley. It wasn’t a trick. She was leaving it all behind.

Her concussion was going to be a mess to handle after Apparition, but hopefully the elf magic would make it better. She took Mippy’s hand, and the vision of Yaxley in the doorway vanished with a squeeze.

A heavy May wind assaulted them upon landing. Hermione’s hair whipped into her eyes and when she pushed it back, the tall gates of Malfoy Manor pressed down upon her. A chill danced along her flesh, and she felt the pierce of thousands of eyes on her.

Mippy waved the gates open and gestured to come in. The dark hedges beckoned her, ready to swallow her whole. She turned to Pansy – staring at the Manor like she couldn’t believe her eyes – then to the hills in the distance. How far would she get if she ran?

“Miss?” Mippy called over the wind.

Hermione stepped through the gates and her arm tingled. She looked down, and saw the tattoo sparkle before returning to normal. She assumed there was a barrier at the gates. She was locked in now.

The gates began to close. Hermione spun to see Pansy, arms wrapped around herself, watching the iron block her out.

Hermione turned to Mippy, pointing to Pansy outside of the gates.

“Miss Pansy stays,” Mippy said helpfully. “We go now, Miss.”

Mippy tottered up the drive, expecting Hermione to follow. Hermione stood frozen, watching the distance between her and the tiny house elf grow.

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“Come in?” It sounded more like a question than she liked.

The door pushed open, and an older female elf tottered in, a tray hovering behind her. The elf — Remy — frowned. “Mistress says Remy must knock.”

Hermione stared at her, wondering how she was to reply. Remy scowled and sent the tray barreling toward the end table near her wing-back chair. She spun and wobbled out the door. Before she could close it, Hermione said, “Thank you, Remy.”

Remy turned, eyes squinted, and nodded once before shutting the door behind her.

Beans and toast. Eggs, juice, bacon, grilled tomatoes. Pastries and tarts. And tea service.

Hermione’s stomach twisted and rumbled. She hadn’t eaten since yesterday — an apple slice Luna had handed her in the morning. Narcissa had claimed she wouldn’t poison her last night, but Hermione knew of at least seven potions that could be baked into the pastries or stirred in with the tea that could alter her perceptions, relax her mind or muscles, or leave blank spots in her memories — all of which were tasteless and odorless.

She wandered into the bathroom suite to hide from the delicious scent of the food and stared at the tub. It had several magical taps for bubbles and scents. The tub was deep and wide, and much more luxurious than Hermione had seen in the last year. Her last decent bath had been last summer, before Bill and Fleur’s wedding.

But she thought of the way Lucius Malfoy had swept into the suite, like her privacy meant nothing to him.

She quickly turned to the large shower, draped a towel over the side, and stripped. The water hit the perfect temperature, and she spent thirty seconds inside, scrubbing and washing only the essential areas, skipping her hair. She turned off the water, grabbed the towel, and wrapped herself tightly. She stood, dripping on the bathmat, waiting for something to happen.

## THE AUCTION

He stepped toward her, now only several paces away, and extended his hand. “Might I have whatever’s in your pocket?”

She swallowed, and he saw it. He smiled.

She withdrew the comb and placed it into his waiting hand. He grinned, and then broke the sharp tail off. He handed her back the benign piece, looked to her hair, and said, “You’ll need this.”

She scowled at him. Such strong resemblance to his son and the easy way his insults would flow. Her fingers curled around the comb, teeth cutting into her palm.

“My son paid a heavy price to obtain you, Miss Granger.” His eyes traveled down her jaw, down her neck. She shivered. “Do try to show your..gratitude.” He whispered the word across the air like a kiss against her skin. He smirked at her, and swept to the door.

Her eyes burned into his back, and she thought of Parvati and the Baxter girl. Penelope Clearwater curled in a corner refusing to eat. The slice to her abdomen. The last glimpse of Ginny as she was dragged away.

She couldn’t stop the words. Like bile creeping up. “*My gratitude?*”

He paused with one hand on the door. “Of course, Miss Granger.” A raised brow. “You have been saved.”

He exited, shutting the door behind him.



Relying on Narcissa Malfoy’s supposed protection wasn’t going to get her anywhere. It wasn’t protection she needed—it was a way out.

After she was sure Lucius wouldn’t be returning, she pulled *Hogwarts, A History* off the shelves, and sat in the chair facing the door, reading absently while keeping an eye on the entrance.

At 8AM on the dot, a knock sounded from the door. Before Hermione could release her tense shoulders or contemplate what horrors could await her, a treble voice said, “Remmy is here for breakfast!”

Hermione blinked. She stood, placing the book delicately on the chair.

## CHAPTER 6

They wouldn’t let Pansy in? Was she outcast? Banished? Hermione sprinted for the gates, meeting Pansy as she did the same. They pulled and tugged at the iron just as it finished closing. After, Pansy stared at her, then at the sky, as if waiting for lightning.

A whipping *pop* followed by another. Both girls turned to see two figures in cloaks ten feet away. Pansy scrambled back, grabbing for the iron.

“No!” one of the figures yelled.

Blaise Zabini pulled off his hood; Daphne Greengrass appeared next to him. “Don’t cross the threshold,” he instructed.

Pansy sobbed, throwing herself into their waiting embrace. Hermione blinked, watching as Pansy was reunited with her friends. She wondered where Ron had ended up.

“We have to be quick,” Daphne said. Hermione could barely hear them over the wind. None of them spared her a second glance.

Blaise grabbed Pansy’s arm, the one with the tattoo, stretching it out away from her body. Daphne uncorked a bottle and laced her fingers through Pansy’s, pulling her hand tight. Blaise pulled from his pocket a scrap of leather, and pushed it into Pansy’s mouth. She fought, confused, until Blaise had it between her teeth.

“This is going to hurt,” he said to her. Pansy’s eyes grew wide.

Daphne started pouring the contents of the bottle over Pansy’s arm. Acid. Bubbling and boiling and sizzling at her skin. Pansy’s screams stretched out over the wind, echoing down to the hills in the distance. Hermione hung on the bars, watching with wide eyes as Blaise pulled his wand and hissed a dark spell.

Black ink bled out of her arm and onto the grass. It thinned, turning to red. Turning to blood. And he stopped.

Pansy whimpered, tears running down her face. Daphne pressed a cloth to the blistered skin of her arm and pulled off her own cloak, tossing it over Pansy’s shoulders. She linked their arms and readied them for Disapparating.

Hermione banged on the bars, rattling them.

Blaise turned around, seeing her like a ghost. She extended her tattooed arm as far as it would go, asking Blaise with her eyes.

He looked at her, then at the Manor. "This is the safest place for you, Granger."

Her lips parted, forming a plea she couldn't hear. Blaise gave her one last look and then took Daphne's other arm.

And they were gone. All she heard was the wind.

Hermione turned, leaning back on the iron bars.

A long stone path, cutting through hedges and leading to a grand manor, devastatingly beautiful in the moonlight despite its sordid history. A small elf stood framed in the doorway.

Was this her home? Her prison?

She looked at her arm again.

*D.M.* Not L.M. Draco himself had purchased her.

What did he want with her? What had he given up to obtain her?

She couldn't imagine that Dolohov would have parted with her for anything less than an astronomical sum.

The Malfoys were rich; that much had been clear even without the evidence of it staring down at her.

But why spend so much on *her*?

She couldn't stand here all night. She assumed she would either be forced inside by elf magic, or worse. By one of the residents of Malfoy Manor.

She stepped forward, and began her long walk.

Scabior had been eager the last time she'd made this walk. He'd dragged her behind him like a disobedient dog. She hadn't been able to think, hadn't been able to breathe.

She followed her feet, the doors growing larger in front of her. The tiny elf in the pink pillowcase blinked down at her as she climbed the stone steps, then turned and moved into the house.

He pulled a deep breath through his nostrils, the hint of a sneer on his lips. "I have no interest in slave-trading. I have enough house elves." He clasped his hands behind his back and looked out the window at the view she had been enjoying.

She remembered strong arms, grabbing her around the waist and lifting her, taking her somewhere. If Lucius hadn't been there, it had been Draco. Where would he have taken her?

And why did he want her in the first place? And how had he obtained her?

She looked up from the thoughtful gaze she had been sending the carpets to find Lucius Malfoy still before her, watching her. His eyes swept over her body, and she shivered, glad to be rid of the gold dress and in sexless nightclothes.

"How do you like your accommodations, Miss Granger?" His eyes pierced her, his words digging into her skin.

She wondered if he wanted her to misbehave. If he wanted her to spit at him and tell him she'd prefer a cell. To act like a Mudblood beast. She looked into his grey eyes, the same grey eyes that had sneered at her for seven years.

She may be under Narcissa Malfoy's protection, but she was also under Lucius Malfoy's roof.

"It's lovely, Mr. Malfoy," she responded icily. "Thank you for having me for a visit." She lifted a brow at him.

He returned the expression, a slow curl to his lips. "Any time, Miss Granger. The weather is lovely in the autumn," he said, voice lilting, teasing. A pause, and then his features hardened. "I do hope you'll still be here then."

A chill crossed her skin, but she was careful not to blink. She burned to ask him questions. *Why am I here? Why did Dolohov give me up? What am I expected to do?* But she knew she wouldn't get the answers she wanted. Just more games.

## THE AUCTION

her suite, eyes landing on her at the window. She clutched the curtains in her fingers, one hand sliding slowly to the comb in her pocket.

Lucius's eyes were abruptly pulled from her as he looked around the room, gaze landing on the bookshelves, the sitting area. He paused on the bed, sheets twisted from her sleep. His grey eyes snapped to her again.

His lips pulled up into an echo of a smirk. "Welcome to Malfoy Manor, Miss Granger."

She felt her heartbeat pressing into the gauzy curtains, her fingers curled. He stood between herself and the door. And if there was a way onto this balcony, how quickly could she sprint out and hurdle over the edge. Grass or stones below?

He tilted his head, examining her, waiting for a response that didn't come. His eyes flicked over her satin pajamas, over the rumpled bedding.

"I see you've made yourself quite at home."

He moved into the room, strolling between the wingback chairs, examining the carpets, moving to the drapes.

Where Narcissa was cautious and warm, Lucius was decisive and cold, inscrutable. He slithered into the sleeping space, eyes turning over the bed curtains and landing on the wardrobe, still open from her investigations. He pulled the doors open wide and just like his wife, an impossible expression spread across his lips. She'd never seen someone frown a smile.

"All the correct size, I presume," he muttered.

Hermione guessed that Lucius Malfoy was not the kind of man who muttered things aloud by accident.

He shut the wardrobe with a click. And turned to her, standing between her and the bed. The comb teeth clicked between her fingertips.

"Sixty-five thousand Galleons," he said, drawing the number out like a question. But she knew it wasn't. "My, my, Miss Granger. What a handsome prize you make."

He wanted her to interact with him. She swallowed her terror, and decided to play his game. "Were you in attendance last night, Mr. Malfoy?"

## CHAPTER 6

Hermione paused at the top and looked back at the gates. Was she going to be punished for Pansy's disappearance? No, she assured herself. It had been by design. The elf said Pansy had to stay, and Hermione was to come inside.

But perhaps she would be punished in other ways. Without Pansy's charms, and legs, and sultry eyes to distract, Hermione was vulnerable. The only choice. She yanked the flimsy gold dress higher up her neckline.

She wondered what it meant that Pansy's tattoo had been removed. Was she free?

"Miss Hermione?"

She looked back down at the elf — Mippy, and stepped inside.

Several large fireplaces to her left. She remembered wondering how quickly she could find the Floo powder two months ago as Harry yelped under Greyback's grip. And just across the entrance hall, there was a closed door that she knew led to a drawing room.

"Miss?"

Hermione turned to see Mippy on the first stair of a massive marble staircase. Grand paintings of the Renaissance stretched to the ceiling, dappling the grey walls with golds and reds and blues.

She'd woken up in her first cell, been dragged by the hair to her second, and strong-armed into her third. And now she was being asked to climb the stairs and walk to her final one.

Mippy's bright eyes blinked at her. Hermione followed the elf up the stairs. They climbed to the third floor, and Hermione's head started to pound again, breathing more difficult after the week in captivity.

Her skin twitched as they passed statues and suits of armor, feeling like eyes were on her. The paintings glared and raised their brows. She swallowed and kept her eyes on the elf until she passed through a stream of moonlight.

Hermione stopped, finding a large window to her right. A pond near the hedges. And white peacocks sleeping on the bank. She'd read about

Malfoy Manor before in a book on the Sacred Twenty-Eight. The white peacocks were a favorite of Draco's grandfather, their care passed down the line. The view would be lovely in the daylight. Spring flowers on the bank of the pond, a gazebo to the right.

"Miss?"

She shook her head clear and continued behind Mippy.

The hall was darker now. And she realized if they were on the third floor, she wasn't being taken to her cell yet.

She was being delivered straight to the bedroom.

Her pace slowed, and the elf stopped and came back to her. "Miss is okay?"

Hermione looked down at the sweet little thing. She wondered if Lucius hurt this one too. She probably knew Dobby at one point. And she wondered if Mippy had any idea what was about to happen to "Miss."

Hermione grabbed the side of a credenza, steadying herself. She swallowed the bile as it crawled its way up her throat.

Would it be Draco or Lucius? And which was better? Draco wouldn't be as cruel as his father for certain. He didn't have it in him. But to be treated as his property, as his slave, when she had a history of feelings for him...

She dug her fingernails into her palm, banishing the thought. Why had he bought her in the first place if not to own her as his slave. His whore.

The concussion wasn't healing. She felt small waxy hands on her wrist, and startled at the soft contact.

"Is Miss well?"

She laughed silently, pressing her eyes closed. *No, Mippy. Miss is not well.*

Her eyes drifted open, landing on a portrait of a Malfoy ancestor, possibly two hundred years ago. Lucius Malfoy's eyes stared down at her, the corner of his lips lifting in a snarl.

nightdresses, followed by shorter ones. None too flashy. Then robes upon robes upon robes of varying colors, lengths, and fabrics. At the end, jumpers and other informal wear. She pulled the drawers at the base of the wardrobe and found jeans.

Hermione frowned. What kind of guests did the Malfoys usually have in this room? Surely no one who needed denims. She opened the top drawer on the right. Cotton knickers in pale shades. A few bras in the same. A few sports bras.

Whoever it was who usually stayed here was prepared for everything. The bottom drawer held shoes for all weather; trainers and boots.

She let her fingers drift across the fabric of the robes as she pushed the drawers back in, and she jumped when a thought crossed her mind.

Was this Pansy's room?

She glanced at the bed with its creams and golds. She looked to the bookcase with its Muggle books. She took in the fabrics in front of her, and cataloged the knickers.

None of this screamed Pansy Parkinson. Pansy wore red lipstick to the breakfast table, and never needed to reapply throughout the day. Pansy would never be caught dead in pale colors, especially her knickers. And Pansy once asked Daphne Greengrass in third year if Muggles knew how to read. Hermione knew she wasn't joking. No, this wasn't Pansy's space.

She shut the drawers, memorizing the placement of the belts, and moved to the windows, finally pushing aside the soft material and peering out into the grounds. Like she'd guessed, the pond sparkled from this view. The gazebo attracted the early morning fog like bubbles in a glass, and just beyond the gates that encompassed the Manor, she could see the sun dappling the ground. Just to her left, a balcony attached to her sitting room.

Hermione blinked. There must be a door. How far was the drop? How much length would the curtains and bedsheets give her?

The door handle rattled, and Hermione spun as Lucius Malfoy entered



She woke slowly, her body trying to drag her mind back into sleep for a few minutes. She couldn't remember the last time she'd slept in a real bed. The cots in the tent weren't as comfortable as this, and Harry snored so loud she was afraid he'd rupture the Protection Spells—

Her eyes snapped open, staring at an unfamiliar wall in an unfamiliar bed. She hadn't moved in the night, and she still lay on her side, facing the empty potion bottle. She bolted upright, searching the room. She was alone. Daylight streaming in through the large windows and cream curtains.

She slipped out of bed, peeking around corners to make sure there was no one hiding. Slithering into the bathroom, she used the toilet, splashed water on her face. The large clawfoot tub in the center of the marble floor called her to slip into the suds and drift away.

She shook her head, blinking away the elegance of the suite and refusing. *Weapons. Exits.*

The drawers in the vanity held lush towels and hair potions. She found a tail comb with a sharp end for styling and pocketed it.

Still, no one intruding upon her space when she exited the bathroom. She checked the clock on the bookshelf. Barely 7AM.

The wardrobe called to her as she remembered Narcissa's expression upon opening it. Some kind of displeased acceptance. Hermione pulled the doors open, finding hangers upon hangers of clothing — an extension charm widening and deepening the space. To the left, a second pair of pajamas like the ones she had on, only in flannel. A few long

And suddenly she remembered how important Lucius's approval was to Draco. How much he idolized his father.

Perhaps she was a gift.

She heaved, vomit splashing down on the stone. The sound loud in the hallway. The first sound she'd made in days.

Mippy had a towel at her mouth, a damp cloth at her forehead. And vanished the sick from the Manor floor. The elf conjured a water glass and begged Hermione to sip. She did, and then left it on the credenza.

She heard the portraits hissing, bickering amongst each other about the proper place for her, about her blood. She concentrated on their voices as Mippy trotted down the hall, beckoning her to follow.

*A Mudblood, sullying our sheets.*

*Such a foul ending—*

*—said it before, and I'll say it again: that Black girl was the downfall of our entire line.*

*Lucius was always weak. His son would be, too.*

*—should be on the ground floor with the elves. Or outside with the garden gnomes.*

She completed the journey, and stood in front of a carved wooden door. Mippy was saying something about quickly getting her into bed.

Hermione laughed. *Yes, please. As quick as possible. Let's get this over with.*

Mippy pushed open the door. And Hermione was met with a lush suite. Cream walls lined with gold. Deep carpets. A sitting area across from the door with a lit fireplace. Two deep wingback chairs in front of the fire. To the right, an arched opening in the wall led to the largest bed she'd ever seen. Cream canopy curtains with flecks of gold hung down from the posts, and more pillows than she could count littered the headboard.

She stepped into the suite, and found bookshelves lining the wall to her right. She didn't let her eyes linger on the texts. They weren't for her. None of it was for her.

## THE AUCTION

She wondered whose room this was? Perhaps it was just a spare bedroom so she wouldn't defile the sheets in the master suite.

Mippy was speaking to her, but she couldn't hear. The sound of wind rushing between her ears. The elf closed the door. And then Hermione was alone.

The bed looked decadent. And she was so tired. But she refused to sleep in it, to get comfortable in the bed she'd be attacked in.

She moved into the bedroom, running her fingers over the curtains and bedposts. Turning to the bookshelves, she found fiction and non-fiction. Muggle and Wizard. Classics and Modern. Testing a theory, she reached out, placing one finger on the spine of *Huckleberry Finn*.

Nothing. So she was allowed to touch the books. She ran her fingers over every spine, waiting for something to happen. Nothing.

Her shoulder ached. She held her arm in front of her chest, supporting the weight, and continued through the bedroom suite. On the far side of the bed there was a door. To the bathroom probably. She inched her way toward it, keeping her eyes on the bedroom door.

She pushed open the wood door and gasped, pain squeezing through her shoulder.

Marble and brass everywhere. A clawfoot bathtub in the middle of the room. Lush towels and delicate lighting. She turned and jumped at the sight of her own reflection. She eyed herself critically, pale and thin, still in the gold shift dress Yaxley had put her in.

Her diet of fruit and bread had not been kind to her.

She turned away, leaving the luscious bathroom. The bed called to her again, but she still resisted. Moving back to sitting room, she examined the far wall of windows, light curtains draped over every frame. She pulled one back and found that she had the same view as the window they'd passed. The gazebo and the pond.

The bookshelf puzzled her. She traced the spines until she plucked a book from the shelves, checking the antique clock on the middle shelf.

## CHAPTER 6

it burn away.

She approached the bed and paused. Fourteen pillows. That's what it looked like. Creams and golds. She peeled back the sheets, expecting to find a horse's head or some Muggle nonsense. Just a fluffy, welcoming mattress.

She stretched up on her tiptoes, folding herself into the bed, and still nothing happened. The mattress and pillows accepted her weight, like they had been waiting for her for some time.

She looked to the door, almost two room's lengths from the bed. She had a perfect view of it here, against the pillows. She lifted the Dreamless Sleep potion Mippy had left her, uncorked it and sniffed. It smelled like the real thing.

*Under the protection of Narcissa Malfoy.*

The same Narcissa Malfoy who had snuck into the castle to find her son as the Dark Lord boasted his victory from the courtyard. The same woman who'd talked of escaping, even as her side's army killed the generals from Hermione's.

*This is the safest place for you, Granger.*

Perhaps Zabini was right. Perhaps all wasn't lost. Only time would tell. Hermione drank the potion. She set the vial down on the bedside table and lay on her side, eyes catching on a jewelry box lined in brass. Her eyes began to fall shut as she reached out, opening the lid, finding its blue velvet interior empty.



of her. With her concussion gone, all thoughts were supposed to be rational now.

Mippy cleared the tea as Narcissa moved to the doorway.

"Mrs. Malfoy," said Hermione, her heart thundering. "When am I to expect a visitor?"

Blunt. To the point. Perhaps Narcissa would appreciate that, despite the fact that Hermione may be asking about her own husband.

Narcissa's blue eyes hardened into ice, much closer to her son's hue. She folded her hands delicately in front of her waist.

"Let me be quite clear, Miss Granger." Hermione felt a chill dance down her spine, bracing herself for some kind of harsh fact, something about her place in this world now. "You are now under the protection of Narcissa Malfoy. No one will lay a finger on you in this house."

And with a stern lift of her brow, Narcissa Malfoy swept from the room, taking her doting house elf with her.

Hermione remained frozen for a minute before collapsing in her chair, mind racing. Absorbing.

It could be lies, of course. Something to make her trust the Malfoy patriarch. Something to settle her into security before the attack.

But there were biscuits on the end table. Pajamas that seemed to be hers. A miniature library at her disposal. And a bed. A bed that she was not meant to share.

Hermione stood. Looking around the room again. It was palatial, really. A guest suite meant for someone to be more than comfortable. Meant for someone to find no reason to leave, she realized.

Books, a private bath, a sitting area, and an attentive elf.

It was the nicest cell she could have hoped for.

She peeled the gold dress off, letting it pool on the floor. Slipping into the nightclothes was like cutting through butter, the satin warming to her skin with some kind of charm. She plucked the gold dress off the ground and paced to the fireplace, tossing the fabric inside and watching

Nearing midnight.

She took *A Tale of Two Cities* to the chairs near the fireplace, choosing the one facing the door, and she sat, flipping pages, eyes scanning between the words and the door handle.

Madame Defarge was knitting by the time a knock rapped on her door.

Hermione froze. She watched the door handle, waiting for it to turn.

Another knock. This time louder.

She shut her book and stood, moving behind her chair, squeezing the wingback.

The door open swiftly, and Narcissa Malfoy stepped through. Her eyes landed on Hermione, and she stopped.

Hermione's heart beat in her fingertips. She was wandless. And in this woman's home. Her throat choked on the dry air leaving her lungs, and she took a slow breath, ready for whatever this woman wanted to do to her.

Narcissa Malfoy's lips turned up in a gentle smile. "Hello, Miss Granger."

Hermione waited. And Narcissa stared at her, eyes taking in her short dress, her thin skin.

"Please excuse me for barging in." Narcissa gestured to the door. "You did not answer when I knocked and I was concerned that..." She trailed off. "Well, Mippy told me you were ill on your way in."

Hermione took measured breaths, waiting.

Narcissa tilted her head, seeing the book in the chair.

"Dickens is one of my favorites too."

Hermione blinked at her, her stomach twisting in knots. Perhaps she'd be punished for touching the books.

"I apologize I wasn't here to greet you. I had no idea you were on your way until a few hours ago. And I had some business to take care of." Narcissa folded her hands in front of her, examining her. And then her eyes were on the room, taking in the bookshelves like she'd never seen them

before.

She looked back to Hermione. “Are you alright, Miss Granger? Are you harmed?”

Hermione took a sharp breath, feeling the air sting her lungs. Her eyes watered with tears she promised herself she wouldn’t cry in front of this woman just because she was being kind. She still might take it all back.

Narcissa Malfoy waited. Patient and calm. Hermione swallowed and brought her hand to her throat, tapping a finger against her larynx. She shook her head and turned her eyes down on the carpet.

A moment passed, and then—“*Finite Incantatem.*”

Hermione startled and looked up. Narcissa was replacing her wand into her robes, pressing her lips tight in a way that was so familiar. In a way that Draco did whenever he found fault.

Narcissa took a deep breath and said, “Let’s start again? Hello, Miss Granger. I am Mrs. Malfoy. You may call me Narcissa.”

Hermione swallowed painfully, lubricating her unused throat. “Hello,” she croaked.

Narcissa stepped forward, coming to the other wingback chair. “Are you injured, Miss Granger?”

“I have...” Her voice pulled thin, like strings about to snap. “I have a dislocated shoulder that they reset. And I have a concussion.”

Narcissa stared at her for a moment, and then: “Mippy?”

Hermione jumped. The girl elf popped through.

“Missus!”

“Miss Granger has an injured shoulder and a concussion. Please tend to it.”

“Oh!” Mippy turned to face her. “Hermione Miss! Tell Mippy you is sick! Tell Mippy and she will fix it!”

Hermione nodded, not bothering telling the elf about her voice.

“And Mippy, have Plumb fix some tea, if you please.”

Mippy popped away, returning three seconds later with potions and a

drawstring pouch. She directed Hermione to sit in the chair she was gripping with her nails. Narcissa floated into the second chair. An older elf popped in and delivered tea service while Mippy handed Hermione a potion for the concussion, and started spreading a healing paste on her shoulder. As she scurried to place a Dreamless Sleep potion on the bedside table, Hermione glanced at Narcissa, who was sipping her tea patiently. Watching her.

“Would you like some tea, Miss Granger?”

Hermione stared darkly at the teapot, imagining all sorts of dark potions inside. Perhaps Narcissa had already ingested the antidote.

Hermione shook her head. “No, thank you, Mrs. Malfoy.” Her voice scratched along her tongue, begging for something warm to soothe itself.

Narcissa seemed to follow her thoughts. Her lips turned down. “I suppose you won’t accept any biscuits either?” She sent her a smirk. “Even if I assure you that I have far more interesting methods of dealing with an enemy?”

Hermione flushed and looked down at her lap. Her dress was all the way to the tops of her thighs, and she pressed her legs together, pulling at the fabric.

Narcissa stood. “Night clothes, yes?” She moved to the wardrobe inside the bedroom area, and muttered to herself, “If I’m not mistaken...” She opened the wardrobe. Hermione watched her face and detected a resigned sadness. Narcissa reached into the closet, then paused and glanced at Hermione. She reached a different direction and pulled out a matching pajama set. Satin, it seemed. She laid the satin trousers and long-sleeved button-up pajamas across the bed.

“Get some rest, Miss Granger,” Narcissa said. “If you do find yourself hungry, or in need of any more medications, please call for Mippy.”

The little elf nodded her head vigorously next to the tea service, ears flopping dangerously close to the sugar bowl.

She would not sleep in that bed. Not until she knew what was expected