

She moved into the bedroom again, turning her attention to the shelves, to the trinkets, searching for answers.

There was a carved statue of a dragon next to a framed photograph of Draco with Crabbe and Goyle. Neither item gave her any information.

Sliding closer to the bed curtains, she gave in to the urge to drag her fingers across the fabric. The bed was made, but something told her that it wasn't the elves who took care of the tidiness. She pulled open the drawers in his bedside table, finding nothing but chocolates, spare parchment, a handkerchief, and a few trinkets. The bookshelf near his bed was filled with familiar titles, and she let her hands drift along the books he kept close to him, noticing a conspicuous hole where seven books would fit perfectly...

The bathroom had a similar tub to her own, tidy counters, and a mirror she could imagine him in, sweeping his hair back with gel or deciding to let it loose.

After half a second's hesitation, she opened the drawers, finding that exact gel and the comb to go with it. She examined his products, some with expensive-sounding French names. She could imagine him here, stepping out of the tub, wrapped up in luscious towels, taking care of his fair skin with the creams and products in the drawers. Her smile faded in the mirror as she wondered if he would ever complete those rituals again. Stumbling from the bathroom, she shook her head, choking back the fear and uncertainty.

The flames burned low in his fireplace, and she spent a few moments looking for the Floo Powder before giving up, not sure if her tattoo would even let her leave by fireplace.

She pulled open the closet doors, finding a vast space for all of Draco Malfoy's blacks, greys, and cobalts. A smirk pulled at her lips as she ran her fingers over the shirts, wondering what he'd look like in pink and orange. He had spare Death Eater robes hung across from his old Hogwarts uniform. She checked the pockets for anything interesting and

Warm.

"Granger?" Sound floated into focus. Not the first time he'd called her name. She could hear the echoes of it now.

Draco was so warm. His hand held her wrist, blood starting to drip, and his other arm held her body up, wrapping around her waist. She pressed her head into his shoulder. Like they were dancing.

She smiled, feeling her lips pull across his skin, dizzy with the melody. Something was wrong with her.

Heat over her wound. And maybe he was healing it. Maybe he would fix it so it meant something. Not just a curving line and a snag.

She looked over at it, and found Draco's lips on her arm.

That would heal it. She was sure of it. Her mother used to do the same.

He turned his face away, lips stained red, and spat her blood onto her cream carpets.

He reattached his mouth, sucking hard, and she felt her head float back down when he spit again.

Sucking something out of her. She blinked at him. Watching Draco Malfoy fill his mouth with her muddy blood, watching the carpets bleed.

She gasped, knees buckling, lungs filling again. He looked at her, his mouth still wrapped around her skin, eyes pale. His arm clutching her body close to him, sweeping her up against him. A waltz was playing somewhere.

He turned and spit. "Accio." His voice cracked on the one word.

His wand flew from somewhere. Somewhere outside of the room.

Because he'd come running when she screamed, leaving his wand behind.

*Like father like son.*

He gripped the wrist of her injured hand and turned his wand on the cuts, siphoning blood into the air, and whispering a spell to pull something dark out of it. Smoke, curling out of her arm and hanging in the air around them like mist.

At some point during her episode, she had grabbed his shoulder, and her hand felt completely frozen now, even as he worked on curing her blood, fingers curled over his neck. She stared at his bare shoulders, the skin of his arms.

Draco Malfoy slept in only trunks and socks. He also had a singular beauty mark on top of his left shoulder. The edges of her vision blurred as she studied his lips. Lips that could suck the life out of her.

"It's a goblin blade," he whispered.

She blinked at the sound of his voice this close to her. They shared the same air. She blinked again. Clearer now.

"It's viper venom. And other things," he said, separating the smoke from her blood again.

She nodded dumbly. Highly poisonous, and he'd sucked it out. Saved her. He met her eyes for what felt like the first time since yesterday. He was so tall. Her neck lengthened, and her hand slipped over his shoulder on accident.

Gooseflesh beneath her fingers.

"It will scar too, unfortunately." He turned back to her arm, and cast a spell to weave the skin back together.

She drew a rattling breath and gave another nod. Her head felt clear again, though it stung around the edges. She wondered again what Bellatrix had intended.

His eyes followed the line of her arm, onto her shoulder, up her neck to her eyes. He held her stare, deep and purposeful. "It doesn't mean anything. The marks."

*Of course it didn't, she thought. It's just a squiggle.*

Her eyes drifted down to his lips, still strained pink with her blood. "Thank you," she whispered.

He swallowed. And then he was sliding his hand away, peeling his body back from her. He steadied her against the wall. "Mippy?" A crack and the elf was there, bouncing and asking if something was wrong with Miss.

She blinked back at it. That door hadn't been there yesterday when she'd looked. And she had been positive she'd checked the rooms next to hers just minutes ago.

A Notice-Me-Not Charm. She wouldn't have found this door unless she was looking for it, or already knew where it was.

Her fingers found the cool brass doorknob, turning. The dragon stared at her.

This was undoubtedly Draco Malfoy's bedroom. There would be no arguing that. Greens and greys and silvers. A Slytherin crest on the wall across from her. A dark-wooden four-poster bed with green canopy curtains hanging down. Bookshelves, though not as many as in her room.

Staring from the doorway, Hermione realized that her room was larger than this. Although Draco's room was the corner suite, hers seemed like two smaller rooms had been combined.

The doors to his balcony beckoned her, and she crossed in long strides, pushing the doors open and stepping into the cool night air.

No barrier.

Not that it mattered. She wouldn't throw herself off a three-story balcony, and she didn't need to climb down to escape — she could walk out the front door.

She moved to the edge of the balcony, hands on the stone railing, and leaned over to see the grass and greenery in the moonlight. When he returned, she would ask him nicely about the access to her balcony. It was lovely in the moonlight.

If he returned.

Her chest tightened, and she swallowed.

Turning to look at her own balcony, she realized just how close the railing was to her own. Just how close his *bedroom* was to her own. That Draco Malfoy had set her up in a suite as close as physically possible to him, and yet had not laid a finger on her in malice.

*Why?*

They had told her that Bellatrix was barred from the estate, but what did that mean exactly? Was she verbally barred? Or magically? Without a Malfoy on the grounds, would she have access?

The thought of Bellatrix returning for her froze her in her tracks. Draco wouldn't come running for her this time.

*In his trunks and socks*, she smiled, and the knot in her stomach loosened.

She paused, looking to the door at the top of the stairs in her hallway. She'd never considered where Draco's bedroom was, simply happy to not be dragged into it and pinned to the bed for her first weeks. But if he'd been ready for bed when he heard her scream, certainly his room was nearby.

She'd already searched the rooms on this floor and hadn't found one that looked like it belonged to Draco Malfoy. Maybe she had to be looking for it.

Her hand reached for the first door handle, but she paused.

Narcissa had told her that the Manor was open to her; she just needed to be respectful of the personal quarters.

But Narcissa wasn't here. And Hermione needed to remember that she was a prisoner of war in a house guest's clothing.

She tried the door, the knob turning under her fingers. A clean and uninhabited guest room, smaller than her own. She'd found this one already, and had already inspected for weapons and exits.

She checked every room on the floor, finding nothing. Frowning at her own door several paces away, she considered if Draco had just been passing through that night. If perhaps he'd thought to come to check on her.

Sighing and resigning herself to searching the other wings of the Manor in the morning, she turned to go to bed, passing a carved wooden door next to hers. Something flashed, catching the light, and she stumbled to a halt, turning to see a dragon with an emerald eye winking at her.

"Blood replenishing potion. Water. And another serving of dinner if Miss Granger wishes."

His eyes never left hers as Mippy popped away.

"I'll have the wards reset. When I chose a Blood Boundary, I thought it would only allow my parents. I didn't think..." He turned his face away. His eyes landed on her blood on the carpets and he waved his wand to vanish it. "I had no idea she would want you again."

Hermione flinched. "Want her" was not her favorite choice of words. "Why did she then?" she rasped. She'd have bruising on her neck in the morning.

His eyes grew cold. "She... disapproves. Of the way we're handling you." His gaze slid down her body, stopping at the bottom of her nightdress, across the tops of her thighs, and quickly set back on her face. Hermione shivered. "I need to speak to my father. If you need anything, please utilize Mippy."

She nodded, feeling warm from his wandering eyes. He turned and exited the room through the door while she stared at her feet, refusing to look at his naked back.

Mippy returned. She changed the sheets for her, cooled the bed, and stayed with her until she had a few bites off the plate.

Hermione lay awake, letting the Blood Replenishing Potion hum through her, running her fingers over the new markings on her left arm as she stared blankly at the ceiling. Only when the marks had faded into the same white scarring as the other word on her arm did Hermione see it.

Bellatrix had finished after all. Not a squiggle and a dash.

There, just next to the ink of Draco's signature, she'd carved an apostrophe and an "s."

*D.M.*

*mudblood*



The poison worked its way through her system overnight, leaving a lethargic hum in her veins the next morning. Once the adrenalin of the initial shock had seeped from her, her body felt the aftermath like a lead weight for the next few days.

Mippy continued to pop in with potions without labels. She asked the elf what was inside the small vial, but all she would reply was, “For Miss! For Miss to heal!”

On the third day of her subdued and woozy recovery, she refused the potion. It was possible the slow climb back to health was not due to the poison, but to the antidotes she was taking. Mippy bounced from toe to toe, spinning reasons to take it at her like a broken record.

“But Miss! Miss was hurt! The potion makes Miss better!”

“But Miss is weak! This makes her strong!”

“Miss wants to feel good? Drink!”

“Master Draco makes it special for Miss. To make her better!”

That one caught Hermione’s attention. She looked to the small girl elf, holding a purple swirling potion out to her. Draco *made* this potion? Or Draco doctored the potion somehow?

“No. Thank you.” She turned her head from the elf’s wide eyes and thought about how easy it would be to drop a sprig of asphodel into almost any potion. Or...

The minty magic suppressant that the nurses gave her in the Ministry holding cells. The ones they’d been ordered to give all slaves.

The Malfoys must be dosing her, but... perhaps they’d enhanced the suppressant to be tasteless? She tried to remember if anything she’d eaten

sharply at her lungs.

She’d had dinner with him only days ago. He’d followed her down a hill, and carried her in his arms like a child, back to safety.

Charlie’s handsome face beamed at her in her memories. She’d knelt to the ground at some point, her knees digging into the rough pebbles and stones. Focusing on the pain, she forced herself to breathe.

How many others had died? The article only mentioned Charlie.

And through it all, the words “limited casualties for the Death Eaters” ran across her eyes like a snagged film strip. Was Draco one of the “limited casualties?”

She took a ragged breath and pressed her face to the sky, letting the sun’s rays melt through her cold panic. A few moments later, a cup of tea appeared next to her, streaming. She sat and sipped, fingers trembling, watching the sun crawl toward the treetops. Beneath her shock and pain, beyond her fear and uncertainty, she pulled one thought forward and focused her anger towards it.

Rita Fucking Skeeter was alive and well and writing for the *Prophet*.



She explored the grounds for the rest of the day. Pacing and meditation failed to banish the horrified dread in her stomach, so she found the boundary again, reaching her arm out to test the tattoo. It shocked her—unpleasant but not truly painful. Walking the perimeter, she kept trying her arm on different spots until her fingers went numb, and all her racing thoughts were forgotten. The same barrier she’d fallen through weeks ago had permitted her legs, head, and other arm, but not her tattooed arm.

It was safe to say that she could cut off her arm and probably make it out alive. Not that the Malfoys had any instrument that could help her with that.

It was evening when she finally retired to the east wing, tiptoeing around corners, always keeping an eye out for intruders or residents.

WHO SCRAMBLED BACK TO THEIR HOLE IN THE GROUND, THEIR TAILS BETWEEN THEIR LEGS.

IN THE WAKE OF THE NEW APPARITION/LAND-LOCKED LEGISLATION, THE REBELS LED BY UNDESIRABLE NO. 1, GEORGE WEASLEY ATTEMPTED TO CROSS THE STRAIT OF DOVER BY BOAT, BYPASSING THE APPARITION LINE BY NON-MAGICAL MEANS. RECENTLY PROMOTED GENERAL LUCIUS MALFOY WAS FIRST ON THE SCENE, RUTHLESSLY CUTTING OFF THE BOAT SUPPLY AND TAKING OUT SEVERAL ESSENTIAL FACES OF THE REBELLION IN THE PROCESS, INCLUDING ELDER BROTHER TO THE REBELLION LEADER, CHARLIE WEASLEY.

Hermione tore her eyes off the words, her fingers crumpling the pages, trying to piece together her spiraling thoughts.

Charlie was dead.

Lucius had killed him.

There were Apparition boundaries, limiting Apparition to inside the U.K. only. Although it was rare to Apparate across countries and large bodies of water, it wasn't unheard of. People with exceptionally powerful magic could manage it. But if there were actual magical limitations, that would make it incredibly difficult for people to get out.

Was escape the plan for the remaining ratters of the Order? Not fighting? Were the other magical governments accepting refugees? What did M.A.C.U.S.A. have to say about all of this? They always had something to say...

If Voldemort had landlocked the U.K., did that mean he had not branched out his rule?

*Recently promoted General Lucius Malfoy.*

George was Undesirable No. 1, and Lucius had killed Charlie Weasley. She braced her hand on the Manor's exterior wall, feeling breath pull

had a strange peppermint aftertaste.

Perhaps that was why her recovery had been so difficult. Healing potions mixed with a heavy dose of magic suppressants.

Mippy disappeared with the undrunk potion, and Hermione decided against dinner that evening.

She woke up in the middle of the night, clutching her arm, sweating, head pounding. She'd been through worse. She knew she could survive it. Her blood began to boil after ten minutes, sweat blooming from her skin and sinking into the sheets. Whatever Draco's potion was, it was clearly better than this. She suffered two hours before whispering a shaky, "Mippy," into the quiet room. The elf appeared and helped her drink.



Lying boneless all day and night as a toxin washed its way through her blood was all too freeing for her mind. She stared off for hours, reimagining Bellatrix's breath on her face, her high laugh. And then piecing together what she remembered of Draco. Seemingly appearing from nowhere. Still as stone as his aunt left the room, and then jerky, hurried movements as he healed her.

He healed her.

It was important to him that he heal her.

In ways that the Dark Lord couldn't possibly condone.

In ways that made her think she was worth more than sixty-five thousand Galleons.

He'd cleaned her blood with his lips, spitting onto the plush carpets like he could buy new ones. Sucking poison from his whore, as if he couldn't buy another one of those.

His untouched whore. In her elegant suite.

Her eyes closed, drifting off, remembering his skin surrounding her.



## THE AUCTION

Narcissa visited often. She offered to retrieve books from the shelves, bringing fresh sleeping clothes, take dinner requests.

On the fourth day, she turned from her bedside and said, “It’s such a beautiful day out. Perhaps in the afternoon, we could take a stroll.”

Her eyes drifted down to Hermione’s arm and back, where twice her own sister had cut into her.

“No,” Hermione tested. “I don’t really fancy a walk. Thank you, though.” She watched, waiting. Wondering how far her illicit freedom stretched.

Narcissa smiled pleasantly. “I’ll leave you to rest then.”

She gathered the books Hermione had finished, floated them to the bookshelves, and moved toward the door. She paused with her hand on the doorknob.

“My sister... cannot be excused. But she is my blood, so I feel I always must excuse her.” Narcissa turned back to her. “I stopped approving of her actions a long time ago. And she stopped approving of mine. But her behavior is not a reflection of this house, or its inhabitants.”

Narcissa nodded to her, and left.

Somehow, incredibly, Hermione was struggling less and less with that concept.



She started rising from bed and moving around her room in the mornings. Her muscles ached, but every day became easier.

It had been ten days since she was electrocuted and poisoned, and ten days since she’d seen either of the Malfoy men. She dressed slowly, intent to get out of bed and leave her room.

The portraits hissed at her as she passed, muttering things about her dirty blood. An older man with the same long blond hair as Lucius but a rounder face and stomach hunched at her as she passed his portrait and said, “Shameful. We would have locked her away in the dungeons in my

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face. She ran for the kettle, and Hermione turned to a frowning Remy. “Has there been any news on Master Draco — er, on Draco? Any word on when they are returning?”

The frown melted off Remy’s face, and she too began to tremble with unshed tears. “No. Master Draco is very hurt.”

Hermione swallowed, feeling her pulse in her ears. “What happened? Did they say?”

“No,” Remy said sadly, shaking her head. “We is just hearing from this.” She gestured to the short counter, where Hermione was shocked to find a *Daily Prophet*.

She approached, looking down on a picture of Dover Castle, burning to the ground.

# REBELLION SQUASHED AT DOVER

BY RITA SKEETER

She snatched up the paper, eyes scanning, heart pounding.

## THE DARK LORD IS VICTORIOUS AGAIN!

A SMALL REBELLION BROKE OUT AT DOVER CASTLE ON MONDAY EVENING LED BY INSURGENTS AND OLD ORDER SYMPATHIZERS. THE ROCKY BEACH AT DOVER PROVIDED MINOR COVER FOR THE REBELS AS THE DARK LORD’S FORCES GATHERED AND VANQUISHED THEIR FOES.

Hermione stumbled out of the kitchens, swallowing the information, and running for fresh air. She pushed through the front doors of the Manor, gasping at the morning breeze, and leaned back against the exterior wall. Her chest was tight, and her fingers trembled as she read on.

THERE WERE LIMITED CASUALTIES FOR THE DEATH EATERS AT MONDAY’S SKIRMISH, BUT CONSIDERABLE LOSSES FOR THE REBELS

She turned to see a watery-eyed forty-six-year-old elf clasping her hands together.

"Er, no. I was just going to help you!" She opened another cabinet, finding nothing incriminating.

"Miss wants sugar? Not honey spoons?"

Her hands froze. *The honey.*

She turned to Plumb. Remmy stood right behind her with a shrewd twist to her lips.

"I was thinking I might not have honey any longer," she tested, watching Remmy's expression. If they were instructed to give her honey, laced with the suppressant, then they might panic.

"Miss hates honey?!" A tear fell down Plumb's trembling cheeks. "But Plumb is giving Miss honey for weeks!"

Hermione's eyes widened, unprepared for house-elf dramatics. "No! No, I like honey. I like it very much!"

Two more tears dropped from Plumb's violet eyes. "I makes honey tea for Miss and for Master Draco. Does Master Draco hate it too?"

Hermione frowned. Draco. Yes. The suppressant wouldn't be in the honey. Unless there was a special jar just for her...

"Might you have a different honey?" Hermione asked, mind working.

"THE HONEY IS GONE BAD?"

Remmy huffed and stepped forward, placing a calming hand on Plumb's heaving shoulder. "We has one honey. Plumb is giving three honey spoons to Miss and Master Draco. Does Miss want different?"

Plumb was now sobbing uncontrollably into her hands. Guilt sank heavily in Hermione's stomach. She just couldn't win. She knelt down in front of the violet-eyed elf and gently pulled her waxy hands away from her blubbing face.

"Plumb? I would very much like a cup of tea with three honey spoons. Might you be able to help me with that?"

Plumb nodded so violently, her little ears flopped into Hermione's

day."

She sneered back at him, dragging her fingers across his ornate frame as he gasped in indignation.

It was difficult for her to have no purpose. Ever since she was eleven, Harry had needed her. She knew things. She had answers. And if she didn't have the answer, she could look it up.

But she was incapable of answering certain questions with books now. She had survived and was being protected for reasons that were impossible to understand. All her captors seemed to ask of her was to merely exist. She'd turned over a dozen possible motives in her mind over the last few days, each more preposterous than the last. *They were Order sympathizers. Double agents. Saving her as a bargaining chip in the event that Voldemort was defeated.*

Whatever their reasons for keeping her safe, one thing was certain: people were dying. Her friends were dying. She'd already lost too much time.

Pushing open the library doors, she shuffled to the texts on dark magic.

It seemed that she had several problems.

Firstly, Voldemort had the Elder Wand — something she had never put as much faith into as Harry had. She was always more interested in the Horcruxes. They were tangible, and weren't rooted in fables.

Which brought her to her second problem: Nagini. There were only two people alive who knew about Voldemort's last Horcrux: her and Ron. She remembered Neville running for the snake in the courtyard, but she couldn't be sure he knew the importance of it. If someone was able to defeat Voldemort, she or Ron would have to make sure the snake was dead. That seemed like such a far off problem.

The locket, cup, tiara, ring, and diary were all gone. A surge of memories rose through her consciousness, unbidden. Parseltongue, shared dreams, mind connections. Where she'd thought that maybe Harry was...

She wiped her clammy hands on her trousers and forced the thought aside.

None of that mattered anymore.

Was Nagini really the last one? Or had he made more? Was his soul stable enough for more?

Hermione reached for a text, her bandaged left arm stretching high, reminding her of her third problem. The tattoos. She wouldn't be able to leave the estate without Draco. She could do all the research in the world, answer all the questions, and still it would be pointless if she couldn't leave and tell someone about it.

If only she could get in touch with George. Figure out some way of communicating to him, even if she couldn't leave. But if Voldemort looked into her mind again...

She flipped open the book on Horcruxes she'd been looking at last week, searching for the passage on Fiendfyre she'd wanted to reread— And snapped the book closed. Her mind... the images she saw... the things she read...

Voldemort could see them all.

It wasn't just her important memories he had access to. He could see anything she did, no matter how mundane. Pages and words and information. Her favorite things.

She put back the book with shaking fingers, knowing that researching Horcruxes was enough to incriminate her. She'd never been afraid of her own mind before. But her knowledge would betray her if Voldemort performed Legilimency on her again.

Staring at the books, staring at the shelves of a library so dark and powerful that it could defeat Voldemort and his Elder Wand with only its pages wielded by the right person, Hermione realized she couldn't use any of it.

She stepped back, breathing hard. There was nothing she could research. Nothing was safe. She blinked quickly at the stacks, focusing on her breath, feeling a sharp pain in her ribs.

"Right," she said. "Back to work."



She studied well into the evening, spreading texts across the large table and scribbling notes. It might be the only time at the Manor she didn't have to worry about being caught, with all three Malfoys away. Figuring out the suppressant potion was an obvious choice for her. Having her magic back would make it easier to escape, once she'd found a way around the tattoos. And if she was caught, an academic curiosity about the suppressant potion wasn't something she would be killed over.

Hopefully.

There were several herbs and crushed stones that could ward off evil spirits, but she wouldn't know the exact combinations unless she could break it down in a potions laboratory. She'd need a vial of the minty potion. And a cauldron. Hermione wrote down and pocketed her list of ingredients.

In the morning, she strode back to the kitchens. The elves looked up from their washing. Remy almost rolled her eyes.

"Miss is hungry?"

"No, thank you." She smiled. "I was just hoping for a cup of tea."

Plumb jumped off of her stool wringing her hands. "Miss calls for Plumb; Plumb did not hear!"

"No, no. I didn't call." She waved her hands, hoping to keep Plumb from banging the kettle over her head. "I was just going to visit, and ask for you to make it here."

*Where I can watch you.*

Plumb leapt to work, setting a fire under the kettle.

"I'll just grab the sugar for you," she said, starting for the shelves. Wrenching the cabinets open, she searched for potion vials kept in handy locations for pouring into tea.

"Miss not like how Plumb makes?"



enemy. Interesting, considering that she was here to snoop.

Her head pressed against the invisible barrier, tilting to the side to view the interior walls. A series of bookshelves that had her fingers itching lined the left wall. Wouldn't it be interesting to see what books Lucius Malfoy kept at his disposal? Kept out of the library?

After ten minutes of squinting at the titles on his shelf, she wandered to the library, ready to tackle one of her many problems. She ran through the questions she had, prioritized them, and tried to find workable solutions.

The most pressing question was contingent on Draco's health. If he died, what would become of her? She trusted Narcissa's kindness in her current circumstances, but she wasn't certain how far it would extend. If she could no longer reside at Malfoy Manor, where would they send her? Would she go back to Auction?

Pushing open the library doors, she brushed aside the fleeting, wistful hope that she'd find Draco at the stacks, turning to her and lifting a brow.

Hands on her hips, standing before a vast library entirely at her disposal, Hermione prioritized.

There was no precedent for the Auction that she was aware of, which meant it would be futile to research the kinds of rules they made for the death of a buyer. She filed that question away, unable to answer it.

Horcruxes, tattoos, or suppressants. Which should she focus on today? A dark thought pressed over her as her eyes skimmed the stacks. *Did any of this matter? They lost. You lost.*

Her lips pressed together. She took a deep breath.

Magic suppression. That's what she'd look into today.

Throwing caution to the wind, she turned to the library catalog and said, "Show me books on magic suppression." And then as an afterthought, "Please."

An eerie shuffling sound from the stacks, and she eyed several books pulled from their homes and hovering in the aisles.

Her mind wasn't her own. She felt his presence inside, slick like oil. It had been almost two weeks since he had invaded her consciousness. Perhaps he wouldn't again. But could she count on it?

She leaned back on the shelves, closing her eyes, trying to find a way out.

The sound of shuffling to her left snapped her eyes open. A book slid from a shelf down an aisle and hovered, as if it had been called. Blinking, she turned to see if anyone was at the catalogue at the front.

No one.

The book hovered. Hermione moved down the aisle, walking carefully toward the text. Close enough to grasp it, and she read the spine.

*Mind Tricks for Beginners.*

Her heart stuttered in her chest as she reached for the thin book. It fell into her hands like an apple from a tree. She stared at the cover blankly for a minute before daring her head around the corner—perhaps a member of the family was playing tricks on her? But there was no one there. Hermione retreated from view and flipped to the table of contents, fingers trembling.

Occlumency and Legilimency.

A book on shielding one's thoughts. Hermione frowned, wondering if the library catalogue provided help without prompting.

Occlumency would be the best protection from Voldemort's probing, but it was a magical ability. And she didn't have magic. Nor did she have the time for the years of study it would take to keep Voldemort out of her mind entirely.

She read the chapter titles:

*Meditation*

*Clearing Your Mind*

*Walls and Doorways*

From the little she knew of Occlumency from her own reading and Harry's lessons, it required a focused mind. She used to bite back a remark

whenever Harry moaned about Snape's methods, certain that her mind—her disciplined mind—could have succeeded with far less whinging.

She looked around the library again for other hovering books, half expecting Harry to emerge from his Invisibility Cloak, teasing her about spending all day amongst the books.

The space behind her eyes burned and she swallowed, blinking rapidly. She looked down again with blurry eyes. The first chapters sounded simple enough, possibly non-magical meditation.

Hermione slid the thin book into a large fiction, and began her slow journey back to her room.

She was just passing several doors that she knew lead to private studies and lounges when she heard voices. Narcissa's melodic hum pierced the cracks in the door and Hermione stilled, listening with held breath.

"Why does it have to be you?" Narcissa said sharply.

"Why does it have to be any of us?" Lucius replied. "He's probably fallen asleep in his dinner somewhere. Or had a heart attack while with one of his paid Muggle whores."

"Lucius, this could be serious."

Hermione pressed closer, her ears straining as Lucius mumbled something low and placating.

"How long?" Narcissa asked.

"A week," Lucius said, his voice closer to the door. Hermione jumped back, frozen in horror—but it seemed that Lucius was pacing. His voice distant again as he said, "He's ignored three summons."

Hermione's eyes widened at her shoes, books pressed tight to her chest. A Death Eater had been ignoring Voldemort?

"Something's happened to him, Lucius. He would never defy the Dark Lord." And then under her breath: "He doesn't have the brains for that." Lucius hissed at her. "None of that. *We* are in no position to think those thoughts."

A long pause. Then Narcissa sighed. "How long will you be gone?"

"Hello again," Hermione chirped. "Peach, isn't it?"

The older elf frowned and said, "Plumb."

"Ah. Yes." She felt heat climbing her neck.

They all stared at each other.

"Miss wants dinner now?" Remy glared.

"No, no." She tried resting casually on the back of a small elf chair. It teetered, and she straightened again. "Er, how long have you been working for the Malfoys?"

"Plumb was born here."

"Oh?" Her brows jumped, and she faced Plumb. "So a very long time! I have read that house-elves can live to two hundred."

Plumb scowled at her. "Plumb is forty-six."

"Right." Her face flushed. "Well then, you all must remember Dobby! He was a dear friend of mine."

The elf in the back let out a tutting sound, and Remy's expression didn't change. It seemed she gained no clout by mentioning that name here.

"Please, do go on." She gestured vaguely at their work. "I just wanted to visit. Perhaps chat a bit."

They stared at her. The knives had ceased their chopping. She opened her mouth. And closed it.

"Yes, alright. I'll take dinner now."

So she ate at 2pm that day.

Later, she'd retraced her steps towards Lucius's study, positive it would still bar her, but content to try regardless. The door handle turned under her fingers, and to her surprise, she could push the door open fully with a shove. Her hand pressed against the barrier—still blocked out.

She stared into the dim room, the window behind the desk casting late afternoon shadows forward. Spying a *Foe Glass* on a shelf, Hermione eyed it, waiting to see if her face clarified and formed in the fog. Silhouettes shifted, passing in the void, but the Glass didn't recognize her as an



It had been almost a week since Hermione had been left alone in the Manor, and she thought she'd explored every inch of it by now. She kept her mind occupied by cataloging each room, searching for clues or possible weapons. As the days passed, she realized she couldn't hold out hope that the Malfoys would be the next faces she saw.

Hermione took the Occlumency book to the conservatory every morning, breathing in the plants and honing her meditation skills. At night, the corridors seemed to creak with the Manor's heavy years, so Hermione stayed inside her bedroom once the sun set. She kept meals in her room, and no one was happier about that than Remmy, who seemed quite pleased to see as little of Hermione as possible.

On the second day of her solitude, Hermione discovered the kitchens. Three elves worked alongside Remmy, cleaning and making dinner for no one.

"Hello."

Four pairs of hands paused, and four pairs of eyes turned to her in varying shades of violet and green.

She cleared her throat. "I'm Hermione."

Remmy waddled to her, scowling. "Miss is hungry? Already?"

"Er, no." She tried a smile. "I just wanted to introduce myself. And meet you all." Surely the elves had the most information about the Malfoy family secrets. Never a bad idea to befriend an elf.

They stared at her. It was silent except for the sound of chopping vegetables from the enchanted knives. Closest to her was the elf that delivered tea on her first night.

## CHAPTER 10

"Just overnight."

"Can't you take someone with you? Yaxley?"

"Everyone else is concerned with the Macnair estate."

Hermione's mind spun. The Macnair estate was where Ron had been at one point. Macnair had bought Ron, Angelina Johnson, and Luna.

If all Death Eaters were concentrating their attention to the Macnair estate... If someone else had disappeared completely... Something was unraveling.

"I need"—Narcissa cleared her throat—"I need to see about lunch." A scraping of furniture legs. "You'll join me for tea before you leave?"

"I... I have several things—"

"I don't care. I'll see you for tea."

There was a flurry of footsteps and Hermione ducked behind a bust of Lucius Malfoy I just as the door flew open, squeezing herself tight so she wouldn't be seen.

Narcissa's heels clicked away down the stones, and once she'd rounded the corner leading to the kitchens, Hermione stood tall again and spun silently on her heel to run back to her room.

"Miss Granger," Lucius called out from inside the room.

Hermione froze, heart pounding. How had she given herself away? She forced herself to move, stepping into the doorway to find Lucius scribbling with a quill at a desk in an impressive study. He didn't look up at her.

"I take it that you have a habit of listening at doors like a child, then?"

His tone was lyrical.

The tension in her shoulders melted. He wasn't going to kill her for what she heard. Just mock her to death. She braced herself, assuming the polite thing to do would be to enter the room and—

She stumbled backward. There was a barrier in the doorway. Similar to the one on her patio. She couldn't lift her foot to step through.

"Oh, no," he said, leaning back in his leather chair. "That wasn't an

invitation.” He pulled the feather of the quill between his fingertips and stared at her. “I suppose you’ve come to thank me for pulling your shaking and drooling body up the hill and back inside the barrier.”

She narrowed her eyes, her temper sharpening like a knife against the stone. “Yes, I was surprised to find that you’d carried me—”

“Heavens, no.” He lifted a brow at her. “I grabbed your arm and pulled you behind me like a dog.”

She glared at him, knowing that wasn’t true. But he was purposefully distracting her. She wondered how far she could push him.

“Who is missing?”

He tilted his head at her, and she expected silence, or another insult, or a taunting “come again?”

“Gregory Goyle,” he said, adding, “Senior.”

She blinked at him, surprised by an honest answer. Or a *supposedly* honest answer.

If he *was* telling the truth, why would Goyle disobey Voldemort? He was one of the ones who had returned immediately. He was in the graveyard in Little Hangleton. Were they sure he was alive?

Looking up at him again, Hermione knew Lucius was reading her face, knew her mind was whirling.

“I’ll give you one more question,” he said, eyes glittering. “Better make it worthwhile.”

She felt her heart stutter in her chest. He wanted to play a game? Waiting for the right question to come to her, Hermione stood frozen, rooted to the floor,

*Why did Draco purchase me?*

*Who has access to Nagini?*

*What has George done to anger Voldemort?*

“Why are the Death Eaters gathered at the Macnair estate?” Her voice clicked, and she didn’t know if she’d chosen the right question out of the thousands in her mind.

“Hello.”

Remmy said nothing, but sent the tray to her side table.

“Will Mrs. Malfoy be joining me today?” Hermione asked.

“Mistress is gone.”

She blinked. “Oh. Gone?”

Remmy nodded, face scrunching into a tight sorrow—the most emotion Hermione had seen from the elf yet.

“Master Malfoy is hurt.”

Hermione felt her blood rushing in her ears.

“Which Master Malfoy?” she asked.

Remmy frowned with watery eyes. “Master Draco.”

She swallowed and looked down at her arm, expecting... something.

“Thank you, Remmy.”

Remmy left the room. And Hermione stared at the closed door.

Draco was injured. And it was serious enough that Narcissa left to be with him. She stared down at her breakfast tray, wondering what would happen to her if Draco died. Surely if he had, the tattoo would have alerted her? A sudden, inexplicable terror seized her ribs, the pressure so overwhelming she found herself gasping for air. She screwed her eyes shut and drew on the meditation she’d been practicing until it passed. She leaned against the bookshelves, savoring the feeling of the wood pressing into her spine, and stared out her windows.

If Draco died, would she go back to Dolohov?

She forced herself to breathe.

She tried, but failed, to find a scrap of joy that there had been some kind of victory for the rebellion. The guilt twisted heavy in her gut while she waited for news of Draco’s health, watching as the sun rose higher in the sky, and began to fall again.

A chill passed through her at the realization that she was alone at Malfoy Manor for the indefinite future, wandless, with only the elves for company.

## THE AUCTION

Hermione, and followed his father out.

They'd been called. Abruptly. Possibly a reflection of Voldemort's mood.

They were gone for several long moments before Hermione remembered to breathe again. Her stomach twisted, even though she felt like she should rejoice if something was wrong.

Narcissa folded her hands on the table, pressing her lips together. Hermione waited, not daring to speak.

"It was like this before," Narcissa said, voice low and somber. "He'd leave, and I'd wonder when I'd see him again." She pressed her fingers to her mouth and said, "And now it's both of them."

Hermione sat still as a statue. She stared at Draco's empty chair, thinking of her missing friends.

Narcissa turned to her. "Are your parents safe?" She reached out and took Hermione's hand. "I never knew how to ask about them."

Hermione swallowed, tears pricking behind her eyes. "Yes," she managed. "They're safe. They're away."

Narcissa nodded, and turned her eyes back to Draco's soup bowl.

They stayed like that until Mippy came to announce the next course.



Before bed, Hermione found all seven Gainsworth books placed on her bedside table. She felt something like guilt when she first saw them, but she set it aside and allowed herself to get lost in the pages. She read the first before falling asleep. That night, she dreamed of her favorite story instead of her usual nightmare, where Harry or Luna slipped through her fingers and fell somewhere far beyond her reach.

She woke late the next morning. It was past nine when she finally tested, "Mippy?" Nothing happened. She frowned.

At 9:20, a knock came from the door. She opened it to find a scowling Remmy with the breakfast tray.

## CHAPTER 10

He steeped his fingers, and gazed at her over the tops of them. "To investigate the recent murder of Walden Macnair, and subsequent escape of his prisoner."

Her eyes widened. *Ron*. Or... prisoner, singular?

She opened her lips—

"Ask and you will receive *within reason*, Miss Granger," he cut in, effectively silencing her. "Creeping about like a mouse is unbecoming." His eyes dug into her, flickering down to the book in her arms and back. "Do enjoy your reading. Hopefully it's something... instructive."

She stared at him, her skin feeling too tight. His face was impassive.

Her fingers curled tighter around the Occlumency book, tucked into the larger fiction book. Did he know? Did he...?

"Thank you, I will," she replied.

He looked away, breaking her gaze. "Could you close the door before you go?" She narrowed her eyes at him. The door handle was past the barrier she couldn't pass. His lips quirked. "Oh yes, of course."

And with a wave of his hand the door slammed in her face.

She frowned at the wood, inches from her nose. No doubt that conversation would take her weeks to untangle.

Wandering back to her room, taking the stairs slowly for her aching muscles, Hermione started with item number one.

Goyle's father was missing. She didn't know anything else, except that Voldemort was sending Lucius Malfoy to investigate. Perhaps he had been murdered and Lucius was headed to find his body.

Second item: Walden Macnair was dead. And a singular prisoner had escaped. Last she'd heard, Ron had been summoned by Voldemort, so it was possible that it was Angelina who had gotten out. Was it George? Had he come for his brother?

And why was Lucius Malfoy telling her all of this? What could he gain from passing information to her? Was it even the truth? What game was he playing?

She reached the top of the stairs, her book pressing into her ribs, and wondered about the Occlumency book that had hovered for her to find. Did Lucius plant it there for her? What possible benefit could Occlumency give her if she didn't have magic?

Pausing in front of her doorway, Hermione breathed deep with the exertion.

Did she have magic?

Was the minty potion truly being served?

She pushed open the door, and stood in the middle of her room. Turning to her bookshelf, she reached an arm out, focusing her energy on bringing a blue spine to her.

Nothing.

Visualizing her wand in her hand, she concentrated on the magic she was born with. The magic that made her float the neighbor's cat when she was seven. The magic that set Becky Tracker's hair on fire when she was ten.

She thought she felt something fighting in her veins.

But nothing.

She dropped her arm. It seemed the Malfoys followed some of the rules on slaves after all. Perhaps it had been the enchanted library catalogue that called the book for her.

Sighing, she settled into the wingback chair that faced the windows and opened the thin book.

*Chapter One: Meditation.*



Three days later, she was on her sixth reread of *Mind Tricks for Beginners*, finding it very difficult to read theories and techniques without the practical application. It felt like her year before Hogwarts when she had gobbled up all of the magical books she could get her hands on, but hadn't been able to practice anything without a wand.

as he stared at Narcissa, his features clouded with irritation. Hermione narrowed her eyes.

It wouldn't have happened if he'd been more open with her. If he hadn't kept her in the dark since the moment she'd set foot on the Manor's marbled floors.

"I don't regret that 'walk' one bit. In fact, it was quite informative," she said sharply. Draco's eyes snapped up to her. "I'd like access to my balcony back, by the way."

Lucius muttered, "*Your* balcony..."

Narcissa swept up her wine glass and vanished behind the brim.

"And why would I do that, if you're so fond of injuring yourself?" Draco said, patting his mouth with his napkin.

Hermione squared her shoulders. "The likelihood of dying from a three-story fall is so low—"

His gaze hardened. "If I know you, you'll accomplish it."

"Well, I hardly see the difference," she said, feeling her blood pulsing.

"I'm just as likely to be injured *in* my room as out of it."

She felt the air in the room pull tight, like a string, vibrating. Draco's eye twitched. He took a deep breath, but nothing came from his lips.

She looked to Lucius, raising a brow over his wine glass, and then to Narcissa, staring down into her empty soup bowl, looking strangely lost at the reminder of her sister's sudden appearance in Manor.

"That won't happen again," Draco whispered. He stared at her, eyes hot and intense. "She's been barred from the estate."

Hermione blinked, stunned. Draco parted his lips to continue—He jerked, a gasp of pain. The spoon clattered in the empty bowl. He stood, chair pushing back from the table with a racket.

Lucius was on his feet too, rubbing his forearm.

"We have to go."

He walked quickly to Narcissa's side, placing a kiss on her cheekbone before sweeping from the room. Draco kissed his mother, slid his eyes to

"That's enough, Lucius," said Narcissa sternly. He relented after a moment, lounging back in his chair, a smirk curving his lips.

Draco cleared his throat and took a deep sip from his goblet.

Thankfully, the first course arrived filling the soup bowls, and Mippy appeared at Hermione's elbow again.

"This is Mippy's favorite! Pumpkin soup! Mippy makes it special for Miss—"

"Do you plan on announcing every course?" came Lucius's steely voice. "Lucius," Narcissa warned. She turned to her elf. "Thank you, Mippy." Mippy twirled her ear and vanished.

Hermione took a deep breath through her lungs. The more she bit back, the more difficult he could make it for her. She shoved her anger aside and documented which spoon Narcissa chose, picking up the same. She tried the soup with as much grace as she could muster, noticing that each Malfoy sat ramrod straight, dipping their spoons with the same elegance and balance.

The soup vanished her sour mood, at least temporarily. It was... to die for.

Narcissa held conversation quite well for someone who could talk about nothing going on outside the Manor itself. She found ways to include all three reluctant parties at the table, asking questions or commenting upon their daily activities.

But no matter what Narcissa did, she could not get Draco to engage. Whereas Lucius had a sarcastic comment at every turn, Draco seemed as distant as possible.

"Well, I happen to love walking around the estate in the mornings," Narcissa said to Hermione, after failing yet again to engage her son. "It's so tranquil. The grounds truly wake with you."

"Granger's already gone on a morning walk, Mother," came a caustic voice. "You can stop selling it to her. She was almost killed last time."

Hermione looked up at Draco. His hand was frozen on his soup spoon

Perhaps she wasn't cut out for Occlumency, and she'd been too harsh on Harry. Clearing her mind was not a strong suit of hers. Her constantly running questions and curiosities were a detriment to meditation.

There were certain techniques that were interesting enough. A cool blue lake with calm waters, stretching out past the horizon. Depths below, but a still and tranquil surface. Or sometimes focusing on a moving target, and blurring the edges of everything else.

She was staring out the window at the grounds, trying to focus only on a lone peacock making its way across the lawn, when there came a knock at her door. She blinked. The intrusion bringing her mind back to the present.

Setting down her teacup, she took a breath and said, "Come in."

Draco pushed open the door, and her breath caught in her throat. She hadn't seen him in nearly two weeks. She'd stopped needing the potions several days ago, so there had been no tangible reminder of him for some time. Besides his lovely home and lovely mother and lovely sheets.

He was out of uniform again. Grey button-down shirt and black trousers. She flushed at the memory of the last time she'd seen him, when he hadn't been wearing any clothing. She hadn't forgotten about the beauty mark on his left shoulder, or the way his skin shivered against hers.

He stood in the doorway like there was a spell keeping him out. She watched his eyes drift down to the corner of her mouth where her bruise had healed.

"My mother would like to invite you to dinner in the dining room tonight."

She stared at him, waiting for him to say more. To explain why he'd saved her that night, and kept away ever since. She searched his face, but his features gave away nothing. Still hiding, then. After frantically pulling poison from her veins with his lips.

She clenched her jaw, disappointment twisting in her gut. "And why is she not here then?"

He blinked, and looked down to the carpets. "My mother would like for *me* to ask you to dinner in the dining room tonight."

"Tell her thank you, but no." She turned back to her tea service. "I will be perfectly happy taking dinner in my room tonight."

She took her teacup to her bathroom and shut the door behind her, dismissing him. If he wanted to her to have dinner or talk with him or... anything else, then he'd have to force her.

She stared at her pale reflection in the mirror and willed heart and temper to calm. It was already clear that he didn't care for her. Why did she have to create delusions for herself?

When she emerged after a few minutes, she expected him to be gone, not examining her bookshelves. But there he was. She watched as his fingers ran over a spine.

"You reorganized them." He glanced at her.

"Yes." She cleared her throat, ignoring the fluttering in her stomach. "They were organized by Muggle and Magical, then by genre, then some strange system I hadn't deciphered—"

"By publish date," he offered.

She blinked at his profile. "Brontë was filed after Joyce."

He frowned. His head swiveled to a top shelf where she'd replaced Brontë into alphabetical order by author's name. He plucked the forest green spine off the shelf and flipped open to the first pages.

"It's a reprint. 1931." His brows drew together. "The original must be in the library. I thought it was in here."

Leave it to Draco Malfoy to distract her by waxing eloquent about books.

She stood next to her bed as his fingers ran down the front page of Jane Eyre. "That's what you get for filing things with magic," she said primly. The corner of his mouth twitched. And she wondered if she'd just made Draco Malfoy smile.

"I'll have the original brought to you."

"Father," Draco cut in. A warning in his tone.

Lucius gave his son a sardonic half bow before taking his seat. "How good of you to join us, Draco."

Hermione stared between them, her mind racing. Bellatrix had resented their treatment of her, and it seemed Lucius disapproved of it as well. It wasn't a stretch to imagine that he hadn't wanted her there in the first place. She jumped when Mippy appeared at her elbow with a decanter.

"Wine, Miss?"

"Mippy," Lucius hummed, scowling. "You will serve the Lord of the Manor first."

Mippy lowered her eyes and bounced over to Lucius with the wine. Hermione looked to see Narcissa smiling into her water glass and Draco rubbing his brow, like a headache was forthcoming.

They sat in thick silence as Mippy poured wine for each of them. It had been ages since Hermione had last had a glass of wine. While reason dictated that she shouldn't drink around people she couldn't trust, it also told her she might not survive an hour of Lucius' presence without it.

"Hermione, dear," Narcissa said, once Mippy vanished. "Have you had a chance to visit the conservatory off the western wing? It's lovely this time of year."

She fidgeted in her seat. "Er... No, I haven't had the opportunity yet."

"Too busy exploring the perimeter, I expect," Lucius said, smiling coolly in her direction.

Her cheeks flushed as she glared at him. "Yes, well, I suppose you could call me more of a hands-on learner. I'm not one to take things I'm told at face value."

Lucius leaned forward slowly, his eyes fixed on hers. Hermione lifted her chin. "Do you find your situation terribly *confining*, Miss Granger?" He tilted his head. "Having your own living quarters, and free range of the Manor? Does it make you feel a bit feverish to experience the world outside?"



He quirked his head for her to follow him and disappeared around the corner.

She followed him to another room on the first floor, past the library and past a beautiful view of the pond and the gazebo. They must have been under her bedroom.

He stopped at the doorway and gestured for her to lead in. She turned and found Narcissa at the head of a much smaller, but no less grand, dining table.

"Hermione, dear," she said warmly. "I'm so glad you've joined us for dinner." She waved at the chair closest to her on her left.

Hermione nodded and forced herself to smile. She made her way to the specified chair and sat, watching Draco mirror her across the table. Wonderful. She'd face him for all of dinner then.

"We're thrilled you felt well enough to join us. We've all been terribly worried, of course. Some of us even more than others."

Hermione dragged her eyes from Draco's scowl to find Narcissa beaming at her, a knowing look in her eye.

"Thank you for having me," she offered weakly, wondering what kind of societal niceties she'd need to adopt for the next hour.

No sooner had Narcissa reached over to pat her hand, than Lucius entered the room, stopping cold at the sight of her. He blinked slowly and said, "Are you lost?"

Hermione shot daggers at him as Draco stiffened in his seat.

"Hush," Narcissa snapped. "I invited her." She turned to Hermione. "You'll have to pardon Lucius. I'm afraid he's been under a lot of stress lately." She shot him a frosty look.

Lucius lifted a brow and pulled the chair at the other head of the table. "She is a slave, not a house guest, Narcissa."

"I truly don't see the difference." Narcissa flicked her napkin and laid it across her lap. "As long as she's here, there's no reason why she must remain locked in her room with only books for company."

She snorted. "I don't *need* the original."

His jaw tightened, and he nodded. Gaze on the bookshelves, he said, "Anything that you do need?"

She sighed. She didn't need anything besides his honesty, but she supposed she could indulge him for now. He'd stayed.

He waited for her reply, and she looked around the room, searching for something to ask for. She followed his gaze to the books as he dipped his head and fingered the cuff of his sleeve.

"Actually," she began. "There is... The *Undesirable* series."

His eyes turned on her, grey and warm. They urged her to continue.

"I found the collector's copies in the library. But I wondered if there were others I could take to reread?"

"You can take those," he said, eyes searching her.

"Oh, but those are..." She reached for words, trying to skate over the fact that she'd read his note from Lance Gainsworth. "They seemed... personal."

His eyes flickered, brows lifting, as he realized. He swallowed and looked away.

"I have another set. I'll have them delivered to your room."

"Thank you," she whispered, and she wondered if the deep inhale he took had anything to do with the reminder of the last time she'd thanked him—with her hand on his bare shoulder and her blood staining his lips.

"Are there other books you're enjoying?" he asked, eyes glazed over, focusing away from her. She frowned at his attempt at small talk, but then he continued. "Learning anything new?"

She felt her skin tighten.

*Mind Tricks for Beginners.*

They were all in on it. Together.

But, of course they were. Hermione swallowed. They would be punished far more severely than her if the wrong people heard about her treatment. She wondered if Bellatrix could be trusted to keep her observations

to herself.

She took a deep breath and said, “I’ve found several new things to read up on. But it seems as if I’m lacking the tools for a true education.”

Surely they knew she couldn’t accomplish much without magic. His brows pulled together. His gaze turned to the floor, thinking, like he always did in Arithmancy when the equations became tedious.

“I can look into that as well,” he said. And she knew they were dancing awfully close to the edge. If he felt he could have come right out and said it, he would have already spoken to her about Occlumency.

She watched him, eyes sliding over her bookcase, hands clasped behind his back. The grey shirt pulled taut across his clavicles. And she wondered how much Occlumency Draco Malfoy knew. She knew he could be cold and closed; surely he must know *some*. But was he skilled enough to keep the Dark Lord from shredding his thoughts and memories?

He turned to face her, breaking her stream of consciousness. “Dinner is at six.”

She lifted a brow. “I’ve already said I’m not coming.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “If you don’t join Mother and me downstairs, she will have my head.”

She snorted, turning back to her tea service. “I’m not sure how that’s my problem.”

A pause. “I can’t get you your books if I don’t have a head.”

“I’m positive Mippy would be just as useful in that department. I wouldn’t need you at all.” She tilted her chin up, challenging him to continue as spots of pink speckled his cheeks.

He swaggered to the doorway, and said, “Well, seeing as Mippy is preparing dinner this evening, I’m sure she would be less inclined to obey you if you offend her.”

“Mippy is a kitchen elf?” she asked, startled.

“No,” he said, reaching for the door handle. “She just loves to cook.”

She caught the beginnings of a grin on his lips as he left. Turning to

her wardrobe, she wondered what one should wear to dinner with the Malfoys.



At 5:57 PM, she descended the marble stairs and headed to where she assumed the dining room was. Narcissa had waved her hand towards it on her first day at the Manor, and she had tucked it away, like she did all the other details of the Manor’s layout.

The candles were burning low in the long room. A deep black dining table spread down the narrow dining hall without any table settings or centerpieces. There was a hum of dark magic, like it had dissolved into the walls.

Had she been tricked? Was there no dinner after all?

She shivered as her eyes roved the ceiling. She didn’t like this room. It felt like death.

“We have two dining rooms.”

She turned to see Draco ten paces from her, standing at the corner of the corridor leading elsewhere.

“Of course you do,” she muttered. “I always carry a spare as well.”

His eyes glimmered, the corner of his mouth twitched. “The smaller dining room is this way.” He gestured for her to follow, but she remained frozen.

She had to ask before leaving. The smell of this darkness would stick to her clothing like smoke.

“What happened in here?” she said, staring into the long room, waiting for an answer. “There’s dark magic here.”

She glanced back at him. He was looking into the walls of the room like he could see inside. Like he could see a scene play out in front of his eyes.

His eyes flickered to meet hers. “We don’t use that room anymore.”

And she knew the conversation was done. Or at least paused for now.