

quickly behind her with a swift slap to her backside that had her yelping.

He shoved her shoulders into the mattress, pulled her hips up, and pushed against her again. And from here it was like she could feel every inch of him. Her dress yanked up, her knickers and his trousers the only thing between them. If he even still had his trousers closed. She couldn't be sure.

She panted into the comforter, fingers scrambling for something. Anything. She tossed a pillow over her shoulder at him, knowing it didn't hit its mark.

She struggled against the hand on her spine as he rutted against her, pressing the most intimate parts of themselves together.

"You know how I like it when you fight."

Tears pushed against her eyelids. Her body sagged into the mattress, exhausted.

Was he going to penetrate her?

Her nails cut through the sheets. He groaned, one hand squeezing her hip, pressing deep bruises.

And then the pressure let up. Before she could scramble away, he flipped her onto her back. She reached to claw at his face, his throat, her heartbeat in her stomach.

They struggled with each other's arms until he grabbed both of her hands, pinning them to the mattress and whispering a Sticking Charm. He climbed over her hips, holding her legs down with his weight.

She jerked her torso and caught sight of his eyes.

Dead.

Irises black with arousal.

But there was no glint of enjoyment.

When he caught her staring, he smirked down at her, grabbed her jaw, and said, "You want me to fuck your mouth again, Granger?"

Her eyes went wide. She sucked in air. "Draco—"

He pushed his palm against her mouth, silencing her. "Not interested

found nothing.

Although rifling through his drawers was a clear breach of privacy, and expressly against what Narcissa had requested of her, she had bigger issues to worry about. She shoved aside her guilt and pulled open the next drawer.

Laid on top of other greys and blacks was the blue jumper he'd worn weeks ago while sipping on cold tea in her bedroom, as she recovered from her electrocution. It was soft.

She pulled open the drawers against the wall and blushed to find his trunks. Black. Of course. The next drawer was filled with socks. An indeterminate amount of socks. She rolled her eyes.

The bottom drawer had extra blankets and a black shoebox. She pried the top open and found her own face staring back at her.

Her fingers froze. Her heart seized. A cold chill ran across her shoulders and down her back.

MUGGLE-BORNS WANTED FOR INTER-ROGATION

It was the article printed when she was on the run last year, marking her as a priority for the Muggle-Born Registration Commission.

She watched her image turn, an old picture they'd used from the night at the Department of Mysteries once the press had arrived. She was covered in blood, sweat, and dirt. She looked feral.

Her head spun, and she centered herself.

There was a drawer in Draco Malfoy's bedroom that contained a shoebox. Inside that shoebox was a picture of her.

She squeezed the lid of the box between her fingers, trying to make sense of it.

Other scraps of paper lay beneath. Her shaking hand reached.

"Miss needs something?"

Jumping, smacking her head on the top of the dresser, she turned to

see a portly male elf in the closet doorway holding linens.

"Er, no, I was just..." she stammered, swiftly closing the box and drawer. The elf stared at her, waiting for an answer. Hermione focused on the bedsheets. "Are they home?"

The chubby little elf looked down sadly. "No. Mippy asks Boppy to bring fresh sheets."

She stood. "Is Mippy here?"

Boppy shook his head again. "Just calls for Boppy."

"Did you see them?" she asked, suddenly desperate. "Was he recovering? Or—?"

"Boppy only sees Mippy. Master and Missus is behind a door."

"What door? Where?"

He stared up at her, eyes watering. "Boppy is not to say. Boppy is just to change sheets." Shifting on his feet in his little pillowcase, he said, "Miss needs help with something?"

Hermione pressed her lips together, mind spinning with all the new information. "No, no. I'll just... head back to mine. My room, that is."

She forced a smile at Boppy as she exited, turning left and falling into her bedroom to lean back on the door. It *was* larger than Draco's. She followed the frame separating her sleeping area from her living space. These had been two rooms, and someone had knocked down the wall between.

She blinked, rearranging the ideas in her mind.

There was a drawer in Draco Malfoy's bedroom that contained a shoebox. Inside that shoebox was a picture of her.

A newspaper article, she corrected. From almost a year ago. Marking her as a wanted woman.

Combing her mind for what she remembered of that article, she looked out the large windows to the pond. Lupin had told them about the Muggle-Born Registration Commission last year, before they went Horcrux hunting. This article had announced her importance. It had told

her own.

The ring that had sliced her lip open when he'd hit her. Not because he'd wanted to, but...

Why had he pinched her?

He grunted into her ear.

This simulation served a purpose. She just had to figure out what it was.

One hand on her hip, tugging her backward, pulling her feet back a step with him while his other hand held her upper body to the wall. He kicked her ankle out, widening her stance. The angle brought his hard length closer to her center, and she gasped.

His hand pinched her again, harder. She jerked, rubbing herself on him accidentally.

"You like that?" he hummed behind her. He slammed his hips to hers, shaking her.

She looked down, trying to figure out what was happening between them. What it was she was supposed to like—

His hand in her hair, twisting her head before she could look. Her neck twinged, and she winced at the pain. His fingers tugged her locks, and the dam inside her burst.

Adrenaline skyrocketed through her veins. Her hands reached back, scratching at the hand in her hair, slapping at any inch of him she could reach. She heard a few hits connect. Her legs twisted to kick at him.

He chuckled and grabbed her around the waist, lifting her off the ground and carrying her back as she thrashed.

Her world widened. The whole room visible, instead of just the wall. She saw every weapon she could use if only she could reach them.

Her legs kicked at him, grunting and panting. She connected with the corner of the wingback chair, and it tumbled to the ground. And then she faced the bed, and he dropped her down into her comfortable mattress and pillows, where she'd found sanctuary for the past few months.

She tried to turn around to use her arms and legs on him, but he was



His hips rolled against her, pressing her into the wall. Her breath hitched, waking her brain. She pushed back again, struggling against his chest, twisting her body away from the wall.

He held her still, breathing hard into her hair. One hand held her arm against the wall, the other quickly slithered down her stomach, and as his hips canted into her again, he pinched the skin on her hip so sharply she yelped.

A dreamy sigh against her neck, like something divine had happened. She blinked quickly, wondering what the pinch was for. He rolled his hips again, his erection pressing harder into her. He pinched her again.

She squeaked.

“Malfoy,” she begged, “what are you—”

“Take my cock so good, don’t you.”

Her body froze. He pushed against her again, groaning, like he... Like they...

Both his hands came to cover hers on the wall.

“You like this, Granger?” His voice lilied. “You like it when I fuck you?”

She swallowed, brain spinning.

His fingers laced between hers, pressing her down.

“You’re so wet for me.”

That couldn’t possibly be. He wasn’t... he didn’t have access to...

She braced herself against the wall, trying to gather her wits as his hips rolled into her. Her gaze landed on the ring on his thumb, pressing over

CHAPTER 11

the world that she was wanted — that whoever procured her would be held in high regard, possibly even paid handsomely.

And Draco Malfoy had a copy of it hidden away in his room, in a location one would keep trinkets or fond old memories.

She felt the cool wood of the door against her back, her heated skin calming. Counting her fingers, counting her breaths, counting the trees she could see in the distance. She pushed aside the anxiety of being caught snooping. She pushed aside the concern over a door beyond which Narcissa and Lucius were standing guard over their son.

She pushed aside the feeling of familiarity. The memory of cutting out an article in the *Prophet* featuring his smirk and grey eyes, bright in the black and white print, and tucking it into her Hogwarts trunk.

Because this was war. And war had no room for her childish fantasies. So, what would the Malfoys gain by buying her at the Auction? She was valuable, of course. To both sides and for different reasons. Her purpose had been served for the Death Eaters: entertainment, humiliation, a symbol of hope reduced to a whore. But to the Order... she still was *incredibly* valuable. Was it possible the Malfoys were prepared to play both sides of this war?

Narcissa’s kindness, Lucius’s information, Draco’s concern for her.

They wanted her to learn Occlumency. They wanted her alive, unharmed, and untouched. They wanted her to play a part when Voldemort visited.

But they weren’t playing both sides, she reminded herself. Lucius Malfoy had just killed dozens at Dover Castle, including Charlie. Shaking her head, and knocking her skull back against the door, she refocused. She tried to think how Lucius Malfoy thinks.

If the Death Eaters fell, and the Order rose up again, would she be expected to testify to their treatment of her?

Her face in print, tucked away into a drawer, like it was a prized possession. Even now, she was tucked away in a suite in a fortress, safe as a

picture in a drawer.

She settled on one thought, boiling away all other concerns about magical suppressants and tattoos and Horcruxes until the crucible bubbled, and the new questions wafted up from the cauldron of her mind.

How long had the Malfoys been planning for her? And what did they expect her to do for them?



The next morning, Draco's door was locked. She rolled her eyes.

"Of course," she whispered to herself.

She wondered if Boppy even needed to bring fresh linens.

Every day for the rest of the week, she tried Draco's door. When it didn't budge, she wandered downstairs to try Lucius's study. She looked for Lucius and Narcissa's bedroom in the other wing, but she felt less inclined to intrude upon Narcissa's personal space.

She threw caution to the wind on the seventh day of their absence and began to reread the Horcrux book. There was nothing new. She now knew all the facets of making Horcruxes, but destroying them still yielded the same answers. At night, when her thoughts would drift to Charlie or Draco, she'd recite the steps in her mind until she fell asleep.

The water imagery in the Occlumency book encouraged her to examine the pond on the Malfoy estate more.

Think of a lake with still waters.

After a week of standing at her windows staring down at the pond, she finally wrapped herself against the afternoon wind, and crossed the grounds to the grassy shore. She plopped herself down in the grass, dropping several books next to her.

Gazing at the water's surface, Hermione blocked the sounds and smells around her, focusing on her sight only.

The peacocks broke her concentration as they cawed for her attention. She jumped, turning to see one several paces from her, eyeing her with a

The slip pulled up over her backside, and then his hand was underneath, smoothing his fingers up her spine until he found the clasp of her bra. A swift twist, and the clasp was undone.

He dragged the strap down one shoulder, his other hand still pressing her firm against the wall.

"You know how I feel about these tits, Granger." His voice rumbled behind her, shaking her ribs.

Her heart stuttered, and her breath caught. No... she didn't.

His fingers traced down her arm, curling around her elbow. His hand on her ribs, fingers reaching for her breast.

This wasn't right.

Something was wrong with him.

She pushed away from the wall with all her strength, jerking her hips back and twisting her body.

His hands snapped to her hips, holding her against the wall while his chest pressed to her back. She felt his breath heavy on her neck.

"Frisky today."

She panted, her forehead pressing into the wall and her palms still pushing her as far back as she could.

Could she call for help? Would Narcissa hear?

He pressed his hips forward, and she felt him hard against her backside. Her mind blanked. A white slate where once she had a brain.

Draco was touching her. And he was aroused. And he was dangerous.

He turned to scowl at her lazily, his eyes flinty and dangerous. She felt a chill down her spine. He'd made her remove her bra the last time they left the Manor, but what possible reason could there be for wanting her knickers off?

He prowled towards her like a jungle cat, and she stood still as he drew closer, aware of the growing pounding in her chest. If she hadn't recognized his movements, his carriage, the deft way his fingers twirled his wand, she would assume someone had polyjuiced themselves as Draco Malfoy.

But she remembered these eyes from sixth year. Different from his own. Something sharp and merciless in them.

He stopped before her, his chest barely an inch from hers, forcing her head to tilt back.

"Or do I need to take them off myself," he whispered, his breath disturbing the curls on top of her head.

A tingling terror rocketed through her veins. She'd never been truly afraid of him before. Not when he'd captured her in Umbridge's office with his hand low on her stomach, not when his friends had been casting killing curses at her in the Room of Requirement.

She searched his eyes.

His hands shot out, gripping her elbows and spinning her swiftly, her feet tangling with each other. Her chest slammed into the wall, her head turning just in time to keep from breaking her nose. The air left her lungs, and she struggled to press back. Her hands flat on the wall, but he pressed one palm to the center of her shoulder blades.

She gasped, mind working quickly over her options.

He was proving a point.

Or she'd angered him beyond anything she'd experienced.

Or this was some kind of dark magic, seducing him and twisting him. His fingers on her low back, plucking at the satin slip, pulling it up, up. Her eyes wide, staring at her cream colored wall.

twitching head.

"Am I on your turf?" she said with a smile.

He tilted his head at her and then wandered down to the water, dipping his head to drink. She watched the two others slip down the bank, shuffling closer to her.

Just like a Malfoy man, she thought. Ruining her concentration and drawing her focus to him.

She took her books, leaving the shore for the peacocks, and circled the perimeter of the gazebo. It was as large as her childhood bedroom, if not larger. Roman marble pillars supported a dome of intricately designed glass and iron, magic-made if she had to guess.

Ascending the stairs, she perched on a bench looking out over the water and opened *Undesirable No. 3*, the third in the series. She'd decided to give herself a break from her usual reading today. The pages fell open to her bookmark, but she stared out at the pond.

Think of a lake with still waters.

A breeze kissed the surface, rippling the water. Hermione focused on the depths below, still not visible even after the intrusion.

The sun dipped lower as she meditated, her fingers tucked in the pages, and her thoughts far away.

"You've mastered meditation, I see."

She blinked at the pond, the voice beckoning her mind forward. Turning, she found Draco standing in the middle of the gazebo staring at her. She stumbled to her feet, the Gainsworth book falling from her lap. A flurry of movement as she retrieved it and he stepped forward.

Standing tall again, the book held tightly in her hands, she met his eyes.

"You're back."

"Yes, just twenty minutes ago."

Her eyes scanned him. Not in his Death Eater robes. Comfortable trousers and a buttoned shirt. Not a hair out of place. Not a scratch or

tremor or bloody stain. But his left arm—he held it across his stomach as if it was in a sling.

“Your arm.” She stepped toward him and stopped. She watched his throat bob. “What happened to it?”

“An injury,” he said quickly. “I apologize you were left alone—”

“What kind of injury?”

He looked down at his shoulder. “An Acid Hex that turned inward. My bones needed to be regrown. I’m almost healed. I just shouldn’t use my arm for a few more days.”

An Acid Hex. Hermione swallowed, visualizing how close it might have come to his heart. And then she remembered Dover. And the people his father had killed.

She closed down her concern and joy at seeing him alive. “Did it happen at Dover?”

His eyes snapped up from the path they were taking over her clavicles. He examined her, and then it seemed to dawn on him.

“Is Miss Skeeter printing again?”

“Yes,” she snapped. “It was the most information I’ve received in weeks.”

He lifted a brow at her. “I’m sure half of it was true. Probably only a quarter now that the Dark Lord is breathing down her neck.”

“So is it true that Charlie Weasley is dead?” She could hear the blood rushing through her ears. “Or is that a lie too?”

“He’s dead.” The answer was swift and merciless. His eyes were cold.

A heavy weight settled in her chest. “And your father killed him?”

“This is a *war*, Granger.” He stepped closer to her, and she noticed that he wobbled on his left leg. “Or have you forgotten?”

“The war is won,” she hissed. “You won. But of course, you won’t stop until every last one of us is dead or in chains.”

“Right. Let me just call off my armies, Granger.” He shook his head at her, scowling. “Did you really think the Dark Lord was going to allow

up from her wingback chair, startled to see him in the doorway.

He usually knocked.

“Yes?”

He stared down at her, his mouth in a hard line. “Get changed. Something presentable.”

She blinked down at herself. She was in leggings and a jumper. She supposed she wasn’t quite prepared for company, but she didn’t expect to have any.

She stood, closing her book. “Where are we going?”

He was silent. She rolled her eyes and headed to her wardrobe. She looked at him as she pulled open the doors, lifting a brow. “Any requests?”

A flick of his fingers and something satin barreled forward into her face. She plucked it off of her head and glared at him. It was a slip. Practically a *négligée*.

“Be quick about it,” he said, words short and chilled. She closed her mouth, biting back her retort. He turned to eye her bookshelves as she exited to the bathroom.

Something was wrong. He was under some kind of stress or... She shook her head, swallowing her apprehension. He’d gotten her this far, hadn’t he? So what if he was in a bad mood. She’d seen worse.

She shucked her leggings and jumper, pulling the satin over herself. She grimaced at her reflection, looking much more like a whore – reminding her of her place outside of the Manor. She pulled the slip up, tightening the straps over her bra, smoothing the fabric over her knickers.

When she came out of the bathroom, he was still staring at the bookshelf, unblinking. She moved to the door, ready to follow him.

“Who gave you permission to wear those undergarments?”

She tripped over the carpets, stopping and staring back at him.

“Excuse me?” She glared at the back of his head. *How dare he—*

“Take them off.”

draining.”

She blinked to find him staring down at her, body close and fingers still light on her arm. He wobbled on his feet, looking pale.

“You’re still injured,” she said. “You should be careful as well.”

His eyes danced over her face, a hint of a smirk on his lips. “We’re quite a pair, aren’t we?”

Her skin tingled even after his fingers lifted from her arm. He offered to accompany her back to her room so she could rest. She could feel the air between them as they walked, every sound of footsteps on the marble echoing in her mind. They were slow to climb the stairs, his ribs still healing and her head still throbbing, but at every corner they turned she could have sworn she felt the ghost of a hand on her back, guiding her, steadying her.

He walked her to her door, and perhaps it was her pounding head that made her dizzy with the ludicrous comparison that he’d just walked her back to her flat at the end of a date. His eyes drifted over her as she nodded at him in thanks, and when she shut her door, she leaned up against the cool wood, listening for his delayed footsteps back to his own room, trying not to think about how his lips might have felt against hers if he’d claimed them in a goodnight kiss.

She woke the next morning to a large pot of coffee at her bedside table.



She didn’t see Draco in person for several days. By the third day, it grimly occurred to her that he might have joined Lucius, wherever he was. She concentrated on her Occlumency to keep herself busy, steadily increasing her endurance and trying out other techniques as well. When she exhausted herself after a day of practicing, she’d curl up with one of her fiction books, allowing herself an hour or two of peace and rest.

She was in the middle of reading her second favorite Dickens on the fourth day of Draco’s absence when her bedroom door opened. She looked

anyone to escape the U.K.?”

“Yes, how silly of me,” she mocked. “*You’re* not in charge of anything. Least of all your own actions.”

“How in Merlin’s name is this *my* fault? It was my *father* who sent the Killing Curse—”

“Just because a few people were trying to escape—”

“No, to kill the man who’d tried to murder his son.”

Hermione’s lips opened. And closed.

Charlie Weasley had sent a deadly Acid Curse?

“He wouldn’t do that,” she said, but she could hear her voice tremble.

“You don’t know him anymore.” Draco sneered at her. “You don’t know *any* of them. I’ve never seen so much dark magic. Not even at the Battle of Hogwarts.”

She swallowed, feeling her stomach churn and tumble as her fingers dug into the spine of her book. She felt a desperate need to turn the conversation away.

“And how many people did you kill at Dover Castle?”

“You’ll be glad to hear that I only sent off a Jelly-Legs Jinx before I was hit.” He frowned at her and shifted on his feet.

“I’ll be *glad* that you didn’t have the chance to increase your death toll?” she said. “Like that’s some kind of accomplishment?”

“I’ve only killed one person,” he snarled. “It was at the Final Battle.”

She blinked at him, taking in the information before hardening again. “And how did it feel? Throwing Killing Curses at your classmates and teachers?”

He sneered at her. “I’m surprised your lips are moving at all, Granger, when it’s clear you’re talking out of your arse.”

His eyes burned into her, and she huffed in frustration.

“Please *enlighten* me, Malfoy. If there are so many things I’m unaware of—”

He stepped into her, eyes flashing, breath puffing on her face.

"I sliced Thorfinn Rowle in half and watched him bleed out at my feet. I made sure my face was the last thing he saw." His chest heaved, and a breeze whipped between them. Her eyes locked onto his, unblinking. "And I'd do it again," he said.

The heat unfurling from him was palpable, and she could taste the darkness he spat at her.

"Why?" Her voice cracked.

He wet his lips, and his eyes cast about her face before he replied, "He posed a threat to me."

Her mind spun with the possibilities. If he had been willing to kill a fellow Death Eater, what did that mean? Was he not as entrenched as she'd assumed—or was he more ruthless than she'd allowed herself to imagine? Or had it simply been self-preservation, an infamous Malfoy trait? "Any other questions, Granger?" he said sarcastically, but it was a whisper in the space between them.

Millions, actually.

"What would have happened to me if you died?" she asked, watching his brows furrow, and his eyes clear. "Would I have gone back to Auction?"

His face twitched violently, like he'd been slapped. He stepped back from her, eyes tracing her from top to bottom, and he exhaled sharply. Blinking, his mask fell back into place.

"My mother would have taken care of you—"

"Why would your grieving mother spare a thought for me?" She lifted a brow at him, waiting for him to confirm her best theory. To admit that she was a pawn. Insurance.

He swallowed. "She wouldn't have let you go back to Auction." But he didn't sound convinced. He looked over her shoulder at the pond, and her confidence faltered.

"Would I have been returned to Dolohov?"

His head snapped back to her, and his eyes turned hard as stone. "No.

floating innocently between them.

She did prefer coffee. In fact, she only drank tea with honey because she'd seen *him* drinking it for the past seven years. Some insane notion to feel closer to him.

"We have coffee," he offered softly, eyes still on the book.

"Thank you. I'll... I'll ask for coffee next time." She wanted to pry, to dig into this observation. But she had more pressing questions while she had him here. "How is Pansy?"

She watched his eyes harden. A swift close of the book. "She's dead."

"How?"

"She was killed for her disloyalty to the Dark Lord."

She frowned, watching him closely. "Those were Zabini's exact words as well. Curious."

His eyes snapped to her. "When did you speak to Blaise?" There was a bite in his words, and she felt the ice from his eyes.

"He stopped by. Entered my room and drank my tea without a care in the world." She shifted in her seat, lifting a brow at Draco's dark expression. "How did you adjust the wards after your aunt's visit?"

His jaw clenched. "It's based on intent to harm."

"And you still won't tell me why it is that the Malfoy family has no intent to harm me?"

His lips pressed together, refusing to answer. She sighed, shoulders sagging.

"Well, if you could also include 'intent to pester,' that would be much appreciated."

The blood rushed to her head as she moved to stand. The Occlumency had drained her far more than she'd thought, and she stumbled back against the arm of the chair.

A hand on her elbow. Her head pounded as she squeezed her eyes shut, registering that Draco was touching her. When she opened her eyes and righted herself, he said, "You should be careful next time. It can be very

"Look at me."

She felt the command in her bones. Turning her head to him, finding his grey eyes, she saw him twitch at the sight of her. He looked down at the book in her lap, then back up at her.

Hermione saw him through a haze, recognizing him, but also failing to place him. Her body filled with cotton, her head filled with dust.

She blinked, and it was like he swam back into focus. Draco Malfoy stood next to her, staring down at her with concern.

Her bookshelf cracked, and the texts fell open at her feet.

She sucked in a deep breath, and his bare chest, his broken ribs, his bloody lips, his cool eyes — they all fell off the shelf.

Her eyes stung, as if she'd looked directly into the sun. She pinched them closed and pressed her hand over her forehead, blocking out the light.

She felt the advanced Occlumency book slither away from her lap, lifted away from her.

"You're too expressive for this specific technique," he muttered. "It will be obvious that something is wrong with you." She listened to him turn the page, and then close the book with a snap. "You skipped intermediate studies?"

"Of course," she said, her lips pulling in the ghost of a smirk. Her head spun. She felt like she'd been awake for days. "Did you expect anything less of me?"

Her eyes slipped open, staring at the pond through the window again. She tried to grasp onto the idea of still waters, calming her racing mind, but her energy was depleted.

"It can be exhausting," he said, barely a whisper.

She nodded, drowsiness in her veins. "I'll just ask the kitchens for tea."

A pause. And then: "You don't drink coffee anymore?"

Her mind startled to attention. She looked up at him. He was flipping through the pages of another advanced Occlumency book, his question

He has no claim on you any longer." She felt a chill across her shoulders, and the same darkness rolled off of him again. "You don't need to worry about Dolohov."

She looked up into his dark eyes, searching for the source of it all. "What did you give him in exchange for me?"

His jaw tightened. The pull she felt for him, like a string vibrating, tugged as she waited for him to tell her the truth or a lie.

"The one thing he wanted more than you."

Her heart pounded and her breath left her as her mind worked through all the possibilities. "Why? Why buy me? Why bid on me?"

He took a breath, and she prepared herself for the range of answers he could give. She thought of her face in his drawer, her bedroom close to his, the way he sucked poison out of her arm. She thought of the esteem she brought the Malfoy family, the way Voldemort had cackled when Draco boasted about the money spent to obtain her.

But she thought about the answer she most hoped to hear, even for all of her logic, as his eyes turned to a spot over her shoulder and his lips pressed tight together.

"It was the right thing to do," he said.

His grey eyes slid over to her, and she studied them as the words swirled inside her ears and her chest. That wasn't an answer. Another evasion.

She clenched her jaw. "When have you ever been concerned with doing the right thing?"

His left eye twitched, but the rest of him was still. "What kind of answer would you prefer, Granger?"

"I'd prefer the truth, but I don't assume I'll get that from you anytime soon." She grabbed for her extra books on the bench, and marched past him.

She was boiling, just reaching the steps of the gazebo before she heard, "Granger—"

Spinning back to him, she growled, "Doing the *right* thing, Malfoy,

THE AUCTION

would have been coming to the Order in sixth year.” His jaw snapped shut, and his eyes turned to stone. “Doing the *right* thing would have been standing up to your father at any of the millions of times he’s done evil in the name of that monster.” She felt a crackling through her veins. She stepped toward him again, watching him breathe deeply through his nose. “The *right* thing would have been stopping the Auction from taking place altogether, or helping us *escape*, or buying *Luna*—”

Her voice cracked, and she swallowed. He lifted a brow, and the haughty look he sent her sizzled her nerve endings, firing up her blood.

“But if I’d fallen on my sword, Granger,” he mocked, “who would have set you up in a private suite?” He prowled forward, his injured arm hanging uselessly across his chest. She felt her skin buzzing. “Who would allow you privacy, and fetch your books, and feed you pumpkin soup—”

“I didn’t ask for any of this, Malfoy—”
“—certainly not Dolohov.”

Her lips curled back, baring her teeth at him. “Is it gratitude, you’re looking for? You want me to say ‘*thank you*?’”

“It’d be a fucking start.”

She felt his breath on her face. He glared down at her, his eyes flashing. Her fingers itched to hit him, to push him back. She was shaking with it.

“I won’t say thank you for something so selfishly motivated. Clearly, nothing you’ve done has been for the greater good if you need *validation* for it.”

“You wanna see ‘selfishly motivated?’” His eyes dragged cruelly over her lips and shoulders, down to her chest. “We could always take that suite away from you. I heard you found my bedroom, Granger. Want to spend more time there?”

She vibrated with the need to hurt him. It shook her every muscle until her hands fisted, determined not to raise a hand to her captor, and the energy punched its way down her legs. Ready to snap back at him, she stomped her foot on the ground, freeing the electricity—

CHAPTER 12

When she brought forward the memory of her mother’s hand clutching hers in the balcony of the Palace Theatre as the first of them died on the barricade, she heard an echo of dark voices. Voices that screamed for her to bend over and strip. Voices that shouted her worth in Gallcons.

A book on the bottom shelf of her mind slid forward, begging to be opened.

She focused on pushing it away again.

“Granger.”

Her eyes blinked. She was staring at the pond from a deep armchair in the Manor’s library.

The books inside her mind shivered, thrumming with the energy it took for her to contain them—to keep them in place. Only happy memories of her parents.

“Granger,” someone said again.

She swam back to herself. There was someone next to her. But if she looked at him, the books would fall off their shelves and she’d be left only with bare shoulders and crumpled bodies and silky voices—

“You’re feeling better?” she asked, drawing breath from her lungs and preparing to look away from the pond and the still waters. “How are your ribs?”

She focused her mind, called upon her strength to keep her shields up. Her heart pounded with an excitement to see him again. And she quieted that book, pushing it away.

“Better,” his voice rumbled.

Breathing deep, she turned her eyes to him, taking in a tall body leaning slightly to the right, and curious eyes gazing down at her.

Only happy memories of her parents.

Her gaze flitted away, her energy focused on the bookshelves in her mind.

“How was your birthday?” She knew her own lips had asked the question, but the voice was unfamiliar to her. “Were you able to enjoy it—?”

of Legilimency. The first Occlumency book she'd taken from the library only covered the basics, such as concentration and meditation. One of the advanced techniques that had resonated with her was thinking of her mind as a bookcase or a series of shelves. Her introductory textbook had a short summary on it, and she'd experimented with it before using pure intuition. But now she had pages of detail and theory at her fingertips.

There were ideas of bringing other memories forward—or, in her case, displaying a memory on an easily reachable shelf. Although the techniques were incredibly advanced, Hermione couldn't help but soak in the information, always seduced by the most challenging ideas.

Hours later, Hermione sat in one of the grand armchairs, facing a large window that overlooked the pond as she focused her mind on still waters and hidden shelves. She tried to bring forward only memories of her parents, a process that involved the effort to push things onto different shelves. She thought less and less of her parents as she stared at the pond from the window, and focused on the memories that were always at the forefront of her mind.

Draco's bare shoulders as he sucked the poison from her.

The silence of Ron's scream for her from across the stage at the Palace.

A body flying backwards, hitting the pillar of a gazebo.

Harry's small frame in Hagrid's arms.

Hissing lips, spitting acid at her from the audience of a grand theatre.

The dried blood on Ginny's temple as she turned to her, pale skin translucent in the spotlight.

Hermione took each of them, holding them like books, and placed them on tall shelves, or shoved their thin spines inside of larger ones, hiding them on bottom shelves. She pulled forward the memory of her parents taking her to the circus. Her mother's perfume bottle as it was replaced on the vanity. Her father's easy laugh at unfunny jokes. An entire shelf was open at eye-level, now that she'd replaced the other thoughts. She filled it with happy memories of her parents.

Draco jerked back, flying through the air as if on a string, his lips parted in a silent gasp. His body slammed against the wall of the gazebo with a crunch, and he crumpled to the ground.

Hermione stood, mouth wide and eyes popping, looking for the source of the magic. Looking for the reason...

Her fingers shook, life sparking in them.

Her magic.

She wasn't suppressed. Never? Or just since the Malfoys left?

Her eyes snapped back to Draco, curled in on himself, wheezing.

"Draco, I..." she stammered, "I didn't mean to—"

He gasped a rattle. His eyes pale, and his skin grey. His injured arm still held across his chest, leaning back against the wall, but his entire left shoulder seemed disfigured.

My bones needed to be regrown, he'd said.

She was running to his side before she could command her feet. Dropping to her knees, her hands reached for him, stopping short when she didn't know where to touch him.

His head turned away from her, eyes squeezing shut. A tear dripping out of his closed eye. He wheezed.

"Draco, can you"—her voice shook and fingers trembled—"Can you stand?"

He coughed, and blood sprayed from his lips onto the gazebo floor.

Her head whipped to the Manor. "Help!"

A wet chuckle turned her back to his ashen face. His glazed eyes were on hers, and he smiled ruefully.

"I always knew you'd kill me one day, Granger," he rasped.

His voice was hollow. And his head lolled as he smiled at her again.

She pressed her hand to support his jaw and screamed, "MILPPY!"

A *pop* behind her. "Master Draco!"

"I-it was an accident, I—" *she couldn't breathe, she couldn't breathe—* "I think his new bones are broken. His—his lungs are punctured, and—"

THE AUCTION

A small hand reached for Draco's sleeve, and suddenly he was gone, only the drops of his blood left behind.

She was alone in the gazebo. She was alone, and she'd hurt him.

Spinning, she looked to his bedroom window—the corner bedroom on the third floor.

The candles were lit inside.

She grabbed up the books she'd dropped and ran. Her legs carried her through the gardens and up the stairs to the entrance. The marble stairs clicked under her feet as she ran up the stairs to their shared wing, barrel-ling toward the door with the dragon carving. The door handle didn't turn. She had to see him. Fix what she'd done.

She stood there, panting, staring at the emerald eye. Reaching her arm out, she imitated the *Alohomora* wand movements and whispered the spell. Nothing.

The clicking of footsteps on marble, and she turned to see a harried Narcissa rushing towards her.

"Hello, dear," she clipped. "We'll have tea later, yes?" And then Narcissa was opening the door and slipping inside with a hissed, "I *told* you it was too soon, Draco," before Hermione could blink.

The door shut, and Hermione startled. She tried the handle again. Locked. Of course they wouldn't want her inside. She was dangerous. Unstable.

She blinked, vision blurring, pressing her ear against the door and waiting for some kind of sound, an indication of what was going on inside. Some kind of reassurance.

The door opened, and she almost fell into the chest of Lucius Malfoy. She scrambled back, looking up into the face of the man that had killed Charlie Weasley and countless others, feeling like a guilty child. "You stupid girl," he snarled at her.

His anger froze her, and she breathed, "It was an accident. I—" Draco screamed beyond the cracked door, and she shuddered, craning

CHAPTER 12

Hermione kept her curiosity to herself, wondering where Draco went, how he spent his free time—afraid to hear that it was official Death Eater business that had called him away.

She looked for him in the mornings from her window, hoping to glimpse him walking through the grounds, testing his new ribs, but she never spotted him.

On Tuesday she decided to resume her daily library visits. After a late breakfast, she pushed open the doors, intent to dive deeper into Occlumency after her routine sweep of the Horcrux information.

She followed her normal path straight to where the book mentioning Horcruxes lay, tucked between two large, leather-bound tomes in the Dark Arts section.

It wasn't there.

Hermione blinked, checking the surrounding shelves. The misplaced book was nowhere to be found.

Her heart pounded as she weighed her options. After a minute or two, she cleared her throat and chanced asking the catalog. But the book finder glowed a dim red, indicating the absence of such a book in the library.

Someone else was reading the only book in the vast Malfoy library containing information on Horcruxes.

Vibrating with anxiety and indecision, Hermione paced. Had Lucius tracked what she'd been reading, pulling it to stop her research—or to better understand her interest? Did the Malfoys even know about the Horcruxes? Lucius had Tom Riddle's diary for years before ensuring its delivery to Hogwarts, but hadn't Harry told her that Dumbledore doubted he even knew what it truly was?

Without a way to deduce the answers to her building questions, she decided she had even more reason now to focus her attention on Occlumency.

She was able to find several other books in the library to help with some of the more advanced practices, including how to fend off an attack

THE AUCTION

He cut off sharply as his eyes caught on something. She followed his gaze to her bedside table, searching for what he saw. The book she'd fallen asleep reading last night, the empty jewelry box, and a candlestick. The book title wasn't anything intriguing — she made sure to always hide the Occlumency book within another on her shelf. She glanced back at him. He frowned, and then turned to her, falling back into his swagger.

"More than happy to give you more information," he finished.

"Wonderful. Anything else? Or can I get dressed now?" —he opened his mouth — "in *privacy*."

He grinned. "I was just interested in seeing the sex dungeon, but..." he sighed dramatically. "I'm afraid you've let me down."

"Apologies." She moved to her wardrobe, dismissing him.

"It does tickle me to see how close you and Draco have gotten."

She froze in the middle of shuffling through her clean jumpers. Blaise leaned against her bedpost, watching her closely.

"We're not close."

"Yeah?" He lifted a brow at her. "When's *my* birthday, Granger?"

She pressed her lips together, fighting the blush creeping up her neck.

He smirked and sauntered to the door, turned over his shoulder, and said, "Or should I call you Hermione? Since we're all on a first-name basis in this house."

With a wink, he disappeared.

Hermione closed her eyes and filed away the embarrassment. She moved an armchair in front of the door before changing out of her robe and into proper clothing.



All further news of Draco was passed on from Narcissa. He'd finally left his room for the first time a day later. He'd walked by himself through the Manor's gardens on the next, and finally on Monday, he'd left the Manor for the first time.

CHAPTER 11

her neck to see into the room. Lucius slid in front of her and shoved his finger in her face.

"You hurt my son again, and I'll drag you to the dungeons myself." He drew himself up, towering over her. "Control your magic," he hissed. "Or I'll take it from you."

He spun on his heel and disappeared into Draco's bedroom. The door slammed, and she listened to the echo of it bounce amongst the portraits, their whispers and sobs slithering through her mind.

She walked back to her room, closed the door, and slid down to the floor. Deep breaths, one after another, until her shoulders stopped shaking and the image of Draco behind her eyelids vanished. She uncurtled her fingers, the nails digging into her palms. There was a new puzzle to solve. She had magic.

And the Malfoys knew she did. And they didn't care.

How did that factor into her latest theories?

She stared blankly at the wall that connected her room to Draco's, the fireplace burning merrily, and wondered if her circumstances were better or worse with the Malfoys' return.



CHAPTER 12

where did you get that idea?”

He turned to look at her from where he’d just parted her curtains to examine the grounds. “Draco.”

She blinked, mind twisting to work through it. But of course Draco would be keeping up the ruse around his friends. She could only hope she hadn’t ruined everything earlier.

He continued, “He’s been quite cagey about you, but he managed to tell us a bit about how you’ve been occupied.”

“My ropes and chains are in the closet,” she deadpanned. “Who is ‘us,’ exactly?”

Blaise wandered towards her bookshelves. “The boys.” His fingers drifted over the titles. “At our gatherings.” He eyed her, his features giving away nothing.

“Gatherings.” She tested the word on her tongue. “Death Eater meetings, you mean?”

“Not all of us are Death Eaters.”

They stared at each other. And Hermione considered her next move carefully.

“Where is Pansy,” she asked.

His dark eyes danced over her face, pausing and thinking. “Dead.”

Hermione felt the wind knocked out of her. She resisted the need to lean on something. Her fingers tightened in her robe.

Her mind worked. The last time she’d seen Pansy, she’d been running into Blaise’s waiting arms... as he rescued her.

Her eyes dug into him. “Why?”

“For disloyalty to the Dark Lord,” he responded smoothly. Too smoothly.

“You’re lying.”

Blaise paused. Then shrugged, and said, “Ask Draco.” He sauntered into her sleeping area, drawing closer to her and the bed.

“He’d be more than—”

Waiting for Draco to recover from his injuries was somehow even more agonizing when they were only separated by a wall. She suspected his condition was serious, but not critical. Narcissa and Mippy kept a near-constant vigil in his room, but Lucius was nowhere to be found, apparently traveling again. Hermione left the door to her suite cracked so she could hear the comings and goings in their shared hallways. Whenever Narcissa’s delicate footsteps clicked toward his room, she’d place her ear to her door and hope to hear some muttered conversation as she entered. Once the footsteps trailed away from Draco’s room and down the stairs, she’d creep to his door and stand there until the dragon’s mocking green eye forced her hand.

But every time she tried the door herself, it wouldn’t budge. She attempted to open it with magic on several occasions, but without success. She wasn’t sure if it was because she was wandless or if there was more than a simple locking charm, in which case *Alohomora* wouldn’t work even if she had a wand.

One the second day, she snuck down to the kitchens and shuffled around until she located several old *Daily Prophets* stacked in the corner. Snatching a few with recent dates, she rushed upstairs, tucking the papers under her jumper and running back to her room. Once she’d locked the door behind her, she sunk to the floor and began to read.

Headline after headline of rebellions being squashed by the Great Order — the name given to the new regime. It felt like a slap in the face to the Order of the Phoenix, to be erased in such a way and written over.

up in a knot, exiting to her bedroom.

Blaise Zabini sat in her armchair, flipping through one of her books, sipping on her afternoon tea. He smiled at her from across the room, eyes slipping down to her bare legs before returning to her face.

"The water temperature is decadent, isn't it?"

Hermione pulled tightly at her bathrobe, feeling her heart pound in her fingertips. She knew little of Zabini at school, only that he had been an absolute cad from fifth year onwards. She hadn't seen him at the Battle of Hogwarts — something that neither earned nor lost him points in her book.

"How did you get in here?" Her voice was stronger than she felt.

He waved his hand. "Yes, it was quite difficult to find, actually. Notice-Me-Nots and the like." He crossed his legs and smirked. "But I knew it would be close."

"No. How did you get *in*?" she demanded. "There are supposed to be... Blood Boundaries, or..." She didn't know. She just knew that Draco changed the spells after Bellatrix.

"Ah, yes," he said, placing his teacup — *her* teacup, really — on the side table. "That did take a few tries. I had to convince the room that I wasn't here to cause harm to the occupant."

Her relief sharpened into irritation when his eyes dripped down to her legs again. "If you keep looking at me like that, hopefully the room will see fit to eject you. Violently."

His eyes sparkled. "Oh, no, no. My thoughts are of nothing but mutual pleasure, Granger. Rest assured."

She bristled, then rolled her eyes. "Wonderful. I'll sleep easier now. Look, Zabini, thanks for dropping by, but—"

"This doesn't look like a sex dungeon at all, really." He stood, straightening his unwrinkled robes, and taking in the suite. "I'm quite disappointed."

She stared at him incredulously. "A sex dungeon," she snorted. "And

Rita Skeeter certainly had a way with words. Hermione knew this from growing up with the woman "buzzing" around her, but it was only her familiarity with Skeeter that allowed her to read between the lines.

The words "small rebellion" and "dozens of casualties" appeared together several times, making Hermione question the actual numbers Skeeter was reporting. Also, she found several articles that referenced back to the Dover Castle Massacre instead of focusing on the details of the skirmishes published, as if the outcomes were never as positive for the Great Order as they were at Dover.

The most interesting piece of information she was able to glean from the articles came in a brief mention of an attack in London three days before the Malfoys returned:

A MUGGLE CAFE WAS BRUTALLY ATTACKED LAST NIGHT BY UNDESIRABLE NO. AND , GEORGE WEASLEY AND ANGELINA JOHNSON. THE DARK LORD'S FORCES WERE DRAWN TO THE CAFE FROM A SIGHTING REPORT, AND PROCEEDED TO ENGAGE IN COMBAT WITH THE TWO CRIMINALS. THE SKIRMISH LEFT SEVERAL MUGGLES DEAD OR WOUNDED, PROVING ONCE AGAIN THAT THE REBELS CARE LITTLE ABOUT THE LIVES OF THE VERY POPULATION THEY CLAIM TO BE DEFENDING. (TURN TO PG. FOR A FULL LISTING OF THE UNDESIRABLES.)

Hermione's eyes narrowed at the words on the page, taking note of the obvious lies and omissions to suss out the truth. The article didn't mention anything about George and Angelina's capture or death. And there was no way they had purposefully killed Muggles at the cafe. Her breath hitched at the reference to a list of wanted rebels.

She flipped to page three, and found half the page taken up by George Weasley's face, grinning in a flamboyant suit, the sign for Weasley's Wizard Wheezes dipping into the top of the frame. Below the fold, Angelina Johnson stared up at her, wearing her Gryffindor Quidditch uniform.

Taking a deep breath, she realized that if Angelina was on the run,

then she was the prisoner that had escaped Macnair's estate, not Ron. Hermione dropped her eyes to Angelina's description, and saw "Wanted for the Murder of Walden Macnair" among her list of crimes, confirming her suspicions.

So where was Ron? Had he not been at the Macnair estate when George came for Angelina? She remembered what Draco had said about Voldemort "requesting" him shortly after the Auction. A pale chill of dread shuddered her.

She forced herself to focus and continue reading Angelina's physical description. Under her height and skin color, it said, "missing left forearm."

She pressed her eyes closed, sucking in a short breath. She had been right. If she cut off her arm, she could get around the tattoo.

Hermione tried to imagine it. Tried to think of George and Angelina at the boundary line of some gothic structure, staring at each other until Angelina gave him the go ahead to mutilate her. They would have killed Macnair first, thinking that would do it—that Angelina would be free if her master was dead.

They at least had wands. Hermione considered her own options. Steal a kitchen knife and hack her way through her own flesh and bone. Or steal a wand from one of her three jailors, and slice it off with a firm voice.

Either of these options were possible—horrible, but possible. But were they necessary? More importantly, were they wise?

Where would she go—armless and bleeding? She could look it up, of course, but she had no training on how to treat an amputated limb, and it could be risky with an unfamiliar wand. If it got infected, she might not be in a state to heal herself. The Order likely had a safehouse and supplies somewhere, but how would she find them? Surely there had to be another way around the tattoos that didn't involve putting herself in such a vulnerable position.

Hermione placed the information on a shelf in her mind — an

Of course he was here. It was Draco's birthday, wasn't it? She looked back to him, a strained look on his pale features, and she felt so foolish for rushing in here, for forgetting everything she'd worked so hard to compartmentalize and hide. The anticipation of seeing him again had been too great, and the need to apologize had overwhelmed her logic.

A noisy sipping from the armchair, and Blaise smiled at her over his glass once her attention returned to him.

"Granger, pull up a chair. Let's catch up." He crossed one leg over the other, and his eyes sparkled.

She gaped at him, blinking quickly before closing down her features and centering her mind.

"I've just come to... to clear the air. About... something." She glanced to Draco quickly, seeing him sitting up in bed as much as he could, leaning slightly to his right. "And—and I have... so... Enjoy your visit," she said, nodding to Zabini. She hurried to the door, pulling it open, and in a moment of sheer impulse, tossed back over her shoulder, "Happy birthday, Draco," before sliding through and shutting the door behind her.

Her fingers shook.

She'd called him Draco.

She'd wished him a happy birthday.

Which implied that she knew his birthday.

Hermione groaned, running her fingers through her hair and tugging at the roots as she stomped back to her own room.



She was still blushing when she got out of the shower an hour later, having allowed her mind to concoct all the different ways Blaise Zabini and Draco Malfoy might have reacted to her flustered intrusion and intimate birthday sentiments.

Sighing, she placed her embarrassment onto a shelf in her mind, putting it away for now. She slipped on her bathrobe and tossed her wet hair

He laid against his pillows looking deathly pale. When her eyes met his, he began shifting, attempting to sit up, possibly saving his dignity.

“Don’t,” she cautioned, moving toward the bed. “Don’t injure yourself further. I’ll be quick.” She wrung her hands. “I’m sorry. I’m very, very sorry, Malfoy.”

His eyes grew wide, and the color returned to his cheeks as she came closer.

“I had no idea that my magic wasn’t being suppressed. I thought—I thought I was being given the potion—which, actually, I’d like to ask about, but—no, another time.”

She was stammering and she felt a blush rise from her chest. He pushed his limp hair off of his forehead, raking his fingers through it.

“I would never have—have injured you further on purpose. I promise that wasn’t my—” She swallowed. “I mean to say, I was just very angry, and I felt out of control—”

“Granger—”

“Please let me finish.” She stepped forward again, and for a wild moment she thought about taking his hand, sitting at the edge of his bed—it was unintentional. And—and of course I don’t blame you for what happened at Dover. I disapprove of your faith—your family’s position in the war, but I’m aware that things could be much worse for me. I know you’re just doing your best—”

“Granger, we have company.”

She froze, heart stopping. Spinning to the other side of the room, she found Blaise Zabini reclining comfortably in Draco’s wingback chair, sipping merrily from a glass and smirking.

“Granger. So good of you to drop by.”

Her lips parted uselessly, staring into Zabini’s dark eyes as he smacked his lips, drinking in the brandy and the show.

“Zabini,” she said cautiously. She calculated all the words she’d just said aloud, combing them for mistakes and terms too intimate.

Occumency trick briefly mentioned in her textbook.

Ever since learning that she had her magic flowing through her veins, Hermione had begun pushing the boundaries of her Occumency skills. (She suspected that was the point of them letting her keep her magic in the first place.) The more she experimented, the more it felt as though there were shelves now in her mind—places she could put things, and not think about again until she chose to.

She was practicing the technique in her armchair one afternoon when a knock rapped on her door. She stood, stuffing the advanced book under the cushion, and rushed for her door. Narcissa stood on the other side with a soft smile and folded hands. Hermione forced a polite smile, pushing away her disappointment.

Of course. It was unlikely he would be standing, much less visiting.

“Hello, dear,” Narcissa said. “It’s certainly been a while since I’ve come to see you. I apologize that you were left—”

“I’m so sorry, Narcissa,” Hermione said, words pouring out of her. “I swear I didn’t mean to cause him any harm. I had—I had no idea that... that I had magic, and I was angry and—and it just happened. Believe me—I wish I could take it back.”

Narcissa blinked down at her, lips twitching. “Thank you, Hermione. But I think you are apologizing to the wrong person.”

“His door is locked.” She shut her jaw with a click, regretting speaking so quickly. “I mean to say, he... he doesn’t want to see me.” Something sparkled in Narcissa’s eyes, and Hermione felt her face heat. “Or, he’s resting, I’m sure.”

“Resting, certainly. It’s been a trying few weeks for him. For the whole family, really.”

Hermione nodded at her feet. “Er—would you like to come in?”

“That would be lovely,” said Narcissa.

She stumbled into her chair, fidgeting as Narcissa fluttered into hers. “How is he? What—”

She jumped, distracted by the two teacups that had just appeared at the small table between them.

Narcissa gave her a tense smile and hummed into her teacup. “His ribcage needed to be regrown, but aside from that, he’s been in good condition.”

Hermione felt her tongue stick to the roof of her mouth. Her vision blurred, and she blinked away the shapes. Remembering his body on the gazebo floor, the way his torso had slammed against the pillar...

She’d done that. She’d broken countless bones in his body, puncturing his lungs. And then she’d fumbled over him for what felt like hours instead of calling for Mippy immediately.

Hermione’s lip trembled. A cool hand with soft skin dropped over hers, and she looked up to see Narcissa leaning close to her.

“Don’t fret, dear. He’s healing as we speak.” She settled back in her chair and said, “And if I know my son, I know he probably deserved at least a slap across his mouth.” She smiled at Hermione and sipped her tea.

They found conversation to steer away from Draco’s health or the Battle at Dover that had injured him originally. All Narcissa revealed about the incident was that they had stayed in a cottage on the outskirts of the remains of the castle while Draco recovered, and that Lucius was traveling, as she’d suspected.

Hermione had no desire to press her on either topic. She hadn’t seen Lucius since he’d wagged his finger in her face and threatened her, and she was glad for it.

Recently promoted General Lucius Malfoy.

She swallowed her fears about what his absence might mean for her friends.

As Narcissa stood to leave, she said, “I heard you’ve taken an interest in the papers.”

Heat bloomed in her cheeks. Hermione held her breath, waiting to be chastised. Instead Narcissa produced a copy of that day’s *Prophet* from her

robes, with a smile.

Hermione couldn’t help but return it. “Thank you, Narcissa.”

Once she was alone, she flipped open the pages, finding another small attack in York the day before. The author claimed George and Angelina had been involved again. Hermione frowned, trying to piece together the places they were supposedly choosing, but couldn’t find any commonalities. She turned to page three for the list of Undesirables, and was shocked to see Katie Bell added to the list, just underneath Bill and Fleur Weasley. Hermione tried to remember Katie from the Ministry holding cells. She hadn’t been there.

Had Katie gotten away at the Final Battle? Who else had escaped?

She pondered the information, rereading the front page article for hints and subtext. Her eyes blinked quickly at the date. It had already been one month since the Battle of Hogwarts.

A weight dropped over her as she realized that today was June 4. She burrowed even further into her chair, awash with shame that Draco would be still mending broken bones on his birthday.



The next day, she wandered the library, bravely pulling the Horcrux text down and reading it for the thousandth time. She looked up Fiendfyre again. She looked into Basilisk venom.

She found nothing else useful.

When she climbed the stairs back to her room, she thought she’d try Draco’s door again. She’d forgotten to try it on her way down to the library, even though it was a force of habit by now—

The handle turned. She pushed open the door and entered the room before it barred her.

Knocking hadn’t even occurred to her. She shut the door swiftly once she was through. “Granger?”