

eyes.

He couldn't answer her. Not here.

He jerked his head and continued towards the gate. She followed, her eyes shifting in every direction, trying to take in the eyes and ears that could be on them. A pair of Death Eaters stood inside the gates, more lounging and laughing than guarding.

"Alright there, Malfoy?" one of them called.

"Evening, Relkin. I take it your leg's still healing, if you can't be bothered to stand and greet us?"

A grumble and a distant reply as they continued up the path to a second archway, a tighter entrance with tall walls of stone on one side and a steep grassy hill on the other. The moon shone bright and over them as they pushed forward.

Two more Death Eaters at the second entrance, standing a little straighter than the first two. They nodded to Draco as he walked through. He ignored them and Hermione followed, eyes fixed on the cobblestones. A low whistle once she passed. She glanced up to find an older man she didn't recognize, leering at her from a set of steep stone stairs leading up the hill.

"You bring her to play, Malfoy?"

"She's playing with me tonight." Draco steered her towards the steps, and they started to climb. "I don't share, Morrison," he said, with a wink and a handshake as they passed. Morrison chuckled, looking her over before Draco nudged her to continue ahead of him. As they ascended, her cheeks burned at the sudden realization that he had a full view of her legs and backside. She shoved her embarrassment aside, allowing her mind to wander.

She had questions. Questions about the guards, the number of Death Eaters moving in and out, the rankings...

After mentally reciting a list to ask once they were home again, Hermione finally reached the top of the stairs, turning once to look out over

in your opinion."

With his hand covering her lips, he reached with his other to below his waist. Her eyes followed, and she found him stroking himself.

She choked, blinking away quickly.

"I thought I got rid of this," he growled, and then his hands were on her satin slip, ripping the fabric down the middle, and tearing her bra apart. "Much better."

She was exposed. Her breasts heaving under his gaze, a sob choking in her throat. Naked for the first time. She watched one hand return to stroking himself, the other against her stomach, pressing down.

His eyes were hungry, drinking in her naked chest. Something flickered behind the grey, and he wet his lips.

The hand on her stomach slipped against the rumpled satin, and then his fingers were under the swell of her breast, hot on her skin.

He grunted, his hips thrusting into his hand. She watched his features glaze over briefly before turning icy again, his gaze back to her face.

"Gonna paint my name on your tits, Granger."

She could do nothing but exist underneath him as he jerked his hand. When a slow tear trailed out of her left eye, he reached forward and turned her face to the side.

She stared at the wall, concentrating on the colors there.

Her bedside table with a hair tie.

An empty jewelry box.

She heard his breath catch. She assumed he was close to being done.

The hand pressing her face away slipped, his fingers tumbling into her hair, grabbing the curls.

A strangled moan. And then something wet hitting her chest.

He stayed like that, his hand clutching her hair, catching his breath.

He sat up. A Vanishing Charm to her bra, and a Repairing Charm to her satin slip.

He dismounted, unstuck her hands, and stood by the bed. "Get up. The

THE AUCTION

Dark Lord is here.”

She stared at the ceiling, how the bedposts stretched towards it. She heard him button his trousers.

“Get moving, or I’ll drag you.” His voice broke on the word ‘drag.’ She heard a click from his throat, an infinitesimal swallow, pushing something back down.

Her chest was shaking and still tacky with his spend.

You know how I feel about these tits, Granger.

She blinked, like a twitch.

The Dark Lord was here.

She dragged herself off the bed, creeping towards the wall.

Her legs gave out after just a few steps. She pushed herself to her knees, eyes screwed shut to block everything out. Heat crackling beneath her skin. The smell of something burning. Maybe it was her.

Her chest seized as she was hauled roughly to her feet.

“Get it together, Granger,” hissed in her ear. And then he was dragging her out the door.

The Dark Lord was here. And she was appearing before him.

She felt tender fingerprints on her skin, left by bruising hands. Marked in more ways than one, like a whore. Voldemort would be thrilled.

With a gasp, her mind sharpened, whirring.

She was being brought to Voldemort.

The back of Draco’s head bobbed down the stairs as she followed dutifully.

Voldemort would be reading her mind.

She had no shoes on. The Manor’s marble stairs were cold on her arches and toes.

Think of a lake with still waters. A bookshelf with leather tomes.

Draco’s hand slid down the banister, long fingers that had grabbed at her hair, held her down, pinched at her skin. Her vision blurred with unshed tears.



Edinburgh Castle loomed over them as they approached on the cobblestones, devoid of the usual tourists or families. Devoid of the Muggle military guards at the gates. Instead they passed cloaked Death Eaters and seedy Dark object dealers begging for Draco Malfoy’s gold like paupers.

How far had Voldemort spread his reach? Surely the Muggle governments were now aware of him, if a popular tourist site had been seized. What did the Muggle papers say?

She shoved her questions aside, focusing on the familiar silhouette in the distance. A wind howled across the stone path, and Hermione shivered in her *négligée*, her ankles twisting in the heels. She looked up at the castle now, and a different howl grated with the wind.

Werewolves.

Their lethal bodies prowled through the turrets over the arched entryway. A jolt of terror shot down her spine. The last time she’d been this close to a werewolf had been in the Great Hall, watching in horror as it hunched over Lavender’s body.

Draco grabbed her arm and strode forward. She focused on the pressure of his fingers as they drew closer, her heart pounding in her ears, as if trying to drown out the sounds of their sniffing and panting. Once they reached the end of the path, he placed his fingers directly over the tattoo and gave her a yank forward, over the threshold.

Goosebumps prickled on her flesh. A magical barrier. “Am I locked in now?” she asked, rubbing the skin where he’d gripped her. He paused, turning to look at her with a cruel expression, a flash of warning in his

THE AUCTION

Eaters are generally encouraged to attend.”

She nodded, willing her nerves to calm. She extended her arm to him, and he stared down at it before gingerly wrapping his fingers around the tattoo and walking them through the barrier.

He walked them to the top of the hill for Apparition, and as he drew his wand, her anxiety tumbled over. “Will something similar happen tonight?”

His eyes were cold and dead as he looked at her, questioning.

“S-similar to my room. Will you need to—”

“No.” It was harsh against the wind. “You will stay close to me, and we will let everyone see you so that we don’t have to return for several weeks. That’s all.”

She swallowed, shivering.

“There will be minor contact,” he said, clarifying her question. His eyes were on the sky, and she wondered much *minor contact* he could stand. As if *he’d* been the one assaulted.

Then again, they’d both been violated. In different kinds of ways.

She offered him her elbow. He took it in a firm grip, and they slipped away and appeared at the edge of a small town, dark and quiet. The cobblestone streets led up a long hill, and at the top, a looming castle looked down on them, the Dark Mark slithering in the sky above it.

He led them forward toward the gates, and just before following him, she caught sight of an old sign hanging off a dead street lamp.

EDINBURGH CASTLE THIS WAY

CHAPTER 13

He pinched her instead of penetrating her. Her mind was flooded with images of an attack, of a rape, but that’s not what had happened.

His feet were heavy on the stairs as they turned the final staircase. His boots. His Death Eater boots.

That’s not what had been happening at Malfoy Manor. Even though it should have been.

She paused on the final steps, feeling her entire body tremble.

Think of a lake with still waters. A bookshelf with leather tomes.

She opened a book. *Tea with Narcissa Malfoy*—her soft hands on her shoulder, her wrist. She snapped it closed and tucked it at the far edge of the shelf.

Another book: *Lucius Malfoy’s Secrets*. Standing at the edge of a study, “Gregory Goyle, Senior,” the playful lift of his brow as he baited her. A key turned, locking the pages of the book like an old diary, and the text pushed back into a forgotten shelf in the corner.

Draco walked to a door and waited for her. Fitting that it was the drawing room again.

Seven beautiful red spines, the collector’s editions: *A Hand on My Jaw—Healing the Cut; You Don’t Drink Coffee Anymore?; The Gazebo; Strong Lips on My Arm; Happy Birthday, Draco; A Cobalt Jumper, Standing Watch at My Window; We’re Quite a Pair, Aren’t We?*

She separated the copies, sending each of them to bottom shelves, tucking them into other books, tearing the covers off of them and sending their pages over the top of the bookshelf.

Standing by the door to the drawing room, his eyes were off in the distance like one of the Malfoy statues lining the corridors. When she reached him, he grabbed her arm and pressed her against the wall. She didn’t flinch when he took her chin in his firm grip. Any memories of softer touches had been buried.

In place of the glossy red spines, there were inky, leathery copies filled with hair tugging, pale fingers on her ribs, electrocution, a week’s

isolation, the sharp pang of his ring as he backhanded her, and *take my cock so good, don't you.*

He shook her jaw, jarring her back to him. "You won't embarrass me, will you Mudblood?"

She startled at the word on his tongue. It had been years.

His eyes were like ice as his fingers dug into her jaw. "You know how to behave, don't you?"

She let the tension melt from her muscles and sagged against his grip. Like a ragdoll.

"Yes." Her voice cracked, and she felt the word float between the two of them.

"Yes, *what?*"

Pull forward only your chosen memory. Let the rest drift back.

Indentations on her jaw as his fingers curled. She let all memories of his warm eyes drift back.

"Yes, Master."

A flicker in his grey eyes. A curl of his lips that felt familiar and cruel. He moved to the drawing room.

She dragged her feet through the entryway and felt the Dark Lord before she saw him.

The darkness hung off of him like a cloak, dripping onto the floors and sinking into the stones. He stood in the center of the room, fingers trailing over the back of an antique armchair, turning to bare his teeth to her in a grin.

"Mudblood Granger. Thank you for entertaining."

Lucius stood with him, holding a glass. He spared her one glance before swirling his wine and taking a deep swig.

A hand between her shoulders – just like earlier – shoved her sharply until she fell to her knees. Draco's shoes in her eye line.

Hadn't taken his shoes off. *Wasn't that a phrase?* She tried to remember.

when she opened it. He didn't respond to her comment about being fashionably late.

She cleared her throat and extended the gold necklace. "It won't close. I assume you need to do something?"

He finally looked up at her. He'd washed his hair, and his skin was back to pale white instead of grey. But he was in his Death Eater boots and trousers. They were both in uniform tonight.

Taking the necklace from her extended fingers, he played with the clasp while she turned around and lifted her hair off her shoulders. Once fastened, the gold shrunk to her neck, and she gasped at the feeling of confinement.

She turned around. "Do these have magical properties?" she asked, fingering the edge of the thin gold.

He jerked his gaze from her neck to her eyes, a tinge of pink in his cheeks. "It's a class system, barring certain collars from certain rooms."

Where were they headed?

"I suppose I have an all-access pass, then?" The sharp humor was coming swiftly, covering the bubble of her nerves.

"Of sorts."

He led the way downstairs, and when he turned left toward the front door instead of the fireplaces, she was reminded of when they'd gone to Hogwarts.

She froze. "Will the Dark Lord be there?" she asked as he stepped through the door.

"No. He rarely is." A pause, and then over his shoulder: "Neither is my aunt."

She followed behind him down the path as the tightness in her chest loosened. "And why is that?"

He didn't respond for a moment. When they'd finally gotten to the gates, he said, "The parties are rather specific... for specific tastes. Neither the Dark Lord nor my aunt have a desire for these affairs. Though Death

corner of her eye, giving her a wide berth of space to enter her room unimpeded. Casting one last glance at him, she asked, “Are you expected to join them now? The Notts?”

“Yes.”

She paused, and said, “You should mess your hair.”

His eyes, which had been solidly fixed on her knees, snapped up.

“If you’ve been ‘dealing with your Mudblood.” His eye twitched, as if she’d hissed it at him. “In your sex dungeon,” she clarified. The corner of her mouth pulled upwards.

He stared at her for a moment and then nodded at the ground, running a hand through his hair absently. Smoothing it — the exact opposite of what was necessary.

She gave an exasperated sigh and found herself stepping forward, reaching up, and dragging her fingers through his fringe, pulling it forward over his eyes, separating the oily strands and rustling the top where she could reach.

Suddenly his head jerked back, his body following, stumbling to the opposite wall.

She jumped, pulling her hand back as if she’d burned him.

“Sorry,” he gasped, as if *he’d* been the one touching without permission, and then he was racing through the hall and down the stairs before she could blink.

She read the revised *Hogwarts: A History* from front to back that night to keep herself from thinking about it.



Friday evening arrived, and with it, a green silk slip, a pair of low black heels, and a thin gold choker necklace that she could only assume was meant to be a collar of sorts.

A concubine, to be paraded around, gawked at and leered over.

At a quarter past ten, he knocked on her door. He didn’t look at her

“How are you *enjoying* your accommodations?” Voldemort’s voice slid over her skin, his meaning not lost on her. “Everything you’d hoped it would be and more?”

He cackled. She kept her eyes cast down. The slip hung forward off her body. Her chest still sticky.

She re-lived the entire experience from moments ago. She pulled the shelf towards her, letting those images flutter in front of her mind. Her cream-colored walls. The sound of his grunting.

“Let’s have her out and about more, Draco. It would be good for morale to see her like this, maybe teach a few others about their place.” The words bubbled beneath her skin. She blinked, drawing a shallow breath. *Think of a lake with still waters.*

“I assume you’ve broken her in?”

“She’s a work in progress, my Lord. But I am enjoying the challenge.”

The voice echoed, slipping into her mind.

“So you’ve finally taken her?” came Voldemort’s low timbre.

“Yes, my Lord. Several times now.” A low chuckle. “In fact, I must apologize for our tardiness.”

She felt her body being lifted, like a hook in her back, pulling her up to face Voldemort.

A lake that stretches into the sunset. Waters still. Depths below them.

She breathed deep into her tight chest, but it was like a shark fin cutting through the waters—

Voldemort was in her mind again.

The cream walls in her bedroom.

Her gasp of pain.

“*Take my cock so good, don’t you.*”

Her fingers scratching at his face blindly—

Draco above her, eyes vacant as he stroked himself.

The sound of her clothes ripping.

The grunt from his throat as his hand twisted in her hair, the sound of

his come hitting her chest—

She was alone. On the floor of the drawing room. Staring at Draco's shoes. Listening to Voldemort cackle.

There were still knives in her mind, slowly sliding their serrated edges through her. The spines of her books were sawed in half. She felt the slow seeping of her energy leaving her.

Her eyes refocused. She'd missed something along the lines of "Was it good for you, Mudblood Granger?" And a hissing laugh. Then silence; long enough for her ears to stop ringing.

"Your aunt intimated that your treatment of the Mudblood was somewhat... 'unique,' Draco. I would have come sooner to see for myself, had I not been preoccupied. But I can see now that she was mistaken."

Footsteps, pausing in front of her bowed head. "Yes," he purred, voice low and soft. "You're no more than a common, filthy whore, are you, Mudblood? You should consider yourself lucky to be covered in a Pure-blood's seed."

Her fingers pressed into the marble. Her nails breaking, pulling backwards. She held the pain close to her.

"...some information from you, Mudblood. Thank you for obliging." And then the hook pulled at her ribs again, drawing her limp body upwards. He was about to look into her again. There were cool waters somewhere, hidden behind a mountain range. If only she could see them. There were books. Somewhere there were books she had to close—

Her head tilted back. Eyes opening, focusing. Lucius stood ten paces behind Voldemort, his gaze intense on her. Voldemort's long fingers pressed under her chin until she met his eyes.

Red fire dissolved to emerald green. She blinked, and Harry was before her listening to her babble excitedly.

"It must have been Fiendfyre!" she said, chest heaving with exertion, staring down at the broken pieces of Ravenclaw's Diadem.

"Sorry?" Harry's face was stained with dirt, his glasses foggy with heat.

Her pulse pounded. The only other time she'd gone "out," they'd visited Hogwarts. "What does that mean?"

"There is a party every weekend. You've had Dragon Pox for four weeks, too ill to attend." His voice dripped with cold irritation. "And now, you are no longer ill."

"What kind of party?" Her voice cracked.

His eyes drilled into her with a look that said, *You know*.

Trying to keep her breath steady under the weight of her ribs, she realized something. "Are there other Lots there?"

When he nodded, her heart skipped a beat, her mind running wild with the opportunities—

"The Weasleys are never in attendance," he said, clearly reading her. A heavy silence. "They don't tend to play nice with others."

She stared up at him, feeling a familiar irritation surge through her.

"And will I be expected to 'play nice?'"

His eyes flashed at her, and he said, "You're too smart not to."

He was right. She'd been looking for a way out of the Manor. And now that she'd gotten it, she wouldn't spoil it.

Turning on his heel, much like Snape used to, he swept to the stairs and paused at the first step, inviting her to follow. They wound up the back staircase in silence, avoiding the route that passed the library, and arrived in their shared hallway with a series of twists and turns that Hermione hadn't been able to memorize yet.

He paused outside her door, and she turned to him. "Friday?"

"At ten."

Her mouth fell open. "In the evening?"

He lifted a brow and deadpanned, "Do you have an early exam in the morning, Granger?"

And it was so familiar, and so dramatic, and so *normal*... Her lips twitched, and she had to tilt her chin away to keep from smiling at him. She pushed open her bedroom door and saw him step back in the

“Answer the damn question!”

“I don’t know!” The shout silenced them both. He swallowed, the tension thick and heavy around them. And then, more quietly: “It’s just whispers and gossip at this point—”

“Could Harry have gotten out?” As soon as the words left her lips, she knew it was absurd — even before she saw the expression on Draco’s face. Still, she whispered, “Is Harry alive?”

He stared at her as if she were a ghost. “Granger,” he said slowly, like she could break. “I have no reason to believe that Potter is alive.” He tilted his head at her. “Do you?”

She considered the information that Voldemort had been looking for. The possibility that Harry had two souls inside of himself...

Draco stepped forward, still watching her warily. “Do you really believe that if Potter were alive, he would have allowed the Auction to take place? That he wouldn’t have been storming the gates every day you’ve been here?”

Looking up at him, blinking quickly, she felt her heart breaking again, just as it had in the courtyard when she’d seen his small body in Hagrid’s arms.

She turned away, her fingers playing with a thread on her jumper. “No. No, I suppose you’re right. It was an unfounded theory.” She closed her eyes, struggling to collect herself. She took a deep breath. “Nott is here to use the library?”

“Yes.”

“And why did I have Dragon Pox?”

His tired eyes sharpened as they ran across her face, remembering his irritation with her. “It doesn’t matter now.”

“Where will he be seeing ‘more of me,’” she said, repeating Nott’s words from earlier.

Draco pressed his lips together in a fine line, and glared at the stone floor. “We’ll be going out on Friday.”

“Fiendfyre – cursed fire – it’s one of the substances that destroy Horcruxes, but I would never, ever have dared use it, it’s so dangerous—”

And then they were younger. Ron stood next to her in Grimmauld Place, whispering to her behind a Christmas wreath.

“He said he *was* the snake. He said *he* attacked my dad.”

“But Ron, that’s impossible—”

“I know, I know.” Running his fingers through his messy hair, Ron looked for eavesdroppers over her head—right where Voldemort’s consciousness hung, like a cape on her shoulders. “Dumbledore seemed like he knew it. Like he guessed it. That Harry saw it from the snake. And then he started lying. Said he saw it from above. Why would he lie, Hermione—”

A squeezing twist, and she was in Charms class turning vinegar into wine, straining to hear Flitwick’s instructions from across the room. Harry cast a Muffliato Charm and whispered to her and Ron about his meeting with Dumbledore the night before.

“The diary’s gone, the ring’s gone. The cup, the locket, and the snake are still intact. And there’s a sixth that was either Ravenclaw’s or Gryffindor’s,” Harry said.

“Are you sure there’s only six?” she asked.

“Dumbledore was sure. Said he made six, with his own soul as the seventh piece.”

Her mind whipped around, and she found herself standing next to Ron in a sea of students, watching Harry and Draco duel in their second year. She flinched when Draco produced a snake from his wand, her stomach rolling as Harry hissed at it. She felt her world slow, and then almost re-wind.

Voldemort stood over her as she helplessly watched Harry spit Parseltongue at the snake again. There was a pause as Voldemort examined the memory for a third time.

Hermione felt her mind screaming. She needed to get him out, to slam

these books shut. But she hadn't been prepared.

There was a slippery sensation inside of her consciousness. Something far gentler in her mind. Instead of sharp blades, it was like a table knife slipping through butter.

A jerk in her mind, and the knives cut through other spines, looking, searching.

She stood over Harry's sleeping form. In the tent. Just months ago.

Hermione watched with shallow breaths as he thrashed in his sleep, snarling words from dreams that clearly weren't his.

"Stand aside, you silly girl. . . stand aside now. This is my last warning—"

Hermione reached down to wake him, fingers shaking. *"Avada Kedavra!"* he hissed. She stumbled back, mouth open in silent horror. But the green light never came.

She stared down at his shaggy hair, sticking to his forehead with cold sweat. She held the chain of the locket in one hand, having severed it from his chest earlier. She felt Voldemort hovering over Harry, and she tried to move—tried to shield Harry from his vicious eyes.

But the other presence in her mind, calmer and less violent, stood behind her. Almost as if he was a passenger, just flitting through wherever Voldemort took him.

The pounding in her head was rocking her, the vision of Harry starting to blur with black spots.

Still, Voldemort slithered over him on the bunk, watching as he thrashed and hissed in Parseltongue. She felt the panic in her lungs, seizing her ribs. She couldn't breathe any longer.

And then she was alone. Her body collapsed to the stones on the drawing room floor, her head lolling to the side as she panted. A blur of images, focusing and refocusing.

Draco's shoes still next to her. Unmoving.

Her vision refocused, and she saw Voldemort looming above her, red

Perhaps he'd gotten out somehow, preparing to regroup...

Her eyes drifted up, catching on the dark corners of the dungeon. There was no way for her to know. Not right now, anyway.

Hermione stepped forward into the shadows and examined the space. She hadn't considered that the dungeons would be worth looking into before — there would be no way out down here for certain.

One torch lit the room, flickering near the stairs. There were shackles and chains mounted to the walls and an ominous table with cuffs, something dating back centuries.

A small blanket folded carefully lay next to a stone pillar. Beside it, a game of jacks and a few cards belonging to an Exploding Snap set.

Luna.

Hermione swallowed. Luna had been kept here. And according to her, Draco had visited with her. Kept her company and told her about what was happening at school.

This is where prisoners were kept. This should have been where *she* was kept. A wave of grief crashed over her, knowing that countless friends and classmates had been kept in similar locations for the past few months. She simmered in her own thoughts, staving off tears by focusing on what she'd just heard about Liverpool.

Possibly twenty minutes later, she heard the grate at the top of the stairs creak open. Scrambling to a pillar out of instinct, her blood was still pumping furiously when recognizable boots stomped down the stone steps, followed by thin legs she knew.

"What the fuck, Granger?" he hissed before he even fully appeared in the opening of the stairs.

"There are people getting out?" Her skin tingled with the questions she needed answered.

"What don't you understand about 'stay in your room—'"

"Who? How many?"

"—fucking idiot sometimes, you know that?"

roiled.

"Mippy?" Narcissa called. The *pop* of the elf appearing. "Take the Mud-blood back to the dungeons. Make sure she stays there."

Like a slice to her stomach, hearing Narcissa use that word. She blinked away her fuzzy vision as the end of Nott's cane began to dip below her collar. Mippy's hand wrapped around her wrist, and then she was squeezed through, arriving...

In the dungeons.

She turned on her knees to face the little elf.

"Mippy is sorry! Mippy tells Miss to stay upstairs!" Mippy's lips trembled, and then she Disapparated.

Hermione stood, spinning in a circle as she took in her surroundings, expecting a dragon to emerge from the shadows. She'd never been down in the dungeons before. Only Harry and Ron had been dragged down here while Bellatrix kept her upstairs. The air was thick and moist, and there seemed to be a draft coming from somewhere.

Moving to the stairs, she found her feet couldn't climb. Mippy had cast a ward against her leaving the dungeon. She huffed and leaned against the stones. Perhaps she'd regret vexing Mippy later, but the information she'd learned had been worth it.

People were successfully getting out. She considered Liverpool — at first glance, not a particularly important location. But it was close to the water. The Apparition Line.

Her mind whirled. George and Angelina's attacks had been deliberately planned away from Liverpool. Diversions.

She desperately wanted to know who had escaped. Was it anyone she knew? Any of the Lots? Had Ron or Ginny gotten out?

A cold shiver passed over her.

If Voldemort was looking for Harry in her mind...

If there was any chance that Harry had survived the Final Battle...

She chewed on her lip, thinking.

eyes narrowed down at her in thought. Behind him, Lucius took a sip from his glass. Smooth movements. Like a knife through butter.

There was no cackle of victory. No savage revenge for her knowledge about his most precious secret.

Just a sizzling silence.

Darkness.

She blinked, re-waking, drifting in and out of consciousness.

When she focused, Draco's shoes were still there. Lucius hadn't moved. But Voldemort was walking to the windows, looking out over the gardens.

"My Lord?" Lucius offered. "Are you finished with the Mudblood? She's drooling on my marble."

Hermione tried to close her mouth, but her body was boneless.

Voldemort didn't respond. Hermione drifted into the darkness again, and when she reappeared, no one had moved.

And then, "Take her out," hissed from the windows. "I don't need anything else from her."

A cold hand on her elbow, yanking her. Sweaty palms on her shoulders, and pale arms around her waist.

As Draco dragged her out, she heard a murmur across the room—"My Lord. I would like to be of assistance."

The drawing room door shut.

More hands, cool and soft. Holding her face, tipping potions into her mouth. Long blonde hair brushing her temple as she sagged into willowy shoulders.

She gagged, turning to spew on the stones. A whispered cleaning spell.

Another potion poured into her mouth, drowning her.

Temporary relief from the daggers and butter knives in her mind.

Her mind...

She focused.

Her books... Her shelves of memories and spines of purple and gold and periwinkle. They were ruined. Shredded open and destroyed.

She swayed. A lighter grip on her shoulders, supporting her. A vice around her right wrist.

“Collect yourself,” a woman hissed near her ear. But it wasn’t directed at her. “You might be needed back inside.”

The blonde woman turned her around, and she caught a glimpse of a pale, thin boy just inches away, panting with his forehead against the wall, choking sounds coming from his throat.

She felt a pressure ease on her wrist as the woman steered her toward the stairs, a sweaty hand releasing its grip on her.

The woman helped her up the steps, one at a time, brushing a hand through her curls like her mother used to.

At the top of the staircase came a *pop!*

“Missus is needed!”

The sound grated against Hermione’s fragile mind.

“I will be right there—”

“Master says now! Master is going with Dark Lord!”

A pause. A curse against her shoulder.

“Hermione, dear. It’s just a few more steps to your room. I will send the elves in with more potions.”

She barely registered the words. Her mind felt raw, flayed open. Something whispered soothingly against her temple, and then she was standing alone at the top of a staircase.

The portraits were silent. The hallway felt thick as she moved towards her door, but her head began clearing.

There was a moment—years ago, it felt like—when she had trudged this hallway, feeling her imminent rape and torture pressing down on her, before she’d seen the suite, before she’d met Narcissa, before she’d had warm lips suck poison from her.

Hermione stood at her bedroom door now. She hadn’t been raped in this room.

She’d been violated, but not raped.

his feet, one hand putting down his drink while his other reached for his wand. His eyes were murderous.

“Ah-ha!” Nott said. “The little filth just triggered my Eavesdropping Charm.”

Hermione was deciding if running would even be an option as Nott’s wand flicked, and her body was brought into the room, zooming through furniture to tumble at their feet.

Narcissa stood, and the icy look she concentrated on Hermione froze her heart.

“What have I told you about wandering the Manor?” Narcissa hissed.

Hermione’s mouth gaped open, and she scrambled for a role to play.

“Please—it’s not what you think. I’m sorry—”

“Not nearly as sorry as you will be,” said Narcissa, her voice soft and venomous.

“Hmm,” said Nott. “She doesn’t look like she has Dragon Pox to me.”

The room took a breath. She looked up to Nott Sr.’s withered face from her place at his feet. He leered down at her.

“Of course she doesn’t. Draco just doesn’t like to share,” Theo said with a chuckle. Hermione flicked her eyes over to where Theo grinned at her.

“Not at all, I assure you,” Draco said casually. “But you’re right about the Dragon Pox. It turned out to be some Muggle disease. Something filthy that *she* brought in with her.”

“We’re very careful with Dragon Pox in this family,” Narcissa said to Nott. “Lucius’ father died from it, you remember.”

Nott lifted the tip of his cane to her chin, tilting her face back with the cold end. Hermione swallowed and met his eyes. “So, we’ll be seeing more of her then?” His double meaning wasn’t lost on her as the end of his cane trailed down her neck and tugged at the collar of her jumper.

“I expect so,” Draco grit out.

“Good. We purchased a male slave, you know. Excellent for labor, but obviously limited in *other* uses.” He laughed, and Hermione’s stomach

THE AUCTION

back to Narcissa, as if Draco hadn't spoken at all. "Wherever has Lucius run off to?"

A tense pause before Draco's voice lilted, "A confidential request from the Dark Lord."

Hermione watched Nott smile slowly.

"Our family is honored to serve him," Narcissa said.

Theo waved his glass carelessly. "Does it have anything to do with what's happening in France?"

Three heads turned to face him. Mistaking their reactions as impressed, he continued, "We're in his confidence as well, you know. No use in putting on airs around us." Hermione watched as Nott Sr. frowned at his son.

Narcissa took the lead and spoke softly. "I'm sure I don't know, Theo. The mission was between Lucius and the Dark Lord."

Theo nodded and sipped from his glass, oblivious to his father's exasperated glare across the room.

"As your husband has sensitive orders from the Dark Lord, so do I," Nott said smoothly. "I appreciate your graciousness as always, Narcissa."

"Be that as it may, sir, my father's not at home. Nor is he asking for assistance in yours." A delicate pause. "How can we be of service to you in your research?" Draco spoke with the elegant disdain of the upper class. He looked better, healthier. His hair was clean, and his skin clear again.

A prolonged silence. And then: "It concerns the Apparition line. And the incident in Liverpool last week."

Hermione's heart pounded. The last time she'd heard of the Apparition line had been at Dover Castle, where people were trying to get out. "We're looking for texts on obscure wards, ones they're less likely to—"

Nott Sr. cut off. She heard him mutter something, and just as she leaned in closer to hear better, the door banged open, revealing her there in the doorway.

Four pairs of eyes turned to her as her blood ran cold. Draco shifted on

CHAPTER 13

Draco had violated her today, because he should have been doing much worse for the past month.

He'd been clever and cunning. He'd found a way to keep her untouched, to keep from taking the one thing she had left to give. He'd played his role well—as had she.

But at what cost?

She pushed open her bedroom door and found a catastrophe.

Coughing, she waded through the heavy smoke. Her chairs knocked over and cushions exploded. The curtains on her windows were burning, still sizzling in some places, the fire contained by the room's wards. Harsh sunlight pierced through the haze. To her right, the bookcase smoked, pages fluttering to the ground still. Copies destroyed, spines burst apart, covers burning.

Feathers covered her mattress. Her bedposts had cracked, and canopy tilted to the side.

She tried to rationalize. She tried to find the cause.

And a chilling dread sunk into her as she realized *she* did this.

Her magic.

She'd been attacked, and her magic had responded.

As they'd left, he'd dragged her from the room, putting out flames as she focused on his come on her chest.

She turned to her bookcase, staring at her companions over the past weeks. Burnt. Flayed. Gone.

The bookcase in her mind shivered. She'd been so careful to save the Malfoys today that she'd forgotten to save Harry.

A sob shook her, and she found wet tears already on her cheeks. She leaned forward on the broken shelves.

Her priorities had shifted somewhere. She'd thought Harry was safe, dead in the ground. But she'd betrayed him.

Her knees ached. She'd fallen onto them.

Harry was dead. Ron was lost. And she was playing house with the

Malfoys.

She'd failed.

Her vision spotted as she sucked in air, head pounding, heart breaking.

Harry was dead. He wasn't coming back.

And she'd just told Voldemort that he was a Horcrux.

She couldn't fathom why Voldemort wanted that information. But she'd betrayed the entire last year of her life by offering it to him.

If only she'd thought to protect what was most important, instead of what was convenient.

A wailing sob shook her, breaking her eardrums as her fingers clawed at the bookshelf. She sat like that for what felt like hours.

A waxy hand on her shoulder. A whispered, "Miss?"

She shook her head, heaving for air. She didn't want to be treated this way. Like she was something precious.

"Mippy will fix?"

She choked, panting and sobbing. She shook her head. "I can't stay here. I can't—I can't sleep here."

Little fingers wrapped around her arm, and with a squeeze, she was in a different guest room, smaller and darker.

Mippy guided her to bed, pressing potions to her lips.

She took them without question, begging the world to release her.

the stairs, stopping at the bottom to stare at the fireplaces, expecting an entire dinner party to pour through the fire at any moment.

The drawing room door was closed. She suspected that was where Narcissa Malfoy entertained guests. But she was sure to be caught if she stood in the doorway with her ear pressed to the wood. She tried to think.

There was a rarely used ballroom attached to the drawing room. She suspected it was for parties and grand affairs. There was little chance anyone would be walking that direction if they were leaving the drawing room.

Hermione hurried through the corridor, sweeping past the kitchens and all the little hiding spots she'd memorized in the past two months. Pushing open the backdoor to the ballroom as slowly as she could, she saw there was no one inside and dashed to the door leading to the drawing room. It was cracked open.

Peeking through the door, she found Narcissa seated in an armchair, an untouched glass of brandy next to her. Draco stood to her side, holding a Firewhisky. A thin older man paced in front of them, using a cane but still moving deftly through the room. When he turned, Hermione saw his face.

Nott, Sr.

She searched the rest of the room and found a thin boy examining the paintings on the wall. Theodore. She watched him sip his Firewhisky and sneer at the taste while his back was turned to the room.

Her ears honed in.

"...project that needs quite a bit of research. Theo and I were hoping to spend the day in your library. Privately, if we may."

"I see," Narcissa said. "I do wish Lucius was here to assist you, but of course you're welcome to—"

"May I ask what kind of project?" Draco cut in coolly.

Theo turned to look at him. Nott took a long sip from his glass. "A confidential request from the Dark Lord," he said with a smirk. And then

THE AUCTION

gentle rustle of branches stretching toward the light.

So when the *pop* of apparition cracked across the leaves and flowers, Hermione dropped her coffee cup, shattering it when Mippy arrived in front of her.

“Miss!”

Her hand flew to her chest, calming her own heartbeat. Her blood ran cold at the elf’s terrified eyes.

“Miss has to go to her room!” Mippy extended a hand. “Mippy takes you now!”

She gathered her books with fumbling fingers, remembering the daggers of red eyes and the burning books—

With a squeeze, Mippy popped them away and into her bedroom.

“Is it the Dark Lord?” Hermione asked, voice trembling.

“No, Miss. Missus and Master Draco has visitors! It’s not being safe for Miss downstairs.” Mippy wrung her hands and disappeared with another *pop*!

Hermione stared at the spot where the little girl elf had been, feeling her fear shift to curiosity.

Visitors. She’d never known the Malfoys to have friends to drop by for a friendly chat.

A small war raged inside her chest. Mippy had made it seem urgent that she was not found downstairs. But this *safety* — this complacency, waiting for other people to control what happened to her — it would get her nowhere.

And if someone was downstairs discussing Death Eater business... Perhaps Lucius was back?

The need for answers, the need to be useful, the need to not just sit here and wait for something else awful to happen to her — those needs won out.

She slipped through her door, looking both ways as if she was about to cross a dangerous street. Her feet were soft on the marble as she descended



he slept for three days.

Mippy kept the room dark for her, mindful of her pounding head. The elf woke her once every morning to pour a potion down her throat, and to ask if “miss wants to walk.”

Miss did not want to walk.

Apart from forcing a few bites of food down when the trays would appear and dragging herself to the toilet once or twice, Hermione lay in bed all day, waiting for her next dosage.

Hermione had disjointed dreams while she was under the pain potions. In some dreams, Draco’s hand would hover on her lower back as they walked the grounds, and then he’d turn and abruptly slam her against a tree, ripping at her clothing and jerking his hips against her while she struggled and scratched at him. Other dreams started with him over her, pushing her face into the mattress, and then evolved into something softer, slower, a breathtaking rhythm while he kissed her deeply.

Draco didn’t appear outside of her subconscious, and she didn’t expect him to. She could still hear the choking, gagging sounds he’d made outside the drawing room. On the second night, she stared for what felt like hours at the round bruises on her wrist, not remembering when he’d made them. She was half asleep when she finally remembered the vice-like grip from a sweaty palm as Narcissa had turned her toward the stairs.

Narcissa visited the smaller, darker suite on her third day, but Hermione couldn’t find the energy to pull herself up in bed. So she lay on her side and listened to Narcissa move about the room, opening curtains and fluffing pillows.

"Hermione, dear," she finally whispered. "I need for you to come with me back to your suite. There are protective wards and enchantments on that room for you. It's safer there."

Her dry lips parted uselessly. *Safer*. She jerked a half nod.

Narcissa helped her up, helped her dress, helped her take a few shaky steps across the room. And at every instance, she asked Hermione's permission to touch her. "May I assist?"

She knew, of course. They all did.

Shock pierced the fog in her head once Narcissa opened the door to her original room. The curtains had been replaced. A deeper color, a more vibrant gold shining with the sun. Her bed curtains were red now. Her armchairs a deep mahogany. Everything she'd destroyed had been replaced with something richer, warmer. Much more like Gryffindor's common room.

She felt Narcissa watching her closely, so she managed another nod, and once she was alone in her room again, Hermione turned to her bookshelf. There were five or six books there, two unfamiliar to her. She saw the crisped spine of one, and deduced that these were the only volumes left untouched by the chaos. She felt her heart ache with the loss. The fire had burned away the spine of a thick forest green cover, but she knew without confirming that it was the Brontë. Jane Eyre had survived.

With a jolt, she turned to the bedside table, searching for seven books stacked in a pile...

Nothing. A new table with just the brass-lined jewelry box still sitting proudly, winking at her. Draco's personal copies of the Gainsworth books were gone now.

Acid rose from her stomach, choking her, burning her throat. Tears pricked her eyes again. She'd destroyed it all. She couldn't be trusted with precious things. Harry had always trusted her with crucial information and keys to puzzles, but perhaps he shouldn't have. Now she wondered if she might have cracked under Bellatrix's knife if Dobby hadn't saved

information.

She sat in the Conservatory, staring out at the July day with a book in her lap. It was the closest she'd gotten to the outdoors. At first, after running into Draco, she'd been hesitant to leave her routine of library to conservatory to library to bed. But as the days passed, she grew anxious to see him. If she was going to help the Order, she needed to be on good terms with him. She needed his access, his information. Knowingly or unknowingly.

She began seeing Narcissa again. Reading and taking long walks through the Manor, in places she could easily be seen. If Draco realized that she was letting things return to "normal," then perhaps so could he. Narcissa tried to make up for the absence of the others by meeting Hermione in the mornings for tea (and coffee) and chatting about novels and holidays and other things normal people discussed. When the guilt gnawed at her insides, Hermione reminded herself that their conversations might make it back to Draco. She tried not to let herself think about whether he was sleeping, or whether he'd put on any weight.

It had been ten days since the incident in the hallway, and Hermione was halfway through the first volume of *Medieval Magical Europe*. She sighed and snapped it closed, having finished another useless chapter.

Considering Blaise again and his rescue of Pansy, she realized that Draco surely knew of his plans. Had he not bought her? Was he not shocked to hear that only one slave arrived that night? Hermione hummed into her coffee cup, and thought of what information she could pry from Draco if only they could talk again, like they used to. Thinking back to the gazebo, she knew he was open to giving her information. What did Draco know about the tattoos and their removal?

She sipped her coffee, breathing in the moist air between the vines. The conservatory windows stretched to the ceiling in a wide dome, allowing all the sunlight in. She sometimes saw Hix, the grounds elf, trimming and watering the trees and plants, but there was no movement except the

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And she was reminded of the first years that would jump out of the Slytherin King's path whenever he swept down the Hogwarts corridors. But to look at him now...

He waited, allowing her to pass with as little disturbance of the air she breathed as possible. She propelled her feet forward, feeling like she was passing through another cloud of grief, just aching to find the clean air and light again.

She thought of her bookcase, a slow-growing apology, a rebuilding of sorts. She thought of pale fingers on her wrist, breaking the capillaries and bruising the bones, unable to let go.

Stopping in front of him, she waited. His eyes didn't flicker upward. He stared off, across the floor, glazed eyes and held breath.

"Thank you for my books," she whispered.

She watched his throat swallow. Her chest was tight with the desire for normalcy, for where they had been before. Her hand lifted, fingers stretched to touch—

His grey eyes flickered to meet hers. Hollow. Her hand dropped. She continued moving through the corridor, pushing aside her thundering heart and her aching chest — her desire to comfort and bring color back to his skin.

When she reached the end of the hallway, she looked back and found a thin figure still leaning against the wall, bleeding into the background of his own manor.



Lucius Malfoy still had not returned. It had been two weeks since he'd left with Voldemort, and still the questions swirled in her mind. He'd offered "assistance" — whatever that meant. She remembered the feeling of two presences in her mind in the drawing room, one smoother and dull. She was fairly certain that Lucius had seen what Voldemort did in her mind, but she hadn't the faintest idea what he'd chosen to do what that

them. Perhaps she was weak — good for her mind, but once her heart became involved, she was useless.

Her knees trembled, and she sank to the floor and wept heaving sobs that made her lungs spasm and stung the skin on her face until nothing existed but her grief and shame. Once she'd finally exhausted herself, she lay on her side, fingers curled in the carpet. Watching through swollen eyes as a sliver of sunlight inched across the room.

At some point, a tray of food appeared on her new coffee table. She ignored it.

What would her friends think of her now? What would Harry think, after she'd betrayed his deepest secrets?

His green eyes flashed in her mind, imploring her to find the right answers, to come up with the solutions, to save them—

To save them.

Her breath caught, and she blinked back the tears. Slowly, she pushed herself up. It wasn't too late for her to fix the mess she'd made. She could still do what Harry needed from her.

She'd been meandering for months, waiting for someone to clearly delineate the next problem, to ask the question so she could concentrate on the answer. But she'd posed the right questions months ago, all on her own. It was just her now. Surely she had more freedom than any of the other slaves. Perhaps she even had more resources at her disposal than what was left of the Order. She'd just been too complacent with the Malfoys to work the problem as she ought to have been.

With a new burst of passion, Hermione stood. She took a deep breath and marched out of her bedroom, and down the hallway.

She needed to kill Nagini. She needed to work on the tattoos. She needed to get them out. All of them. They were counting on her, and she knew it.

Having now experienced only a fraction of what her friends had been going through for *months*, she felt the guilt weighing heavy on her as she

hurried down the stairs.

She pushed open the library doors and froze, heart pounding in her chest. Thankfully, it was safe. Empty. She took a shaky breath and stepped inside. Forcing herself to set aside thoughts of the last time she'd been here, she crossed to where the Horcrux book had been a week ago. Finding it still absent amongst the other Dark texts, she wondered which Malfoy had stolen it. Would she find it in Lucius' study? Perhaps it had been destroyed if they'd known Voldemort was coming for the information in her mind.

Her addled mind spun around the possibilities. The questions she'd buried for days underneath sleeping potions and grief. She blinked at the empty shelf, fighting off the headache she could feel coming on.

Did the Malfoys know more about Horcruxes than Hermione had assumed? And why *had* Voldemort been interested in Harry again?

She shivered, the cool air in the library not the cause.

Why look for the Horcruxes?

She swallowed, knowing the answer required her to look inside her own mind. To work through the purpose of Voldemort's visit.

She pressed her hands on the shelf in front of her, closing her eyes and trying to remember through the terror and the closed doors in her own consciousness.

Some information from you, Mudblood. Thank you for obliging.

Her lower lip trembled, and she bit it closed. He'd been there specifically to look for Horcruxes. That's why the Malfoys hadn't been prepared for his visit. What Draco had chosen to do — to do to *her* — had turned out to be a necessary precaution. Voldemort had decided to check on her treatment as a secondary motive, but he was there for the Horcruxes.

Hermione blinked, staring at the spot where the Horcrux book should be filed, as if she could will it into existence. It wouldn't tell her anything she didn't already know, but it would be a comfort of sorts.

She tried to think. She had been right — Harry had likely been an

the bottom of, so she stopped there, letting her mind wander as she ran her fingers over her own tattoo.

D.M.

She wondered what Blaise knew about the tattoos. Though Pansy's tattoo hadn't been activated by the estate, he must have known *something* about them in order to remove hers. She could have asked him weeks ago if her head had been in the right place.

A new book arrived on her bedroom shelf every morning. In the evenings, after a long day's work in the library, she'd reward herself by perusing its hundred-year-old pages, willing herself not to think about how the book had gotten there.

After a frustrating day of making little progress, she decided on a change of scenery. Hermione took several history books and headed toward the Conservatory. The air there was clear and easy on her mind. Passing the kitchens and the dining room, she wound her way toward the western wing of the Manor.

She heard his footsteps before she saw him.

Her steps faltered, and she squeezed the books into her chest.

Not his Death Eater boots. They made a harsher sound against the marble.

She stood in the middle of the corridor leading to the western wing, like a broomstick accident waiting to happen.

He turned the corner, twenty paces away, eyes fixed on a stack of parchment in his hand. He looked thinner, if possible. Bones protruding from his face and chest like knives.

His eyes glanced up at her when he was halfway down the corridor.

His body jolted, dropping half his paperwork. She could see the violet bruises of exhaustion under his eyes from halfway across the room. Sucking in a rattling breath, she watched as his gaze dropped to the marble, his knees shaky as he bent to pick up the papers he'd fumbled. He stood and pressed back against the wall, eyes cast down.

THE AUCTION

After a full afternoon of research, she slept for the first time without a potion. When she woke in the morning, gold-tinted sunlight shimmering across her walls, there were two new books on her shelves. She pulled herself from the bed, and examined them.

HOGWARTS:	A	HISTORY
BATHILDA		BAGSHOT
PRINTED LONDON, 1984		
HOGWARTS:	A	HISTORY
BATHILDA		REVISED
PRINTED LONDON, 1996		BAGSHOT

Her eyes widened and her fingers itched. Comparing two editions side-by-side? Her skin tingled with the desire. She reshelved them, and promised she'd wait until the end of the day to crack them open. Her traitorous heart fluttered on her way to the library that day, as she let her mind briefly wonder where Draco was finding these books.

She spent a week looking into magical slavery. The catalog returned an assortment of books on the history of enslavement in Europe, Asia, the Americas, and of course the Roman Empire. To her chagrin, no charms or potions books turned up. But at least it was a start.

She started with the more recent European history books. The problem was that there was no modern precedent for magical enslavement in Europe—apart from house-elves, of course, but their magic worked quite differently. Any magical enslavement in recent centuries was taboo, so there were no records. There were rumors of magical slavery in more shadowy parts of the continent, but it was hard to find research on spellwork that no one admitted to doing. But she was certain that magic as powerful and quickly developed as the tattoos had been inspired by something. She only had to find the seeds.

Looking into the significance of tattoos and skin branding in ancient cultures like the Celts had taken her down a rabbit hole that she never saw

CHAPTER 14

unintentional Horcrux. A part of Voldemort's soul had split from him the night the Killing Curse had rebounded, and attached itself to Harry. Voldemort had filtered through the only memories she had that could possibly prove that theory. So she wasn't alone in her hypothesis. But what had tipped Voldemort off?

A sliver of hope tugged at her ribs — *was Harry alive?*

She'd seen his body in the courtyard, but had he survived after all? She hadn't known he was going into the Forest to meet Voldemort, or she would have stopped him. The last time she'd seen him, he'd been clutching Snape's memories, racing for Dumbledore's Pensieve. What had he discovered that made him surrender himself?

She remembered the urgency in Snape's voice as he wheezed blood and begged Harry to take his memories. She'd suspected then that he wasn't loyal to Voldemort, though it was impossible to confirm now. Perhaps he'd known about the Horcrux. Found a way for Harry to fake his own death, while killing the piece of Voldemort inside of him. Skepticism warred with the burning hope in her ribs. It was highly unlikely — and yet, why would Voldemort care about Harry if he was dead?

The headache was returning. Hermione rubbed her temples, knowing it was no use guessing about what was in Snape's memories. She would never see them.

The library doors creaked.

She whipped around and stepped to the side, peering through the stacks towards the entrance, heartbeat thundering.

His cheekbones cut through his skin; even in the distance, she could see that. He was hunched, his shoulders folded over on top of his ribs, his hair thin and greasy. His skin seemed grey.

Take my cock so good, don't you.

She felt her body tremble. Her lungs refused to fill.

You want me to fuck your mouth again, Granger?

Standing in the open doorway, he pulled his wand. She watched him

mutter, “*Homenem Revelio*,” and the wand sparked blue, indicating there was someone in the room. Her.

She dug her nails into her palms, preparing herself, when his eyes flicked over the shelves, and he stepped back, quietly closing the doors behind him. As if he’d never been there at all.

It was ten minutes before she could trust her legs to move again. She grabbed several texts on Celtic magic, chest seizing, and sprinted back to the safety of her room, all earlier bravery forgotten.

Taking calming breaths, she leaned her head back on the closed door, staring at her new room. She hadn’t let herself think about Draco since that night. But she had to think this through. They couldn’t avoid each other forever.

Her chest twinged painfully at the thought of his pinched skin. He’d looked even worse than he did sixth year. She screwed her eyes shut, willing the image away. She had to use her brain, as her heart had failed before.

Draco did not want to harm her. In fact, it was quite clear that hurting her was one of the most traumatic things he’d ever gone through—

Her heart thumped with the possibilities, but her mind forced them aside.

She tried to put herself in Draco’s position and found little fault in his logic. He’d made the safest choice that night. If he’d cued her in somehow, she might not have managed to convince Voldemort that she was being routinely attacked.

Her mind moved to the next point: *Draco was actively absent — not visiting, not entering rooms she was in.*

Not apologizing.

She stopped herself. Too close to her heart. Reeling back, her mind fought for logic.

Draco was either convinced she didn’t want to see him, or he didn’t want to see her.

That was fine. Either of those were acceptable, logical answers. She stared down at her books, and another thought struck her.

Her greatest chance of exiting the property was under Draco Malfoy’s watch.

Until she found a way around the tattoos, Hermione needed him. They couldn’t keep running away from each other. Eventually, she would have to seek him out, and hope he would allow it.

Turning to her measly book collection, she grimaced at the burned titles. She set down the books from the downstairs library, and ran her fingers across the two new books. They weren’t new, per se, but they hadn’t been there a week ago. Solidly bound but withering with the years, they felt older than her by several lifetimes. She checked the copyright pages.

GREAT
BY CHARLES
EXPECTATIONS
DICKENS

PRINTED LONDON, 1861

LES
BY VICTOR
MISERABLES
HUGO
PRINTED LONDON, 1862

The heartbeat that she’d suppressed earlier thundered. *First editions.*

As she brought her face close to the pages, inhaling the musk of aged parchment and letterpress ink that had survived over a hundred years, she thought back to her earlier assessment.

Perhaps he was apologizing.

She placed them next to *Jane Eyre*, the only hundred-year-old text that had survived the fire.

All three leatherbound copies had lived through terrible things. She could do the same.

