

This is Definitely Torture

I move across the attic, my boots echoing on the wide, hollow floorboards. The place is huge, bigger than any house I'd ever set foot in, bigger than most barns back in the scrub lands. Dust layered everything: the rafters, the cracked beams, the corners where cobwebs hung like lace and yet... I could see it. With a bit of magic, just a flicker of light here, some polish there, a charm to scrub out the stink of mildew and male armpits, it could almost be beautiful. Maybe. As I wander, something catches my eye near the far wall: a faint glow, just a sliver, breaking through the floorboards. I crouch, running my fingers along the seam until I find it: a little plate of metal wedged between boards. With a tug, it scrapes back, and I suck in a sharp breath. It's an air vent. Although small and narrow, it looks directly down into the dorm below. I press my face closer, grinning when I see the outline of a student stuffing books and clothes into a bag. He moves quickly, muttering to himself, completely oblivious. I lean back, scanning the attic floor, and my grin stretches wider when I see more vents. There are dozens of them scattered all along the length of the floor. "Well, hello, magic supply," I murmur to myself. I bend low again, focusing on the boy below. That hum of energy, raw, careless, unguarded, buzzes through the vent like a live wire. I reach for it without thinking, tugging just enough to taste. The power slides into me smooth and warm, sparking against my skin. Just a sip, that's all I'll take. Just enough to make me hum along with it. He won't even notice it's gone. They hardly ever do. By the time he leaves the room, his reserves would be refilled, and I'd have had my fill. I sit back on my heels, heart racing, lips curling into a secret smile. Yeah, this attic might stink of dust and disuse, but it comes with one hell of a perk.

I slide the vent back into place with a little scrape of metal on wood, then lean back on my heels. Humming softly with my reserve of warlock magic, I whisper the words of an old spell I'd come across

once, tucked away in a book no one thought I'd read. The air around me shivers as the magic sinks into the beams and walls, sealing the attic tight. No sound in, no sound out unless I deem it so. A nifty trick. One that had helped me more times than I could count. I stand, brushing dust from my hands, and raise my palm. With another breath, I let the borrowed magic spill outward, sweeping across the floor in a sharp gust of wind. Dust whirls up, then vanishes, leaving the space shining. I cross to the massive stained-glass window and press my hand against the cold glass. The grime dissolves under my touch, colours bursting into clearer, brighter hues until the morning sun pours through, scattering red and blue patterns across the floor. For a moment, I stand there in the light, chest rising, magic humming faintly in my veins. I probe myself quietly, testing the pull. There is still a little left, a neat stash tucked inside me. Enough to count if I need it. I decide it's best to save the rest. You never know when the next fight-or-flight situation might come. With a sigh, I turn to the far side of the attic. The wardrobe stands there, cracked and lopsided, but faintly buzzing with enchantment. My fingers brush its handle, and a warm spark crawls over my skin. Definitely enchanted, because of course it was. It's useful. I pull the door open and immediately wished I hadn't. Inside hangs the uniform. I groan aloud, dragging a hand over my face. "You've got to be kidding me." The outfit looks like it had been designed by someone who'd never had to run for their life. It's a tiny black pleated skirt that would barely cover my ass, thigh-high white socks that scream, "look at me," a stiff white button-up shirt that is probably two sizes too small, and a little blazer with silver embroidery that seemed designed to choke me with formality. To top it all off, black heels. How would I ever run for my life in heels? I hold the hanger up, glaring at it like maybe it might spontaneously combust. "Yep," I mutter. "This school wants to torture me."

After wrestling myself into the ridiculous excuse for a uniform and shoving my legs into the thigh-high socks, I sling the satchel bag I found in the wardrobe over my shoulder. It smells faintly of mothballs and dust, but at least it's sturdy enough to hold a few books or a brick if I need one. With my shiny new humiliation complete, I take the magical map in hand and head down the winding attic staircase. The

moment I step back into the dorm hall, I regret it. The stares come instantly. Not the same curious or mocking ones as before, these are different. They're heavy, lingering, hungry. Shifters lean out of their doorways, eyes gleaming as they track me. Warlocks paused mid-conversation, lips curling into smirks. Even the fae among them tilt their heads in that predatory, assessing way that makes my skin crawl. Heat creeps up my neck as I clench my fists at my sides, but I force myself to keep moving. I shift my bag higher on my shoulder and let my long black hair tumble forward, curtaining my face. My eyes stay glued to the map in my hands, as if the glowing lines and shifting symbols are the most fascinating thing I'd ever seen. One step, then another, down the length of the dorm, through the wide common area, past the wolf whistles and murmurs. "Roommate material?" someone whispers. "She won't last a week," another says, low and eager. I press my lips together, pretend not to hear, and keep walking. The map glows faintly, guiding me through twisting halls and down marble staircases until the heading sharpens in golden light: Intro to Arcane Theory — Lecture Hall A. I blow out a breath, bracing myself. My first class, first test, and already, I hate everything about this place.