Perhaps

by Naralanis

Summary

Hermione Granger, Transfiguration Professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, gets a new co-worker: Narcissa Black.

Notes

A/N: So, this is a file I had on my computer for like... two years? Anyway, I decided to publish it, for no particular reason. I don't expect this to be updated terribly soon, as I have another story (For the Better) from another fandom in the works, which will take priority over this one (simply because it is a larger project, one I've been working on for a good while).

~Naralanis
Chapter 1

Hermione Granger pored over her notes from her previous two years as the Transfiguration Professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. She was in the process of writing up some new exams for the coming term, and she wanted to make them challenging. Not enough to make her students lose too much sleep over it, of course, but enough to make them work hard for good grades. After the retirement of Minerva McGonagall from the teaching post five years prior, Hermione had large shoes to fill. And, of course, she had more than proved herself, as the present Headmistress often remarked. Still, Hermione Granger was known as many things – including brightest witch of her age – but a slacker was not one of them.

For the past five years as a Hogwarts professor, Hermione had built a reputation for being a kind and supportive mentor, albeit a strict one at times. Ron and Harry teased her mercilessly about the similarities she shared with their own Transfiguration Professor, often calling her “McGonagall 2.0” – though never to either witch’s face. Secretly, however, Hermione could not help but feel flattered by the comparison to her favorite professor.

On this particular summer afternoon, Hermione sat diligently at her desk, looking over the exams from the year before. She made sure to never repeat herself too much, and it was an extremely difficult task to come up with new material year after year, but she enjoyed it nonetheless. She was presently writing a rough draft for the first years’ exam for the upcoming term. Her desk was littered with parchments of varying lengths, and a few heavy tomes floated around her, pages open strategically. The cozy office was mostly silent, save for the sounds of her quill scratching away at a fresh roll of parchment and the chirps of Athena, her own. The massive black bird had been a gift from Harry, once she resigned from her position at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to accept her current position at Hogwarts.

Hermione worked in peace and quiet until she heard a soft rapping against her door. She mindlessly flicked her wand at it, as her wards had not alerted her of any unsavory presences. None other than Minerva McGonagall greeted her from the other side, walking up to her former student, now colleague, with a smile.

“Good morning, Miss Granger. Hard at work as always, I see.”

The brunette smile guiltily.

“Good afternoon, Minerva.” The Gryffindor still felt awkward addressing her former Head of House by her first name, though Minerva had insisted. Funnily enough, when Hermione asked her to do the same, Minerva seemed incapable – some things never changed.

The door closed after McGonagall with a soft thud. The Headmistress took a few steps toward Hermione, glancing fondly at the office that had been her own for so many years until relatively recently. When Hermione had first moved in the former Head of House had been pleased to note their sense of interior decorating was quite similar – Hermione also preferred darker woods and tones, as well as bookshelves lining almost every wall. Sadly, the younger woman did not hold the same preference for tartans.

“To what do I owe this visit?” Hermione said with a smile, putting her quill away and facing the older woman directly.

Minerva took a seat by Hermione’s desk, still smiling at the young professor. She was incredibly proud of her former student, and would have liked no one better to take up her old
“Oh, no particular reason. Thought I’d pop in for a bit of a chat. How have you been?”

“I’ve been well. Summer is indeed a quiet time for us professors – Merlin knows how much we need it!” Hermione laughed.

“Quiet? Miss Granger, it certainly doesn’t look to be so quiet from where I’m standing. Pray tell, what are you trying to do, a complete exam rewrite for the next ten generations?”

Hermione blushed.

“I’m not that far ahead! These are just for the next term… For years one through four. I’ll get to the rest by the end of the week.” She said gleefully.

Minerva arched an eyebrow.

“I do believe the Muggle term for you would be… workaholic?”

The young witch had taken a while to get used to the friendly banter with her former Head of House. Once she did, however, she had to admit she enjoyed it immensely.

“That would be correct. I am almost done for tonight, though. I plan on seeing Harry and Ginny later tonight.” She said.

“Good” Minerva replied “send them my warmest regards, and to little James as well.”

“Good” Minerva replied “send them my warmest regards, and to little James as well.”

“I will.”

The two witches spent a few minutes talking – about Harry and Ginny, about a recent incident unwittingly caused by Hagrid that had the school temporarily overrun by pixies, about Hermione’s recent publications on Transfiguration Today, among other things. Conversation was easy between the two, as it usually tended to be. At some point, Dobby had been called, bringing them a pot of tea and freshly made biscuits.

After sipping her tea, Minerva turned to Hermione, her face a little more serious.

“To be perfectly honest, Miss Granger, I wanted your opinion on a matter of staff” she said, delicately munching on a biscuit.

Hermione raised her brow in wonder. The Hogwarts staff had remained mostly unchanged since she had been brought on, with Neville Longbottom stepping in for Pomona Sprout shortly after. Before that, McGonagall had taken on Charlie Weasley for Care of Magical Creatures, and Viktor Krum, of all people, for Defense Against the Dark Arts. Though Krum had been an unusual choice, he had proved to be an excellent professor, taking the position about a year after the war, after a particularly bad encounter with a bludger ended his Quidditch career prematurely. The Healers had managed to heal his spine, but he had walked with a cane ever since.

Since there were currently no open positions and no one was likely to be tired, the young Gryffindor presumed one of her colleagues was about to retire or resign.

“Staff matter? What is going on?”

Minerva sighed as she put down her teacup.

“Horace had decided to retire once and for all, before the term begins. I tried to persuade
him to stay, but he says his mind is quite made up. It is understandable, I suppose…”

The young witch frowned. Although she had never been overly fond of Horace Slughorn, even she had to admit he was an extremely important part of the teaching staff at Hogwarts, as qualified Potions Masters were nothing short of a rarity. Slughorn had been the best, besides the late Severus Snape.

“That is too bad” Hermione pondered. “Finding a suitable replacement won’t be easy… Do you have anyone in mind?” she asked, her curiosity piqued.

“As a matter of fact, I do have someone I’ve been considering” Minerva said, righting herself on the chair and looking at her former student intently, as if to gauge her reaction. “I have been thinking of hiring Narcissa Black.” She finally said.

Hermione’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. She hadn’t heard of the former Mrs. Malfoy in years, ever since the very public divorce. It had made headlines for weeks on end as Narcissa and Lucius dragged each other through the mud, trying to squeeze every last Galleon from the other. Of course, being in Azkaban had not helped Lucius much – that, along with his own son testifying against him in court had led the Ice Queen to walk away with a sizeable chunk of the Malfoy fortune and assets.

Before that, Hermione had only briefly seen Draco’s mother during the notorious war trials; where Lucius had been sent to Azkaban while she and her son had been acquitted, courtesy of the one and only Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived. Hermione remembered Narcissa’s cold and menacing expression as her then-husband was taken away in shackles, seemingly giving her title of Ice Queen justice.

After the trials, however, Narcissa had sought out Hermione only once. Her icy demeanor seemed to be exactly the same, that is until Hermione looked deeply into the woman’s electrifying blue eyes and saw that they were brimming with unshed tears. The witch had maintained her stony expression and looked deeply into Hermione’s eyes for a few tense, uncomfortable moments.

“I am so sorry.”

She had walked away before Hermione had a chance to form any kind of coherent response, not that one was needed. Both witches knew exactly what was being referred to.

Hermione had been constantly plagued by nightmares those first couple of years. They were always so vivid and terrifying she was afraid to close her eyes, and outright refused to sleep at one point. Her body had very nearly shut down with exhaustion, and then she realized she wouldn’t be able to keep her eyes open forever. In her despair to escape those crazed eyes and the insane cackling of the madwoman who had tortured her mercilessly, she had taken to a generous helping of Ogden’s Finest and a phial of Dreamless Draught. That, in turn, developed into an addiction that was only broken when Harry, Minerva, and the entire Weasley clan took it upon themselves to stage an intervention for Gryffindor’s Golden Girl. She and Harry attended several therapy sessions together, and that put her in the right track again. The saving grace, however, had been Minerva’s offer of employment. Leaving her stressful job at the Ministry had helped her immensely; it was hard to chase the nightmares away when her job entailed chasing them in real life. They still happened from time to time, but nowhere as frequently as they used to. Most importantly, she managed to work through them on her own.

Focusing on teaching was strangely the best therapy. The nightmares and addictions had robbed Hermione of what she loved most of all: learning. The academic environment and the bright
young faces in that temple of knowledge by the name of Hogwarts were the recipe for Hermione’s almost complete recovery.

Regardless, she wasn’t sure she had accepted Narcissa Black’s apology, or forgive her for that matter. She still remembered those electrifying blue orbs watching, as cold as ever, as her deranged sister tortured an 18-year-old girl in her own house.

That being said, Hermione didn’t hate the woman either. She had her to thank for Harry defeating the Dark Lord, even if she did it out of self-preservation, for herself and her son. As cold as she was, Hermione didn’t think Narcissa was as bad as her ex-husband, or her sister. Still, she had her reservations.

“Hermione? What do you think?” Minerva asked. Her former student blinked a few times, taken from her thoughts.

“To be perfectly honest, Minerva, I don’t know. I heard she’s a very skilled witch, but does she have the proper qualifications?”

Minerva sighed.

“Out of our current possibilities, she is by far the best choice. She was an exceptionally gifted student, not much unlike yourself, and had an extraordinary talent for Potions and Arithmancy. Slughorn himself recommended her. In fact, he tells me the only reason she had never gone on to achieve her Potions Mastery was due to her marriage to Lucius Malfoy. I’m sure you know, in traditional pureblood families such as the Malfoys, it is frowned upon for the Lady of the House to work.”

Hermione frowned. She was aware of the practice; luckily it was quickly falling out of fashion. Draco Malfoy himself had encouraged his wife, Astoria Greengrass, to pursue a career of her own when she expressed her wish. She was now an accomplished journalist for *The Phoenix Gazette*, a publication that arose after the fall of *The Daily Prophet*.

“Horace also tells me” Minerva continued “That Narcissa has returned to her Mastery studies. She plans to achieve it by the end of the coming year.”

The younger witch could not hide her surprise. Narcissa Black had clearly been working on her Potions Mastery for a while; it was a laborious, academically intensive process.”

“Really? I had no idea. Was she thinking of teaching Potions?” she asked.

Minerva shook her head in the negative.

“She has been working on Potions Research for St. Mungo’s for the past few years. I seem to remember she wanted to be a Healer, back when she was a student, and it seems she has pursued that path after the war.”

Hermione laced her fingers together, contemplating.

“You can look at some of her research on *The Practical Potioneer*. She has made quite a few advancements in the Polyjuice Potion, I’m sure you’d be interest in that.” Minerva tried.

Hermione pondered for a moment. She wasn’t stupid, she knew precisely why Minerva was asking about her thoughts on the matter. She could just say the word and Minerva would look elsewhere; Narcissa Black would never step foot onto Hogwarts if she so wished. Anything to avoid revisiting the trauma.
On the other hand, Hermione knew Potions Masters were hard to find, especially ones that were willing to take on the teaching profession. If Slughorn had recommended the woman, she must be good enough for the position. So be it.

“Has she accepted the position?”

Minerva looked sheepish for a second.

“I have yet to send her the owl. I wanted to hear your opinion first” the older witch remarked carefully.

Hermione shot her former Head of House a reassuring smile.

“You’re the Headmistress, Minerva. If you think Narcissa Black would be a good addition to the teaching staff, then by all means, hire her.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Ugh. OK, I know said I was not going to update this because I'm working on another story (For the Better, from The Devil Wears Prada fandom, if you're interested). But while doing some spring cleaning I came across a nearly completed chapter 2 on my notebook, so I just had to type it up and go. So here ya go. Don't get used to it! DO NOT. GET USED. TO IT.

Also, if you're someone waiting on FtB, I'M SORRY, I'M GETTING TO IT I PROMISE.

Reviews are appreciated!

~Naralanis

“Are you sure about this, Mother?”

“I’m not known for dithering.”

Grey-blue eyes rolled.

“I saw that.”

“Sorry.”

Draco helped his mother catalogue the last bits of her research before organizing them neatly into her ornate trunk. Narcissa was impeccably organized in all facets of her life, except when it came to her research. Said research was usually scattered about the room in hastily written sheets of parchment. Now, with her impending move, the two were taking the time to properly organize everything before she started her teaching career.

The young man sighed as he took in the sight of his mother’s office. The shelves that were usually lined with books were bare. The paintings adorning the walls were gone. A couple of cabinets were slightly open, but they were just as empty.

“What of the Manor once you go?” he asked, for what seemed to be the millionth time. Narcissa was the only one still living at Malfoy Manor. His father had lost it in the divorce, not that it mattered much in his decrepit cell in Azkaban. Meanwhile, Draco and his wife were temporarily living in London.

“I told you, I want you and Astoria to move in. Make this a happy home. Barring that, burn it. I don’t care what happens to this house.” Narcissa said, rifling through a wad of papers.

“Astoria and I are quite happy at the townhouse, Mother.” Draco reasoned half-heartedly.

Narcissa rolled her eyes, eerily like her son had done only moments prior.

“You won’t be so comfortable once your little bundle of joy starts flying around on a toy
broom. Trust me, you’ll want the extra room.” She argued.

Draco sighed. He knew his family would probably move into the Manor at some point. He just didn’t want to not have his mother there.

“There’s don’t you stay with us? It’s not like you’ll be living at Hogwarts… will you?” he asked. Though there were a few professors who chose to live in the castle even after term ended, he seriously doubted his mother would find the staff’s quarters sufficient.

“Perhaps. At any rate, I still have Black Manor to take care of. And the house at Charles Street.” Narcissa said, her nose turning up in distaste at the mention of her childhood homes.

“You can have our solicitor take a look at those. Sell them, then come live with us.” Draco reasoned. “Scorpius would love to have his Grandmother around. And you know Astoria would be delighted to have you.”

Narcissa gave her son a funny look. It didn’t matter how much she loved her grandson, she could still never think of herself as a grandmother.

“It’s not my place to live with a young couple. No, I’m quite decided. Hogwarts it shall be, for the foreseeable future, at least. Now go, go, don’t you have a wife and son to take care of?” She said, an unmistakable air of finality in her voice.

Draco gave her a lopsided grin, admitting defeat.

“Whatever you say, mother.” He said, leaving her to her packing.

Once her son was gone, Narcissa sat at the plush chair by the bay window with a deep sigh, overlooking the gardens of the impressive manor. For years she had been the Lady of the House. Her now office had been the only room where she could find some refuge in all of her years there. When she had first married Lucius, he had outfitted the room to be her own personal library, as he knew of her deep fondness of books.

The room held her happiest memories in the dark house. It had served as a relieving balm once she found herself overwhelmed by an arranged marriage. She had felt Draco’s first kicks while reading, curled up on that very chair. His first significant bout of accidental magic consisted of books flying off the shelves at astonishing speed. It was in this room where she had last spoken to Andromeda. The very room where she could recall, vividly, her last conversation with Bellatrix before her older sister lost her soul to the Dark Lord completely.

It was in this room where she had sought refuge when Tom Riddle himself invaded her life and her residence.

After the war, her acquittal and subsequent divorce, her library had transformed into so much more. Without the constraints placed upon her by her family and her marriage, she had outfitted it to be a fully functioning Potions lab, where she could work on everything she dreamed of working on since she was a student. She had even found some of her old Hogwarts notes tucked away with her old schoolbooks. Once she was finished, the left side of the room was overtaken by counter space, cabinets, cauldrons and measuring instruments. It felt good to delve into Potions once more.

Now, the room was bare. Her books, cauldrons, instruments and ingredients were packed. It was bittersweet, to be sure, but Narcissa welcomed the change with open arms. She never thought she would go back to Hogwarts. She hadn’t thought it once she graduated – and then
she hadn’t thought it after the war, once she did return only to witness so much bloodshed.

The former Mrs. Malfoy tucked away the last of her notes, closing her trunk with a gentle tap of her wand. The click it made reminded her of her first day as a student, and she could not help but smile at the memory.

“Merlin’s saggy underpants, Cissy! What are you trying to do, take your O.W.L.S. before you’re even sorted??” cried Bella, finding her youngest sister surrounded by parchment and open books on her bed.

Narcissa smiled guiltily, but made no answer.

“Oh, Bella, she’s just excited, is all. Weren’t you, as a first year?” Andromeda pointed out gently, grinning proudly at the blonde 11-year-old sprawled in bed with notes.

“Excited, yes. Studious, Salazar help me, no” retorted Bellatrix, crossing her arms in amusement.

Narcissa blushed furiously, scrambling to gather her books and papers.

“I was just reading, that’s all!” she cried, clutching a heavy tome to her small chest.

“Really? What do we have here?” interjected Bella, forcefully taking the book from her sister with amused glee, ignoring her protests. “‘Hogwarts: A History’? Merlin, Cissy, at least read something you haven’t memorized yet.” She joked, delighting on how red the youngest Black was turning.

“Oh, Bella, stop it” Andromeda admonished, taking the book from her oldest sister and returning it to Narcissa. “You can read and write as much as you like, Cissy. You’re going to be the brightest witch Hogwarts has ever seen!” she said happily. The young blonde smiled.

“Just take care not to do it too much; it wouldn’t do for you to end up in Ravenclaw.” Bella piped in.

Narcissa held back the tears brimming at her blue eyes. The longing and the hurt were too much to bear. She had studied to the point of mockery from her peers; but it never lasted long. Not with Bellatrix and Andromeda by her side; no one dared mock the Black sisters.

The youngest Black sibling choked on a stifled sob. At least she had those happy memories, even if they were clouded by the dark shadows of the years that followed. Dark, terrible years. She could remember with more clarity than she cared to have, her sister’s descent into madness. With each passing year, Bellatrix’s mind was poisoned and deformed past the point of no return. Narcissa remembered her sister’s eyes becoming hollower and hollower, until they were nothing but empty shells of black. That was after Bellatrix returned from Azkaban.

And Andromeda. Narcissa had kept in secret correspondence with her after her elopement, after her own marriage to Lucius, even. She missed her sister dearly; but one day Bellatrix had found out. It had been the last time she had seen her middle sister, in her library.

Narcissa stopped her memories; it would not do to dwell in the past, when all it brought was pain and suffering. Bellatrix was dead. In fact, her sister had been dead long before Bellatrix
Lestrange fell to Molly Weasley’s wand. And Andromeda… Andromeda was another matter.

She stood up, refusing think about it any longer. She had a new goal now; a new opportunity, and Merlin damn her if she did not take it. To say that Minerva’s owl had surprised her was the understatement of the century, but Narcissa was not about to say no to such an offer. She had the chance to return to the castle and make new memories; hopefully for the better this time.

She turned to her desk, where Minerva’s letter sat, open and smudged. Narcissa had read it and re-read it so many times over that the ink had begun to fade by the edges. She had been shocked Minerva would even consider her for such a position. True, Potions Masters were hard to find, but the former Mrs. Malfoy was sure the Hogwarts Headmistress could have found someone if she looked hard enough. There were quite a few notable wizards in America and France with a talent for the subject. Then again, she presumed Hogwarts would benefit most from someone in tune with its history, its struggles.

With another wave of her wand, her trunk shrunk to the size of a matchbox. Another flick and swish levitated it to her nearly empty desk, landing with a sharp thud that belied its new size. That was certainly one thing she did not miss from her times at Hogwarts; lugging the trunk to the train. Although she had to admit the red locomotive held a special place in her heart. Sadly, she would not be using it to get to the castle. She chuckled when imagining the reactions of students when none other than the Malfoy Ice Queen stepped into the compartments.

She might as well spare them until the opening feast.

“Mione! Come on in! You’re late, what in Merlin’s name were you doing, studying?” Ron joked as Hermione stepped into the Burrow, giving her a healthy clap on the back.

“Very funny, Ronald. I was preparing for the term, in case you forgot. It starts pretty soon, you know. As in tomorrow.” She retorted, wheezing from his form of greeting.

The ginger just laughed, his eyes twinkling, moving in for one of his bear hugs.
Hermione reciprocated, laughing with her best friend.

“I’m so happy you could make it” he said sincerely. Between his job as an Auror and hers as a Professor, the two hadn’t had the time to hang out and talk like they used to. The Golden Trio saw each other pretty often when Hermione still worked for the DMLE, but after she left and Harry got a promotion and a family, it was hard to make the time. Ron himself had just gotten a promotion, heading a new division of the Aurors that would be stationed in Ireland in a year’s time.

“How are things going? How’s Lavender?” Hermione asked, sincerely happy for her friend. The news of his promotion and his engagement to their former classmate were the reason for the party at the Burrow, where everyone had gathered to celebrate.

“She’s doing great! Come on in, she’s expecting you.” Ron said, his smile reaching his eyes.

Hermione walked in, arm-in-arm with her best friend. Once upon a time, they both thought she’d be the one marrying him. Instead, when the dust had cleared after the war, it became clear that they simply were not meant to be. Hermione would never be a housewife and mother of
half a dozen children, and Ron would never want anything else. They both wanted peace and quiet, only in completely different forms, and after about a year of trying, they realized it themselves. The former lovers parted amicably, and no one was happier for Ron and Lavender than Hermione; that is, with the possible exception of Molly Weasley.

“My Merlin, there she is! Hermione, sweetie! It’s been so long, too long!” cried the Weasley matriarch once she saw the brunette. The brightest witch of her age quickly found herself enveloped in a rib-crushing hug as Molly Weasley sang her praises and chided her for not visiting as often.

“Hello, Molly” she said, once she finally had her breath back.

The party was taken outside; there were simply too many people to dine in the Burrow’s close quarters. Instead, a long table was set up outside, candles floating high up in the air providing the light. Hermione immediately greeted Ginny Potter, with a very enthusiastic James on her lap. Little James had just begun to show some signs of accidental magic: earlier that week he had turned his father’s hair Weasley red, which nearly gave Molly a heart attack and made Ginny refuse to sleep next to him until it was fixed. Harry stood proudly (hair thankfully back to its normal hue) by his wife and son, looking happier than he had in years.

Arthur Weasley was next in greeting Hermione, quickly pledging to show her his latest modified Muggle contraption. Arthur had only recently retired from the Ministry, so he had had ample time to tinker with Muggle knick-knacks. Bill and Fleur were also there, their young daughter in tow, the spitting image of the Frenchwoman. George and a very pregnant Angelina were present, as well as Andromeda Tonks, who was on the heels of a very excitable, purple-haired child.

“Mione!” cried Teddy Lupin, jumping to the brunette with glee, nearly tackling her to the ground.

“Edward Remus Lupin, you’ll settle down right now!” called Andromeda. She looked at the brunette sheepishly.

“I’m so sorry, Mione. You know how he gets” she quipped apologetically. Hermione simply laughed.

“It’s nothing, Andromeda. Teddy here is just so happy that his favorite aunt is here, aren’t you?” Hermione teased, hugging the young boy fiercely. “And look at your hair! Purple suits you.” She said.

“Look at my eyes, ‘Mione! I can make them different colors!” Teddy said excitedly, changing one eye to blue while the other remained hazel.

“That’s impressive! Now tell me, Teddy, how’s that pig nose coming along?”

The engagement party had been peaceful and wonderful. At some point Ginny had gotten out her record player from her school days, and now they all sat at the table enjoying the smooth tones of Celestina Warbeck. Hermione sat by Neville and Luna, facing Harry and Ginny, who had handed off James to his grandmother. Ron and Lavender sat next to them, absorbed in happiness.

“So, Hermione, ready for term?” Luna asked from Neville’s side. “Neville was still
“Only because I was figuring out what was wrong with the new Aconite batch I received yesterday!” her husband defended. Hermione only laughed.

“I am ready, Luna. A few days ago I was still finishing up my class plans myself. Though I am proud to say I already have an exam schedule for all my classes.” The brunette said.

“Hermione, you didn’t change much from student to teacher, y’know?” Ginny quipped, making all laugh with Gryffindor’s Golden Girl.

“To McGonagall 2.0!” Ron yipped, raising his cup of Firewhiskey, earning a glare from Hermione.

“Hear, hear!”

“You are pretty diligent as a professor, Mione. Not that that’s news to anyone here” laughed Neville. “Exams and class plans otherwise, how are you for this term?” he asked.

Hermione looked at him, puzzled.

“Should be fine. Same as every term, I suppose.” She replied.

“What Neville means” quipped Luna “is how are you feeling about having Narcissa on staff this year.” She clarified.

Once the name ‘Narcissa Black’ left Luna’s lips, their side of the table fell silent. Ron looked surprised, Lavender looked confused, and Harry and Ginny looked a little uncomfortable.

“Narcissa Black?” Ron said, his surprise evident. “She’s at Hogwarts?”

“Yes” Hermione confirmed. “She’s at Hogwarts?”

“You were in Ireland, I guess we all just forgot to mention it.” Harry said. Hermione had spoken of Minerva’s intentions of hiring the former Malfoy matriarch a few weeks before, at his birthday dinner. Ron had been unable to attend due to his promotion.

“Why, blimey, I didn’t even know she was still around. Potions?” Ron asked, puzzled.

Hermione nodded.

“Apparently she’s been working on her Potions Mastery for the past few years, the past two as a Potions Researcher for St. Mungo’s. I read some of her publications on The Practical Potioneer and The International Potions Review. I have to say, I was impressed.” The young professor pointed out.

“Still, Hermione, are you OK with this?” Harry asked, concern tingling his tone. Her peers looked at Hermione expectantly. She shrugged.

“The school needs a qualified Potions teacher. She’s qualified. That’s all that matters.” She said finally.

The group seemed to accept her answer, and quickly dissolved into its own parallel conversations. Neville scooted closer to Hermione, whispering.

“I’m glad, Hermione. I’m very excited to work with Narcissa, I was hoping you would be
OK with it.” He confessed.

The brunette was nothing short of shocked. She would have never thought Neville Longbottom would be looking forward to working with Narcissa Black, of all people. Really, she’d think he didn’t want anything to do with the woman: her deranged sister had tortured his parents to the point of insanity.

Neville chuckled softly at her look of confusion.

“I know, I know… Not quite what you expected to hear from me, yes?” he joked.

“To say the least” she agreed. “What… I don’t even know how to start this question” she admitted.

The young Herbology Professor sighed deeply.

“It’s complicated… But I guess everyone will know sooner or later. Narcissa is helping mum and dad.” He whispered, looking like a huge burden was lifted off his chest.

His confession only left Hermione with more questions.

“Helping? How?” she asked. She really wanted to know how on earth Narcissa Black could help the Longbottoms. They had been interned at St. Mungo’s for most of Neville’s lifetime. Surely nothing could be done. She didn’t want to say it outright, however; it seemed insensitive.

“Part of her research is how Potions are used to heal body and mind. It’s quite interesting. I won’t go into the details as of now, but we’ve been working together on some research that might help my… well, it might help people who’ve had their minds altered by magic.” He said in a rushed whisper.

Hermione was simply stunned. Narcissa Black, ex-wife of a Death Eater and sister to the Dark Lord’s most faithful servant… Helping those who had suffered at their hands? The brunette couldn’t help but ask herself why. Appearances? Guilt? A genuine desire to make amends? There was no figuring out the youngest Black sister.

“And that’s not all” Neville continued at Hermione’s contemplative silence. “She’s donating Black Manor to St. Mungo’s. It’ll become a new permanent-resident ward. Sort of like those psychiatric wards for Muggles, I guess. We’re moving mum and dad there by Christmas.”

“She wha…” Hermione started, forgetting to whisper.

“Sh!” Neville interrupted. “Not everyone knows yet. It’ll inevitably surface by then, but for now we’re keeping it under wraps.” He clarified.

“She’ve” Hermione started, forgetting to whisper.

“Neville” Hermione whispered “that’s… That’s… Incredible? Surprising? I don’t really know what to say right now. How long has she been helping you?”

“She only approached me a few months ago. Her research on this has been going on for at least two or three years though. It looks really promising.” He said, and the hint of hope in his voice was unmistakable.

“Neville…”

“T’m not getting my hopes up” he said, though his eyes belied his certainty “I know they’re too far gone. But it could help other people.”
Hermione simply nodded.
Narcissa walked down the Great Hall, alone. The students would start filtering in through the great heavy doors in just a few hours.

She had arrived earlier that day and was greeted by a very excited Horace Slughorn. Whether he was happy to see her again or to be finally retiring once and for all, she could not tell, but it frankly did not matter.

He had shown her to her classroom, office, and private quarters in the castle dungeons. Bleary, to be sure, but Narcissa could hardly contain her giddiness – Potions had always been her favorite subject; the dungeons just served to enhance the nostalgia. The good kind of nostalgia.

Horace had not waited long to leave. She supposed he was a little too eager to jump into retirement again. She soon after went to work setting up: her classroom could definitely use a little more light. With calculated flicks of her wand, her books found their new places in her shelves; her cabinets at once filled with ingredients; and her cauldrons flew right into their respective racks. With her more delicate measuring instruments, she was more careful, delicately levitating each one individually and placing them neatly on the counter.

Her scales and other finely-tuned and exquisitely calibrated instruments were her pride and joy; Draco had bought them for her once she announced her decision to return to her Mastery studies. They were of polished silver, and she never, ever altered them magically; not even to shrink them. They had been sent in separately via a special messenger (Draco) directly to the castle. He grumbled about having to transport them, but Narcissa would never simply apparate with such delicate instruments. She found that using magic on them could alter their accuracy, even if only slightly. She remembered how Slughorn had guaranteed her such a thing was all but impossible, but she nevertheless found an ally in her theory: Severus Snape. He had been the only one who shared her love and fascinations for the subject of potion-making. While Narcissa had been excellent, Severus had simply been extraordinary. She hoped she would do his skills and standards justice in her teaching.

“And to get that lighter hue, I just stirred it counter-clockwise for two extra turns before adding the wormwood powder.”

Narcissa huffed in frustration.

“That’s not what the books say! That’s not how Slughorn did it!” she cried.

“Stop thinking about what the book says, Narcissa. And you remember, Slughorn’s was slightly darker than mine anyway.” Severus retorted calmly.

The blonde threw her arms up in exasperation.

“I give up! I’ll never get my NEWTS like this.” She lamented.

Her friend merely rolled his eyes, brushing his long hair off his face.

“Stop being so dramatic, I swear to Salazar, you’re just like Bella. Listen, you’re the best Potions student in our year, or in Hogwarts, for that matter.”
Narcissa shot him an angry look.

“Besides you, you mean.” She said bitterly, earning another eye-roll from Severus.

“Don’t compare us. I have talent, sure. I experiment, sometimes recklessly. You have talent, but you also have something else: you research, you consider all variables. I’m just too bloody lazy for that.” He countered.

“Yeah, bloody right. If you’re so lazy, how did you come up with the two extra turns?”

“Two extra counter-clockwise turns.”

“Argh!”

Narcissa could not contain a smile at the memory. Her study sessions with Severus, often drawing late into the night, were some of the highlights of her time in the castle. Only he understood how fascinating she found potions to be.

Now, standing in the Great Hall, she felt all of the good memories from her years as a student return to the forefront of her mind. Despite the darkness growing beyond the castle walls, her time at Hogwarts had been a happy one.

“Reminiscing, I take it?” said a voice from behind. Narcissa turned to see Minerva McGonagall walking up towards her with a knowing smile. The blonde nodded.

“Sometimes it amazes it how it is still the same. The same today as it was in your time as a student, as in mine and as in so many more.” The Headmistress commented.

“Yes,” Narcissa agreed. “I find it quite... comforting.”

Minerva looked intently at her former student, her soft smile never wavering. She took a few moments to speak again.

“I am very happy to have you back, Narcissa.” She said truthfully, smiling at her newest hire’s confusion.

Narcissa was momentarily taken aback at the statement; but she could clearly see the honesty in the older woman’s eyes.

“Thank you, Minerva. It feels good to be back.” She said, meaning every word.

“Minerva, the train has just arrived at the... Oh, Professor Black.” Said a voice approaching from the other end of the Hall. Narcissa froze in place, and Minerva turned to greet the newcomer.

“Right. Thank you, Miss Granger. I shall call the others, we must get into position.”

Minerva said, immediately walking away, leaving the other two professors alone. The two women merely looked at each other for a few seconds.

“Professor Black...”

“Professor Granger...” they both began at the same time.

Narcissa looked at the young woman, noting how much she had changed in the past few
years. Her hair was shorter than she remembered, falling a little below her shoulders, cascading in curls that seemed to be a lot more manageable than they had been earlier in life. Hermione had certainly developed into a strong, grown woman – she was a far cry from the teenager Narcissa remembered. Narcissa also realized the young professor looked much healthier than she had been during their unfortunate encounters during the war. Though the observation was obvious, Narcissa was glad to see the gaunt, terrified expression of a war survivor replaced by a healthy, confident glow.

Hermione also conducted a similar examination of her newest peer. In many ways, the blonde had not changed at all – she still possessed a commanding, confident posture and demeanor; her robes still looked quite expensive and impeccably stylish. Her skin was still quite pale, though a healthy glow made it look fair as opposed to the sickly complexion Hermione had come to associate with the Malfoy matriarch. Narcissa’s hair was also longer than she remembered; the silky strands ran, mostly straight, though with some waves to them, all the way down to the small of Narcissa’s back.

“Have you found your quarters acceptable?” Hermione asked, clearly not comfortable with the silence they had found themselves in. Narcissa nodded.

“Yes, quite acceptable. In all honesty, they are significantly better than what I expected.” She replied, making an honest attempt at conversation.

“Oh? I must say that surprises me; I would have thought that the dungeons would seem a bit…inhospitable.” The brunette confessed, happy that Narcissa was receptive to her conversation. She hated the silence; it gave her thoughts an opportunity to run wild.

Narcissa smiled at the Gryffindor’s comment.

“It is a common misconception,” she said “but my accommodations resemble the Slytherin Common Room; it is quite comfortable. It brings me memories of my time as a student.”

Hermione smiled; she knew the feeling well. Her own personal quarters were closely modelled after the Gryffindor Common Room.

“Ah, I understand. I believe you have an “inside view” of the Black Lake as well then?”

The blonde nodded in confirmation. She seemed to be about to respond, when suddenly she stopped herself, her expression pensive. Hermione was about to interject when Narcissa finally spoke, changing the subject completely.

“I hope you have been keeping well, Miss Granger.” She said.

Hermione contemplated the blonde for a few moments, a little surprised by the sudden turnaround. Narcissa looked to be sincere.

“Thank you. I have.” She said simply.

“Good” Narcissa said, seemingly struggling with her words. “I had hoped… I hope that my employment here does not cause you any undue stress.” She finally finished, her expression betraying a flash of deep guilt.

The young professor bristled initially, but quickly took in the sincerity of Narcissa’s words to heart. The blonde seemed truly and sincerely worried.

“Oh, no, please don’t trouble yourself. It’s not an issue, I promise.” She said confidently.
Narcissa seemed momentarily reluctant to believe her, but did not have the time to formulate a response, as they were startled by the Scottish timbre of Minerva McGonagall’s voice echoing through the hall, reverberating off the walls.

“All staff, please assemble in the Great Hall. Our students are on their way.”
Chapter 4

Hermione would never tire of leading the expectant first years through the castle for their Sorting Ceremony. She would look at their excited, at times frightened faces and remember her very first time crossing the great doorway, walking through those hallowed halls into her new life. As a Muggle-born, she had been especially excited, not to mention worried about what the wizardry school held in store for her.

“Welcome to Hogwarts.” She said from the top of the stairs, allowing her new students some time to ogle at the wonders around them: the moving, talkative portraits, the winding torch-lit halls, the grand moving staircase, and everything else.

“In a few moments, we will be going through these doors into the Great Hall” she said as she went down to meet them. “Once there, you will participate in Hogwarts’ ancient Sorting Ceremony, in which you will be sorted into our four noble Houses.”

Hermione took a moment to let the new students process the information. Most were unfazed; after all, everything she had said was common knowledge in the British Wizarding World. However, she could pinpoint exactly the students who seemed to be particularly nervous, hanging onto her every word. The young professor smile inwardly; she could tell immediately they were Muggle-borns – she was certain she wore a very similar expression on her first time at the school. She looked forward to mentoring and guiding them through her transition.

After telling the first-years about each of the Houses and reveling in their growing excitement, Hermione led the group through the heavy doors. The oohs and aahs coming from the young pupils would never, ever bore her. This was the moment where birth or blood did not matter: all were equally amazed.

The Great Hall did that.

While Hermione was the one leading the new students to the Great Hall, Minerva had retained her position conducting the Sorting Ceremony itself. In her view, the Headmistress should maintain a more personal and involved relationship with the students, and what better way to welcome them to the great school than sorting them into their new families?

Personally, Hermione just thought McGonagall was too attached to the role to ever give it up.

The young Transfigurations Professor took her seat as the Headmistress thanked her. Neville Longbottom sat to her left, beyond the Headmistress’ chair. Narcissa Black was to her immediate right.

“I forget how young they were…” Narcissa muttered, seemingly to herself.

Hermione smiled; she thought that as well. It was hard to imagine herself at that age, even if her own Sorting had taken place later than Narcissa’s. But she understood the feeling, and was about to say so when she noticed Narcissa’s hand lightly shaking on the table. Taking a look at the blonde, Hermione at once saw the new Potions Professor looked terrified.

“Hey.” She said, taking the shaking hand in her own without thinking. “You’ll do just fine. We need a good Potions professor, and you’ll do great.” She said, reassuringly.

Narcissa was very obviously taken aback at Hermione’s gesture, perhaps too taken aback
to move her hand away. Hermione was about to apologize for the possible intrusion; it was just in her nature to be caring and reassuring, even if the person who needed said reassurance was Narcissa Black.

“Thank you” Narcissa said, looking calmer after the initial shock. Hermione gave her an awkward smile in return as they both turned to listen to McGonagall. The Headmistress had just finished the usual welcoming speech tailored specifically towards the new first years; she had spoken briefly about the history of Hogwarts and its founders, the creation of the Houses and how the House Cup rules worked. Everyone in the Great Hall stilled in anticipation as McGonagall pulled out the Sorting Hat, setting it neatly on a stool. After one of its cheerful songs, the Sorting Ceremony could finally begin.

“Annette Abraham” Minerva called.

“Hufflepuff!” the Hat cried out as a small blonde girl took her seat.

“George Atticks”

“Gryffindor!”

“Liam Bertrand”

“Ravenclaw!”

The ceremony went on, as usual, with cheers coming from each House as its newest members were sorted in. Hermione counted six new additions to Gryffindor thus far, two of which she thought were Muggle-born. Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff so far had seven new students each, and Slytherin had five. She and Neville also played a game of trying to guess which House each coming student would be sorted to. As of yet, Neville had been wrong in every single one of his guesses. Hermione was not in much better shape, however: she had only two correct guesses, one for Gryffindor and one for Ravenclaw.

At some point, she noticed Narcissa seemed to be doing a similar thing all on her own; she softly whispered her guesses to Slytherin. As the ceremony went on, Hermione realized the witch had so far guessed correctly for all of her new students.

“You seem to be very good at this.” She remarked quietly at Narcissa’s eighth consecutive accurate guess.

The blonde smirked in response.

“Not exactly. Most of these students come from old, Pureblood families. A few are Half-Bloods, but from families I know quite well. So really, it is a biased guessing game. I’m just looking to get at least one wrong.” She said, which surprised Hermione.

Taking a moment to process that new information, Hermione reflected on Slytherin House. Though much had changed after the war and the message of unity was much stronger within the castle, Hogwarts’ House of Cunning had been slower to adapt. To be fair, that was not the students’ fault. Though a good part of the House was composed of Purebloods and Half-bloods, there had yet to be a single Muggle-born sorted. There had never been one in over a thousand years of history.

Of course, there were still tensions among the Houses. Hermione thought that particular aspect of Hogwarts life would sadly never change. Thankfully, disputes and anything of the sort did not usually carry deep hatred and bigotry with it. Attitudes had changed through generations;
not as much as she had hoped, but enough to show significant progress, for which she was thankful.


Hermione watched as one of the young boys she knew was a Muggle-born reluctantly stepped up. She recognized the name; she had helped Minerva with a few letters written specifically for Muggle families who had a witch or wizard in their midst, those whom Minerva visited personally. He was short, with green eyes that reminded her of Harry, but with a head of messy blonde hair. The poor kid looked simultaneously amazed and terrified; his eyes darted through the Great Hall with great trepidation.

“Gryffindor.” Hermione whispered. She wasn’t sure if that was her guess or her wish.

Narcissa chuckled beside her as the Sorting Hat was lowered onto the boy’s head. His hands gripped the stool, trembling.

“Hufflepuff.” She whispered playfully.

The Sorting Hat was taking its time with the boy, whose face blanched another shade whiter every few seconds or so. Hermione began to truly worry the young William would faint on the spot, but he seemed to be holding on. The whole thing was quite strange, as the Hat seemed to be taking its sweet time. A minute rolled by, then two. After five minutes, the Great Hall began to grow restless, and Hermione swore William was about to burst into tears.

Close to the six-minute mark, however, the Hat finally made its pronunciation over the nervous boy.

“Slytherin!”

A collective gasp erupted from the Hall’s occupants; though Hermione heard it most prominently coming from her right. Narcissa had subconsciously grasped Hermione’s hand once again with a shocked squeeze. Truthfully, Hermione barely even registered it, too astonished by what had just happened.

Slytherin House would receive its first-ever Muggle-born student.
Hermione rushed through the corridors on her way to McGonagall’s office, after visiting the Gryffindor Common Room and seeing that her students were properly accommodated. She had introduced herself to the new first years and talked briefly to some of her older students. She had not lingered; McGonagall had called a meeting of the Heads of House in order to discuss the major development that had taken place over the Sorting.

The young professor cringed thinking of the way William White had been received once he reemerged from the Hat, trembling and afraid. For a few seconds, the poor boy seemed not to know what to do or where to go; the entire Hall was staring straight at him. Finally, a few cheers and scattered applause followed as he stumbled his way to the Slytherin table, which was mostly silent and in shock. Hermione had watched the young man, he had barely touched any food or talked to any of his peers. Hermione noticed Narcissa seemed to watch the boy as well, though she did it with an air of practiced disinterest. The brunette could see it in her eyes though; Professor Black was intrigued, to say the least.

She had barely eaten herself, she watched the boy and the other Slytherins like a hawk from her table. While no students made the effort to actually talk to him, that seemed to stem from their shock, and not from an effort to shun him. In any case, she would keep an eye on him, through the school year if that was necessary. It was clear Slytherin’s newest addition would need some special attention and care, and by Merlin, she was determined to give it.

In her rush to get to the Headmistress’ office, Hermione spat out the password and lunged up the revolving stairs. On her way in, she almost collided directly with Professor Black, who had undoubtedly just walked in herself.

“My apologies, Professor Black. Professor McGonagall.” She hissed, somewhat out of breath.

“Good evening, Miss Granger.” McGonagall greeted. Narcissa nodded in greeting, her face stoic.

In the office were the other Heads of House. Filius Flitwick was still, after all this time, the Head of Ravenclaw House. Gabriel Thurman, a Hufflepuff from before Hermione’s time as a student, who taught flying lessons, was his House’s Head. And then there were Hermione and Narcissa, for Gryffindor and Slytherin.

“Now that we are all here” McGonagall began, taking a seat. “Please sit. We have much to discuss.” She said, flicking her wand so that the existing chairs in the office were pushed up to where the Professors had gathered around her desk.

“It seems” she continued once all were seated “that we have had a major development this year. Mr. William White, a Muggleborn, has been sorted into Slytherin. As I am sure you are all aware by now, this is the first time this has happened in the history of our school. Therefore, I thought we should have a brief discussion on how to proceed.” She looked at her staff attentively. “Thoughts?”

“It will be an adjustment, certainly.” Said Thurman pensively. “While blood purity ideals are not as prevalent as they once were, I believe we must be prepared to encounter fringe individuals who seek to perpetuate them, not only in Slytherin, but in other Houses as well.”
“I agree” Hermione said. Thurman was a Half-Blood who had been raised by his Muggle mother and stepfather. He and Hermione had worked together to develop a new Muggle Studies program that was implemented by Eleanor Everett, a Muggleborn who had been hired just after the war. Everett had previously worked at the ministry, in an undercover operation as a Muggle.

“I think we should promptly offer our support and guidance to William. He needs our help; especially at a House such as Slytherin. The students there are not used to interacting with Muggleborns in-house, so to speak. I believe we should outfit some special guidance and individual support to him.” She continued, nodding her agreement to Thurman.

“I am reluctant to go all the way to individualized treatment, Miss Granger, with all due respect” Flitwick responded politely. “I am sure Mr. White will need some special assistant from us; however, we must tread carefully: we cannot put the needs of one student over others’.” He said pensively. Hermione shook her head.

“Respectfully, Master Flitwick, I must disagree. You saw how he was during the Sorting; he is very scared. The lackluster reception coming from his House didn’t help any. Granted, that was most likely due to shock, but I fear that William will not make any friends any time soon; he needs our direct attention in order to fully integrate to the school and its courses.” She said passionately. “We need to give him special attention. If he does not have us, he will have no one.”

McGonagall hummed softly, seemingly considering what was being said. Her eyes found Narcissa, who had been quiet the entire time.

“What is your opinion on this matter, Professor Black? As Mr. White’s Head of House, I hope you have something to add to this discussion.” She said.

All eyes in the office turned to the former Malfoy. She sat stoically upon her chair, her posture impeccable, her face pensive. She took a few moments to speak.

“As it stands, I believe we should not intervene, at least for the time being.” She finally said. Hermione interrupted with an indignant shrill to her voice.

“That is absolutely out of the question! William has absolutely no knowledge of the Wizarding World! His entire life has changed at the drop of a hat, he’s far away from home, in an environment that isn’t exactly welcoming. It would be irresponsible to leave him to fend for himself!” the brunette tried to reason. How could Narcissa simply say they should leave the poor boy be? He needed guidance. Hermione fervently wished the young William had been sorted into Gryffindor instead. She had no doubts the environment would be much more accepting, and they would not need to have this discussion in the first place.

“Yes, Miss Granger. Mr. White’s world has changed, but you must consider how the very essence of Slytherin House has changed as well. Mr. White’s Sorting into Salazar’s House is an event that will be talked about in centuries to come, and while he may not realize that as of yet, his peers most certainly do.” Narcissa explained calmly. Hermione couldn’t help but scoff.

“So, you’re saying Slytherin House is more shaken by this than William?” She said.

“I said nothing of the sort.” Narcissa replied coldly. “What I am saying is that Mr. White does not yet realize the ramifications of his Sorting and its effects for Slytherin House. We Slytherins are a proud, competitive bunch, and we take care of our own. For now, Mr. White is still viewed as an outsider.”

“And as such, he doesn’t warrant our help, or that of his peer’s?” Hermione challenged,
unaware of the raising volume of her voice.

“I did not say that. Mr. White has forever changed the balance of Slytherin’s identity. He must work to be accepted by his peers as one of his own, regardless of his blood. We value independence and intelligence, perseverance and cunning. If Mr. White has Professors coddling him left and right, he will become a joke, an embarrassment.” Narcissa elaborated coolly.

Hermione could not believe her ears. Was Narcissa really suggesting they simply leave the boy be so that Slytherin House would be saved of the embarrassment?

As if she had read her mind, Narcissa promptly started again.

“I am not suggesting we leave him be. We may offer our assistance, but it is up to Mr. White to seek it.”

The brunette shook her head.

“If it is left up to him, he may never do it! The kid is terrified!” she countered.

“Yes. He must get over that fear. We may offer our assistance and encouragement, but he must be the one to decide whether to take it or not. Having the special attentions of professors makes him a target for far more than ridicule” Narcissa said evenly.

“What on Earth do you mean?” Hermione asked. She could swear the blonde suppressed the urge to roll her eyes.

“As Professor Thurman has pointed out, blood purity ideals have fallen to the background. However, and take this from someone who is intimately acquainted to many of the families represented in Slytherin, they still permeate heavily in certain circles. While they are not widely advertised or perpetuated, they linger. A Muggleborn in Slytherin goes against what most of these children have been taught, and believe me, they will show it, sooner or later, and Mr. White will become a target. But, if he proves he is just as qualified to be in this House as any other Pureblood or Half-Blood, he stands a much better chance at acceptance than if he were to be coddled by his Professors.” Narcissa finally said, narrowing her eyes.

Hermione’s eyes widened at Narcissa’s blunt admission that blood purity ideals did still linger within Slytherin House. It was unsettling to hear it come from someone who had been part of Voldemort’s deadly blood purity campaign years ago.

“Can’t you understand? William is alone. He has nobody. He is in a strange world where he has no one to help him. You say he may become a target, yet you allow for no action to help him?” Hermione said through gritted teeth.

“I cannot even begin to understand what he may be going through. However, I understand Slytherins. I understand how blood purity works in their minds. And I understand that those who identify the most with the blood purity ideals feel threatened by a Muggleborn ‘infiltrating’ their noble House. Giving Mr. White preferential treatment only paints a target on his back.” Narcissa replied coldly.

Hermione didn’t like the way the other Heads of House were nodding in agreement, even if Thurman seemed to be doing it in begrudging acceptance of Narcissa’s argument. She refused to accept it. Even Minerva seemed to be seriously considered. She turned to the Headmistress in a desperate plea, ignoring Narcissa completely.

“Minerva, please! We can’t just leave William to fend for himself in that nest of vipers!”
She almost shouted.

Hermione heard a muted gasp coming from Narcissa, and even Thurman and Minerva shot her incredulous looks at her outburst.

“I would appreciate it if you refrained from slandering a Hogwarts House, Miss Granger, regardless of your feelings on the matter” Minerva reprimanded her, though her eyes shone in understanding. “While you make a good case for yourself, I am inclined to defer this matter to William’s Head of House.” She said, looking pointedly at Narcissa.

“Thank you, Headmistress. I’ll be sure to ask for assistance if need be.” Narcissa said. Hermione visibly deflated at the pronouncement.

“Good. You are dismissed.” Minerva replied, seemingly eager to put an end to the discussion.

Thurman and Flitwick were the first to leave, while Minerva retired deeper within her office. Narcissa stood to leave, stopping momentarily to turn to Hermione, who still sat, defeated.

“Don’t worry, Miss Granger” she said, her voice pure ice. “I’ll make sure the vipers won’t bite.”
Chapter 6

During the first few weeks of term, Hermione kept a sharp eye on the young William White. Despite her coworker’s decision at their meeting with Minerva, she chose to summarily ignore them. She would not let a young Muggleborn to his own devices in Slytherin House.

She felt herself fervently wishing he had been sorted in Gryffindor once again. If he had been sorted into her own House, she would have been able to help him a bit more directly. As of now, she had instructed a couple of Gryffindor prefects to keep an eye on him and offer their assistance whenever they deemed it necessary. Additionally, she sought William out every now and again after her Transfiguration lectures, to make sure he was adjusting to school well. The young boy seemed… scared of her. He stuttered and mumbled, incredibly shy, and seemed always too eager to scurry off.

Hermione huffed. The lectures were another matter altogether. William seemed to have made at least a casual acquaintance of the Ravenclaw girl he sat next to in Transfiguration – Alexandra Hall, as she recalled, another Muggleborn. While Alexandra seemed to be an excellent student, reading ahead on material and being quite adept on the subject matter, William was… the complete opposite. It broke the young professor’s heart to see him struggle so deeply with her subject. He had great difficulty grasping even the simplest theoretical concepts. Practical application was a complete and utter nightmare – William had yet to produce a single successful result.

His failings in class did not go unnoticed by the Slytherins sharing her classroom. She could hear faint whispers, but frankly no more than that. She had never truly seen him fraternize with anyone other than Miss Hall; certainly no one from his own House. At mealtimes, he shared a cordial greeting upon seating himself and leaving the table, during meals he tucked into a book harder than his actual food.

Hermione sighed, thinking of how desperately alone he must feel. She had heard nothing from her prefects about any bullying or other incidents involving White or any other Muggleborns. There were the usual pranks or late-night forages, but nothing of note.

She supposed there would be more info on the young boy at the staff meeting coming up in two days. Hermione could have asked Narcissa, the woman was after all the Slytherin Head of House, but she did not want to cross the witch’s path any more than necessary after their altercation at the previous meeting. Having to contend with the completely unfazed and indifferent Narcissa Black at mealtimes was enough.

Narcissa smiled at her young wards as they shuffled sleepily into the room. One of the downsides of being a first year was having Potions bright and early, three days a week. She wondered how long it would take for her younger Slytherins to figure out it was possible to get food directly in their dorm room, saving them a trip to the Great Halls and the long return to the dungeons.

Not that she would say a word, of course.

She spared William White a look as she busied herself cleaning her chalkboard. The boy looked better than he had at his Sorting, that much was certain. He was a very reserved young man, keeping his distance from most. Still, he seemed tranquil in his solitude, so Narcissa did not bother him. Some in Slytherin House seemed to be keeping their distance for the time being, but she
hoped his performance in her class would help bolster his position.

Despite being a Muggleborn with absolutely no experience of the Wizarding World, William seemed to have a natural talent for potion-making, something Narcissa was very happy about. While many of his peers had some background knowledge on the material she was teaching them, William devoured his textbooks and engaged happily in lectures. Their only practical class thus far had been a Pepperup Potion, which she had supervised. William seemed quite interested in the use of potions in medicinal applications, and looked to be quite excited about their next project of creating a simple Bruise Removal Paste.

Her students filed in and settled without much fuss. Truth be known, Narcissa had been terrified of her first day of teaching – would she be good enough, did she actually know how to go about this, and, most importantly, what would her students think of having Narcisa Black, previously Malfoy, the Pureblooded Ice Queen, as their instructor?

Thankfully, her students seemed more fascinated by her than anything else. A few older Slytherins had expressed their regards in having her teach them, and she hilariously noted a few of her younger students seemed to be quite smitten with their teacher.

She laughed inwardly at the notion. Narcissa knew she was a woman of great beauty – it had served her well in life, as most underestimated her true abilities. Besides, she remembered what it had been like, to have a crush on a professor; not that she would ever, ever admit it to anyone.

This morning’s class was quite excited by the prospect of another practical lesson. As first years, a lot of time was spent covering the theory of potions; kinds of ingredients, their properties and uses, types of cauldrons, the importance of proper measurements and incantations, among several other things. Thus, a practical lesson was reason for excitement.

She did not have a seating chart of any kind for her classroom, though the students naturally arranged themselves in a semi-rigid organization. She was pleased to note that William seemed to have befriended a Slytherin enough to sit by them every single day. Spencer Wyndham was an exuberant half-blood with a knack for making friends, so it seemed. Narcissa had noticed him at mealtimes, amicably chatting with anyone and everyone around him.

“Good morning, class. Today, after much anticipation, we will be preparing a simple Bruise Removal Paste. Now, before you take out your materials and notes, could anyone tell me one of its three main basic ingredients?”

She was happy to see a few hands up in the air, William’s among them. A young Hufflepuff girl had been quicker, however.

“Miss Abraham?”

“Camphor, Professor.”

“Quite right, Miss Abraham. Five points to Hufflepuff. Camphor is, in fact, the main active ingredient in this truly remarkable paste. Can anyone else tell me what form of camphor is used in its preparation?”

William’s hand once again went up like a shot.

“Yes, Mr. White?”

“It can be used as an oil, Professor, or the wood can be used in its natural state.”
“Correct. Five points to Slytherin. Now, a follow-up question: ten points to the House who gets it right, as this was not part of our notes or lectures. We will be using camphor oil in our work today; why is that preferable to the camphor wood?”

Only William’s hand shot up in the air. She suppressed a smile; the boy had read ahead.

“Yes, Mr. White?”

“The oil is more concentrated, and easier to carry and integrate in the paste. The wood chips take too long to be incorporated, and the extra uh… stuff that comes with it makes it less effective.”

“Excellent! Ten points to Slytherin. If you could all take out your cauldrons; you can work with your partner, but I would like to see individual samples of the paste. You may have your notes with you, I will check in with you all in about five minutes.” Narcissa said, moving back to her desk to organize attendance.

After a few minutes, she paced through the classroom, happy with most of her students’ progress. As she helped Mr. Abbott and Miss Kramer through a small ingredient mix-up, she heard hushed voices coming from a couple of rows behind.

“Mate, don’t worry about it, just use some of mine; what’s the difference anyway.”

“Spencer, you need all of it. You don’t have enough left over, just let me deal with it.”

“Hold off, let me ask Abraham o’er there. Oi, Annet--”

“No! Please, let me deal with it. Don’t make a fuss, I don’t want Ms. Black to hear.”

“Mate, how’re you supposed to make this bloody thing if you don’t have enough camphor?”

“Please, let me deal with this.”

Narcissa felt compelled to intervene; obviously Mr. White had been underprepared for class for whatever reason. Yet somehow, something told her to give the young man his space, he seemed adamant to let him ‘deal with it,’ as he had so put it. Discreetly looking over their table, she noticed the awful condition of his cauldron and his tools with a bit of surprise; she hadn’t seen them before for their previous practical, as it had been a group activity, where Mr. Wyndham had used his shiny new cauldron on behalf of his group. Additionally, she noted the scarcity of camphor up on William’s workspace; he had barely a third of what was necessary for the paste.

The professor felt a pang of guilt. Camphor oil was not the dearest ingredient, but it was far from cheap. The state of William’s materials told her everything she needed to know about the boy’s situation, and it made her think of so many things she had taken for granted. She had always had the best of the best, and provided Draco with the same.

Her musings waned as William tackled his assignment with unusual fervor. He worked the ingredients he did have meticulously and precisely, though Narcissa was saddened. Even after all that work, he would never be able to achieve a good result. Still, she decided not to mention it; William obviously did not want it. Besides, she could tell from her occasional observations that his method was beyond reproach.

After the hour was done, Narcissa called for the end of the practical, and students filled small tin containers with their finished paste. Overall, Narcissa was happy with the results; a few had been burned here and there, but most of her pupils had managed to achieve a solution consistent with a Bruise Removal Paste.
It was when she arrived at the White-Wyndham table that her biggest surprised surfaced. Wyndham’s paste was close to impeccable, and White’s was, surprisingly, the right consistency and texture. It was, however, a completely different color, a very odd shade of brown.

“Mr. White” she said softly “could you explain to me the difference in tonality of your paste?”

She thought William would cower with embarrassment, which was why she tried her gentlest tone. However, the young boy surprised her even further.

“My apologies, Professor Black. I… forgot to bring enough camphor oil, so I tried to use an uh… alternative ingredient.”

Narcissa could not hide her surprise. Alternative ingredient?

“I see. Let me ascertain something first, and then I would like you to tell me what that ingredient was.” She said with a smile. With a flick of her wand, a small but quite visible bruise immediately formed on the back of her own hand. William seemed shocked, and about to interject.

“Worry not, Mr. White. It is merely a tester charm; healers in training use it fairly frequently.”

With that said, she took some of the young man’s finished paste and gingerly applied it to her hand. To her bewilderment, the purple mark started to fade almost immediately, waning to a pale yellow in a matter of seconds. It did not clear completely as the traditional Bruise Removal Paste would have; however, it worked just as fast. It was nothing short of astonishing.

“Remarkable. Mr. White, if you would be so kind, what have you used in your version of the paste?”

William looked timid but somewhat proud of his accomplishment.

“I ground up a few arnica leaves into the mixture, Professor. I knew it has similar properties to camphor, even if it isn’t quite as… potent.” He said.

Narcissa was pleasantly surprised. Of course.

“Remarkable, Mr. White.” She turned to the rest of the class. “This is an excellent example of ingenuity coming in handy. It also serves us well as a lesson not to simply memorize ingredients and how they are added to a mixture. Any common cook can memorize a recipe, but a Potions Master knows why certain things work the way they do.” She turned to the young man, who seemed a bit apprehensive, though his desk mate was positively beaming.

“Twenty points to Slytherin, Mr. White – for your ingenuity and creativity.” She said; William looked happy until Wyndham clapped him on the back for all the points he had won Slytherin just in that class.

Once class was dismissed, Narcissa quietly asked William to remain and help with clearing up – a pretext, but not really. She planned to make it a habit to hold onto a student or two after every practical for that very purpose. But today, it gave her a chance to check in with the young boy. Professor Granger’s hysterics were unnecessary, but she could understand the other witch’s point of view, as well as her protectiveness of Muggleborns. In any case, she was glad William seemed to be an incredibly talented student; surely the quantity of points he amassed for his House would be favorable to his image in the end.

“Mr. White, what an inspired idea, the arnica leaves.” She said, startling the boy who had occupied himself with cleaning some of her communal scales – sans magic. “May I ask, how did you think
William seemed bashful, but his grin had his hint of pride. Good, Narcissa thought; a fair amount of pride went into being a Slytherin.

“It was a coincidence, really. My mother makes a lot of home-made remedies. She uses it for everything.” He said. “I noticed it growing by one of the greenhouses; Professor Longbottom said I could collect some. I didn’t quite know it would come in handy so soon, I completely forgot to bring my camphor oil. My apologies, for that, Professor.”

Narcissa commended the boy for his insightfulness, but she could spot a lie a mile away.

“Impressive indeed, Mr. White. But if I may be so bold, from what I have seen of you in my class, you do not seem like the type of student to ‘forget’ such crucial material… especially if you read ahead and knew of its significance.” She said gently.

Whatever confidence William had had just moments before evaporated into thin air, if his shocked expression was anything to go by. Narcissa tutted inwardly; the boy would need to learn how to stand his ground if he ever expected to make it in his House.

“I… I…” he stuttered. Narcissa softly tapped his shoulder in reassurance.

“At ease, Mr. White. This is no interrogation. You are a remarkable student, and your work thus far has been beyond reproach. I am commending you on account of your creative solution, not accusing you of not following the rules.”

The boy relaxed slightly, but a look of utter shame overcame his features.

“Mr. White?”

“I… I’m sorry, Professor Black. I couldn’t afford all the ingredients on the school list at Diagon Alley. I… I couldn’t even afford half of them.” He confessed, his eyes welling up with tears he resolutely refused to shed.

“Oh, William” she said, turning his face towards her. “I wouldn’t worry about that. You may use anything you’d like from my personal reserves. If you wish, you can come the day before class and I’ll supply anything you need.”

Narcissa could not help a smile as the first-year’s eyes lit up.

“Oh, would you? I mean, thank you! Thank you, Professor, truly!”

Narcissa winked.

“You won’t get away from my lessons so easily, Mr. White.”

His returning grin was the epitome of sheer joy.

“No, never!”
Hermione cursed under her breath as she rushed towards the Headmistress’ office. She was late for a meeting Minerva and Narcissa had set up to discuss William White. Well, truly the meeting was meant to be between Minerva and William’s Head of House, but Narcissa had been diplomatic enough to offer the Transfigurations professor a chance to participate, knowing how much she feared for the young Muggleborn.

But now, Hermione was running late – a blasted Hufflepuff fifth year had all but blown up her classroom, reminding her of her former classmate Seamus Finnegan. The class had been attempting a more complex incantation to transfigure a parrot into a goblet. Before she knew it, it was feathers and flames all over the bloody place.

The edges of her hair were still lightly singed as she made her way up the gargoyle entrance. She could hear Minerva and Narcissa discussing softly.

“… that is indeed truly remarkable…”

“… don’t believe there will be an issue…”

“Ah! Ms. Granger, thank you for joining us” said Minerva with a knowing smirk and glance at the stray feathers on her former student’s robes. Hermione sighed. News travelled way too bloody fast in this castle.

“Apologies for the delay. There was an unfortunate incident during class.” She said diplomatically.

“Incident? I trust everything is alright?” asked Narcissa, oblivious.

“Yes… it involved a parrot or several… and an explosion caused by faulty wandwork.” Hermione quipped as she seated herself. She could have sworn she saw the blonde’s lips curl into a grin for a moment before her features were once again schooled. Narcissa offered no further comment.

“Well, shall we continue then?” Minerva said. “Ms. Granger, I believe you can tell us of Mr. White’s performance and behavior? Narcissa was just telling me of his work in Potions.”

Hermione huffed, half in worry, half in defeat.

“It is worse than I thought, Headmistress. Young Mr. White seems to have neither the aptitude nor the will to tackle Transfiguration. He interacts with no one but one student – his assigned deskmate. He shows great difficulty with the subject, both in theory and in practice. I am afraid that he is still much affected by this major transition in his life and has yet to adjust; I believe a closer and more personalized method of teaching would greatly benefit him.”

It was only once her commentary was done that Hermione realized the looks of complete shock over the other two women.

“Excuse me, Ms. Granger, but this is William White we are talking about? The first ever Muggleborn in Slytherin?” Minerva asked, clearly confused as her former student regarded her as if she had grown another head.

“Yes, of course. Why would I speak of any other student??”

Minerva and Narcissa shared a look.

“Well, Ms. Granger, your comment beggars all belief, to be frank. I could not have heard a more different account if I had asked for one” Minerva said.
“What do you mean?”

“Well, it has been my understanding that Mr. White has been doing acceptably well in all of his classes thus far. Narcissa was just telling me of his incredible performance in their practical lesson two days ago.” Minerva confessed, stunned.

The brunette turned to her coworker so fast Narcissa thought she heard her neck crack.

“You must be joking. William White? The Muggleborn in Slytherin?”

Narcissa smirked.

“Why, Ms. Granger. I would have thought you of all people would be aware of the limitless potential of Muggleborns.” She quipped. What an interesting turn this conversation had taken.

Hermione narrowed her eyes.

“Any Muggleborn is as witch or wizard as any Pureblood in this castle. That is not the issue. William White has yet to achieve a single passable result in my class. He does not read the material, he does not participate, and seems reluctant to perform the simplest incantations!” Hermione yipped, both in frustration and confusion.

“And that has caught us by surprise, Ms. Granger. Thus far, we have only heard positive things from William’s professors, Ms. Black included.” Minerva commented.

“That cannot be. If he presents this difficulty in Transfiguration, he must present difficulty in another, similar area. What has Flitwick said of him in Charms?”

“I hate to contradict you, Ms. Granger, but Master Flitwick has had only good things to report – Mr. White seems adequately proficient for his level, and has no trouble participating in lectures and demonstrations, though he is quite timid in general.

“What about Defence Against the Dark Arts?”

“Professor Krum has also reported satisfactory work. Mr. White seems like a shy boy, but academically, he fares decently well despite his timid nature.”

“He is not so timid in Potions” Narcissa added. “I believe his friendship with Spencer Wyndham has helped tremendously.”

“Friendship with Spencer Wyndham? This is the first I’m hearing of this.” Hermione said.

Minerva cocked an eyebrow at the brunette.

“I fail to see why you would have heard of it, Ms. Granger. If am remember correctly, Mr. White and Mr. Wyndham are in separate Transfiguration classes.” The Headmistress countered.

After the war, the Hogwarts staff had worked to make classes more diverse by creating smaller class numbers mixed with all four Houses. It had seemed to work, as most students ended up befriending those from other Houses.

“That is beside the point. Caroline Stewart and Gustav Braun have not reported any friendly interaction on the part of Mr. White.” Hermione muttered.

Now both of Minerva’s eyebrows had climbed unusually far into her hairline.
“Ms. Granger, you mean to tell me you assigned Gryffindor prefects to keep tabs on a single student?” she asked, half amused, half infuriated by Hermione’s stubbornness.

“Not ‘to keep tabs.’ Simply to check in every now and then, to make sure William’s doing alright. I constantly try to talk to him to see if there is anything I can do, but he seems terrified or conversation.” She mused.

Narcissa could not contain a snort of laughter, which earned her a glare from the brunette.

“My apologies, Ms. Granger…. But I believe we’ve arrive at the crux of the matter.”

Hermione folded her arms against her chest in denial.

“Oh, and that would be?”

Narcissa rolled her eyes. How could such a brilliant witch not see what was right in front of her?

“Ms. Granger… You with your covert observations, you little spies, your constant badgering for him to speak to you when he is clearly not willing, your over-willingness to be of use… don’t you see?”

Hermione refused to answer, but Narcissa had seen understanding dawn in those mocha-brown eyes.

“Ms. Granger… you’ve scared the boy.”
Chapter 7

Hermione huffed as she walked around the castle in her nightly walk, thinking of the past week. She wanted the ground to open up and swallow her deep into the earth over the whole William White thing. After the strange meeting a few days before, she had grilled Neville, Flitwick, even Krum – all of them had assured her that what Black and McGonagall had told her was quite true. The young Muggleborn was doing just fine, it seemed. Except in her class.

Part of her felt hurt – surely William could understand; he had to be aware that she was only trying to help him.

Although perhaps setting Gryffindor Prefects after him was probably not the most brilliant strategy.

She sighed as she strolled over the beaten path leading to the school greenhouses. The full moon shone brightly enough that she had no need for a *Lumos* to guide her steps. Hermione enjoyed those midnight walks – they were a habit developed when she was still plagued by nightmares of a certain Death Eater. It had started as pacing her room like a caged animal, then it gradually evolved to full-blown walks around Muggle London. Being enveloped in the midst of Muggle nightlife, with its sounds and smells served as a blanket, cocooning her away from the furious scratching of a cursed knife and the screeched *Cruciatus*.

The walks were all she kept after therapy. Now they served less to shield her from her nightmares and more as a way to relax and wind down from a busy day. She enjoyed the stillness of a Hogwarts night.

She was just passing one of the greenhouses kept by Neville when she noticed movement from within. Hermione sighed; so much for stillness.

The greenhouse in question was none other than the one reserved for Faculty. Since she was quite certain none of her colleagues would be down at this time of night, the intruders were bound to be some foolhardy students on a quest for adventure or pranks.

Hermione smirked as she unsheathed her wand and slowly made her way in; all they would get would be a deduction of points. Maybe a detention, since they dared interrupt the quietude of her midnight stroll, even if unwittingly.

The glass-paned space was a maze of greenery cast in the gloomy blue light of the full moon. Hermione almost scoffed at the chaotic nature of the place. How Neville was able to get any work done in such chaos was well and truly beyond her.

The young professor heard faint whispering coming from further back. She slowly and stealthily made her way in the direction of the sound, where Neville’s worktables were situated. As she came and closer, she felt a strong smell of eucalyptus – soon followed by the sounds of a cauldron clearly on a boil and the snipping of gardening shears.

Who would be brewing potions in Neville’s greenhouse? The Herbology professor was quite inept at potion-brewing, so there was very little reason for such an activity to be taking place in his domain.

Hermione was about to make her presence known to whomever was there after hours, when a sudden smattering of light made her stop in her tracks. There to the side, at Neville’s workspace,
patiently snipping the buds off a Monkshood plant, was Narcissa Black.

It took Hermione a second to realize that reflective gleam that stopped her was nothing other than Narcissa’s platinum-blonde hair illuminated by moonlight. The witch was totally devoted to the task at hand, murmuring incantations as she gingerly collected the snipped buds in a large glass phial. The young professor noticed how the youngest Black’s mesmerizing blue eyes seemed to glitter in concentration.

She looked nothing like the rest of her family, Hermione mused, thinking of one Black in particular. Bellatrix Lestrange’s crazed eyes, dark as coal, would never stop haunting her for as long as she lived. Andromeda was practically a copy of her eldest sister; so much so Hermione had had difficulty interacting with the woman immediately after the war.

Narcissa was the polar opposite of the other two, with her light hair and eyes. While different, those eyes also haunted Hermione’s dreams occasionally. They stared, unflinching, as Bellatrix Lestrange straddled and mutilated her; other times they gazed, moist with unshed tears, in the aftermath of it all.

Before she could stop to think about it, Hermione found herself face to face with those blue orbs as they found her within the bushes.

“Oh!” exclaimed Narcissa in surprise, dropping the phial she held in her delicate hands. The sound of shattering glass broke Hermione out of her musings.

“My apologies” she said regretfully, waving her wand over the mess that now sparkled on the ground. The phial reconstructed itself, the Monkshood buds falling neatly inside. With another wand-flick Hermione levitated it back into Narcissa’s waiting hands. “I saw movement inside and… I thought students were breaking in.” she explained.

Narcissa murmured her thanks, setting the phial down at one of the worktables, next to the bubbling cauldron Hermione had heard and smelled earlier. She seemed uneasy with the brunette, and silently worked on separating some of the buds she gathered for the brewing mixture.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt” Hermione said, carefully stepping closer to the witch. She sniffed the air, the scent of eucalyptus definitively came from Narcissa’s cauldron.

“What are you brewing, if you don’t mind me asking?” she said, stepping over to the other side of the worktable to get a glimpse of the cauldron. Narcissa smiled slightly at the younger witch’s curiosity.

“Wideye Potion” she said, carefully stirring the mixture. “I prefer to add fresh monkshood at this stage of brewing. My fifth years depleted my supply in class this morning, so Mr. Longbottom kindly offered some of his.” Narcissa explained, waving her hand over the cauldron in a silent incantation.

Hermione cocked an eyebrow.

“And the eucalyptus smell?” she asked. Wideeye Potion was notoriously foul-smelling. Narcissa’s smile widened.

“Eucalyptus oil masks the rather nauseating smell and taste of this potion. Not to mention, in the right quantities, it can counteract the jitters that often come as a side-effect to its ingestion.”

Hermione could not suppress the expression of surprise at that little tidbit. She was not too bad a potion-maker herself, but the subject never fascinated her as much as most of the others she had
studied at Hogwarts. She was a woman of results; she had not the patience to monitor potions over
insanely long brew times or work out the minuitia in ingredients – regardless of her precocious
dealings with Polyjuice. So, while she vouched for the usefulness and tremendous importance of
the discipline, she was more than satisfied with retaining her above-NEWT level of knowledge on
it.

“Huh. I would not have thought of that.” She confessed, genuinely impressed. Narcissa let out a
chuckle.

“Come, now. I’m sure the Brightest Witch of Her Age would have thought of something.” She
said.

Hermione laughed.

“Maybe, but I was never too fond of Potions. It’s a fascinating subject, just not my area of
expertise.”

Narcissa seemed shocked.

“Is that so? I would have thought you made any area your area of expertise.”

“It wouldn’t do to tarnish my image as the Brains of the Golden Trio now, would it? But between
us two, I was never too keen on Divination either – don’t tell anyone” Hermione said, glad that
whatever initial tension there was previously had now evaporated.

“My lips are sealed” Narcissa said.

Hermione looked at the materials and ingredients spread out on the worktable, then up, towards
the glass ceiling. One of the panes was open, showering the area with unobstructed moonlight.

“It’s a beautiful moon.” She commented.

Narcissa nodded her agreement. “Yes; I thought I would finish brewing in the moonlight. The full
moon amplifies the magical properties of Monkshood; I expect this batch to be especially potent.”

“For Wideye Potion, you said? Why are you brewing it; is it part of the curriculum?”

Narcissa paused the incantation she had been whispering over the smoke, hesitating.

“No” she finally said. “This batch is for my own use.”

Hermione frowned at that. Generally, Wideye was used for awakening unconscious patients.
Faints, sleeping potions, concussions, even as an antidote for the Draught of the Living Dead. She
wondered what sort of use Narcissa would make of it.

“A certain amount of Wideye Potion prevents the drinker from sleeping.” The blonde said, as if she
had read Hermione’s mind. The statement only served to further confuse the brunette, but Narcissa
kept on. “I prefer it over a Dreamless Draught.” She murmured, so low Hermione could barely hear
her.

The younger witch’s brow only furrowed more deeply at the statement. She had plenty of reasons
to avoid sleep; she wondered what Narcissa’s were. Probably some on the other side of the coin as
her own.

“Additionally,” Narcissa continued, looking at anywhere but Hermione “this potion, unlike the
Dreamless Draught, has no addictive properties.”

“Everyone needs sleep at some point.” Hermione said, speaking from experience.

Narcissa shrugged.

“Indeed. Complete physical exhaustion is what makes the prolonged use of this potion an unwise decision. But once it comes to that… There is no need for a Dreamless Draught.” She all but whispered.

A heavy silenced reigned for a few minutes. Hermione remembered how she’d gotten to the point of drinking five to six phials of Dreamless Draught every night – anything to stop the nightmares. She had it so often the customary half-phial was not cutting it; so she upped her dosage to one phial, then two, then three… When the Healers at St. Mungo’s refused to prescribe it to her, she started brewing it herself. It was to this day the one and only potion she could make with absolutely no recipe – she knew it like the back of her hand.

“I used to take Dreamless Draught. Every night for a long time.” She said, almost to herself.

“How long?”

“Two years.”

“Merlin.”

“Yeah…” the brunette said sheepishly. “Shouldn’t have done it; I mean, I knew it is not meant to be used for more than a week, but… There was no other way to… The nightmares, they were just so real.” She murmured, unsure how the conversation had gone in this taboo direction. She looked at Narcissa; she had stopped her potion-making.

“Desperate times call for desperate measures. I imagine you, of all people, have dreams you would rather forget.” Narcissa whispered, so softly that Hermione wasn’t sure she had meant to say it at all.

“Yes.” She said simply. “What about you?” she asked, because damn her curiosity would never let her not ask it. “What sort of dreams make you chase sleep itself away?”

Narcissa let out a bitter chuckle.

“Much of the same as you, I suppose, as well as many other things. I’ve lived a lifetime of dreams to plague my sleep.” The blonde said.

Hermione was at a loss. Why was she talking of dreams – no, why was she talking of nightmares with someone who featured so prominently in her own?

“I dream of your sister” she said suddenly. Narcissa’s gaze snapped back to hers in shock at the admission. “Some nights, I feel her weight on me. I hear her screaming at me, and I feel her magic – I feel her Crucio like that day, all over again. I feel her k-knife, her knife, cutting into m-my arm, and you” she raised a shaky hand to point accusingly at Narcissa “were there, you were there and you looked straight a-a-at m-me” she continued in a strangled stutter, her thoughts swirling out of control. The last thing she wanted was to have a panic attack in the presence of Narcissa Black, but that was exactly what was happening. The greenhouse seemed to get darker, as if the moon had waned in an instant, and suddenly she began to struggle to breathe. She felt her blood thundering in her ears as her breaths came in increasingly shorter gasps; her arm began to throb, her Mudblood scar feeling like it had been slashed anew.
Suddenly she felt two hands gripping her shoulders with unbelievable strength. It hurt, it hurt to the point of bruising, but the pain grounded her, yanking her back from the whirlwind of emotion she had begun to cycle through.

“I did” Narcissa breathed, her face impossibly close. Those eyes, those blue eyes that watched as Hermione suffered were merely inches away from her own, and the brunette could see nothing but the sea of blue. “I stood there. I watched as my sister, as my own blood tortured a child and I did nothing. I hear her too, in my dreams. Every night since that night I hear not only my sister, but you. It is your screams that torment not only my dreams, but my every waking moment. They will until the day that I die.”

Narcissa’s sudden proximity was enough to stop Hermione’s breakdown. Hermione looked intently at the older witch, looked right at those blue eyes welling up with tears. It was only once she noticed Narcissa’s welled up tears that she felt the wet heat running down her own cheeks.

“Why?” she gasped.

Narcissa’s grip relaxed slightly. Hermione could tell she was trying to rebuild her defenses, desperately trying to don her Ice Queen mask and failing.

“I lack the courage you Gryffindors take so much pride on. I did it for my family in the end, but at what cost? If family is such a noble thing, how come not a day goes by that I don’t remember that moment in shame?”

Hermione’s breathing had calmed down, though her pulse was still racing. Narcissa had yet to let go of her.

“You apologized to me. After the trials.” She said. Why did it sound like an accusation?

Narcissa closed her eyes. She had never looked so vulnerable, so broken.

“I did. There is nothing I can ever do or say to warrant your forgiveness. I vowed I would never seek it. But you needed to know, I needed you to see that I am not as cold as the world may make me seem.” She said, finally letting go of Hermione’s shoulders.

The brunette took a few deep breaths. This was precisely the kind of situation she tried to avoid so desperately in her nightly walks.

“I’m sorry.” She said.

Narcissa looked at her, puzzled. “Why in Salazar’s name are you apologizing?”

Hermione gestured vaguely around her own person. “For all of… this, what just happened. It doesn’t happen so often anymore, but…”

Narcissa nodded in understanding. “I understand. Miss Granger, please do not hesitate to let me or the Headmistress know if my presence here undermines your…”

“It’s fine! It’s fine, dammit, when will people stop coddling me like this!” Hermione suddenly snapped. She immediately regretted the outburst upon seeing Narcissa’s shocked expression. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I… It’s fine, Narcissa. You’re a qualified Potions teacher, and we need one. I don’t have a problem with it.”

“Oh very well” Narcissa said, thankfully dropping the subject.
The two remained silent for several moments. Narcissa went back to her Wideye Potion, while Hermione leaned against the table, wiping at her wet cheeks and wondering why she couldn’t just walk out of the greenhouse and leave the older witch to her affairs. They had nothing left to say to one another, had they? But it was as if her feet were planted on the ground along with all the shrubbery.

With nothing to add to whatever conversation they had, Hermione looked at Narcissa work. She was staring, she knew, but the other witch truly did not seem to mind, or was ignoring her completely.

It was as if not a day had gone by since Hermione first saw her. She knew that witches and wizards aged somewhat differently than muggles, but even then… Narcissa seemed untouched by age. Her shimmering blonde hair was longer than Hermione remembered, and she always wore it down; it reached the small of her back in silky tresses. She was the picture of elegance and grace – an observation that had Hermione holding in a scoff. Of course; born into Wizarding aristocracy and married into more Wizarding aristocracy. She was bound to have had etiquette lessons or the like.

Hermione watched as the older witch carefully and methodically went about her brewing. She had perfectly manicured, dainty hands, and those hands were not finely chopping the monkshood buds with such ability Hermione was momentarily entranced by the movement of the knife.

As much as Bellatrix Black was dark, Narcissa was fair; as fair as melting snow. Maybe that was also why people called her the Ice Queen. Hermione chuckled: one thing had most definitely changed: Narcissa no longer carried the expression of someone who had just smelled something foul.

“What’s so funny?” Narcissa asked, her brow furrowed in concentration as she weighed the chopped monkshood on a small scale.

“Oh, nothing. I was just remembering the first time we met.” Hermione said, chuckling even harder at Narcissa’s confused expression.

“You and me?” she asked, bewildered at Hermione’s confirmation. “Not a particularly amusing memory, in my recollection.” She said, her voice heavy with shame.

“Not particularly” Hermione agreed. “But Harry had a way of describing the… expression you had.”

Narcissa cocked an eyebrow, urging the brunette to go on.

“It’s awful, really” Hermione said, trying hard to contain her laughter now. “Not to mention immature; but we were teenagers, and, well, you were the enemy” she explained. “He said you looked like you looked as if you had just sniffed some dung.” Narcissa’s stunned look only served to release the peals of laughter she had been trying so hard to hold in. “I am awfully sorry” she added quickly.

To her utter surprise, Narcissa let out a good chuckle herself.

“Mr. Potter’s observation does not surprise me.” She confessed, to Hermione’s astonishment. “The ‘mask of preeminence,’ as my late mother called it. Many Pureblooded families practiced this air of disgust for the world around them; as if we were far too perfect for it.” She said, a bit of guilt in her voice. “I was always quite good at it, but someone completely unexpected surpassed me in the practice.” She said.
Hermione couldn’t help it, she was curious. “Who managed such a feat?”

Narcissa smiled wickedly. “Draco, of course.”

Hermione let out an inelegant guffaw. It was funny because it was true; Draco had inherited his father’s sneer and his mother’s haughtiness. It was no contest.

The two witches fell into silence once again, though this time it felt as if a heavy fog had been cleared from the air around them. Hermione still leaned against the table, following Narcissa’s every move with her eyes.

Said witch added the last of the monkshood to her now simmering cauldron, stirring it gently so as not to disturb the mixture excessively. After a few minutes, a flick of her wand put out the fire under the cauldron, and another wave cooled the substance, now an iridescent blue. She turned to her silent companion.

“Would you mind helping me bottle these, Miss Granger?” she asked politely.

Hermione nodded, glad to be of use. Narcissa summoned several phials from a box by the table; they clattered in the air before neatly arranging themselves in rows on the tabletop. Hermione grabbed a ladle and got to work.

They worked diligently and silently for a few minutes. Hermione idly wondered what time it was, but felt no desire to leave just yet. Instead she bottled and labelled phial after phial; Narcissa had brewed quite a large batch. It made Hermione think about how much she used it.

“I remember my first-ever Potions lesson as a first-year” Narcissa spoke softly after a few moments. “I imagine Slughorn didn’t expect much of me; I had two brilliant sisters, it was unlikely that I would eclipse them. But I had read ahead. I was insufferable; I wanted to answer all the questions. At the end, poor Horace had to pull me aside. ‘Miss Black’ he said. ‘My dearest Miss Black, please do leave at least one question for your fellow students’.” She said. It was clearly a fond memory, as the corners of her mouth tugged into a slight smile.

Hermione couldn’t help a smile of her own.

“I believe I was quite insufferable as well… An ‘insufferable know-it-all’, as Snape put it at the time.”

Narcissa frowned.

“Severus always lacked tact… and some basic manners. It didn’t help that he disliked children with such intensity.”

“Not at all… Though some other teachers were a bit exasperated with my hand going up every time they asked a question” Hermione said with a chuckle. Narcissa smiled openly.

“I understand the feeling well. I read all of my textbooks before term had even begun. Bell… My sisters were afraid I’d be sorted into Ravenclaw.”

Hermione noticed the near slip, but chose to ignore it. Narcissa was obviously trying to avoid mentioning Bellatrix for her sake.

“I remember when I got my letter.” She said. She had never told this to anyone, but could not fathom why she wanted to share it with Narcissa Black of all people. “McGonagall came to explain it to mum and dad. I cried for two days straight.”
“I suppose it was a shock.” Narcissa said diplomatically.

“Yes. But not in the way you might think.” Hermione said. “When Minerva came and explained it all… explained me… it was like pieces of a puzzle falling into place. I had always known I was different. And then there was the answer: I wasn’t broken, I wasn’t a freak. I was a witch.”

Narcissa smiled, though she was deep in thought. She would never know such a deep feeling of displacement, of not belonging. She fought a frown at the thought of how many had tasted belonging only to have it ripped away by the blood purity ideals she herself subscribed to for most of her life.

“Hogwarts was… it felt like coming home. It didn’t last long.” Hermione added sadly, to Narcissa’s surprise.

“Whyever not?”

“Kids are mean, muggle or magical. I was a freak, a buck-toothed, insufferable know-it-all.” She explained. “Even Harry and Ron didn’t want to be friends with me. That is, until a troll changed everything” she recalled with a smile.

“Ah, the troll in the bathroom incident.” Narcissa commented.

“How do you know about that?” Hermione asked.

“Draco told us about the talk of the school in a letter or two. You featured so prominently in his letters we worried he fancied you.” She admitted, laughing at Hermione’s bewilderment.

“I suppose the heir to the Malfoy family falling for a Muggleborn would have been cause for alarm.” Hermione snipped humorously, taking care to let her tone show she meant it in jest.

“Quite” Narcissa agreed, a hint of shame back into her eyes. “I like to think he and I have grown, as a family and as people since the war.” She murmured softly. Hermione smiled.

“Draco was the first person to call me a mudblood.” She said, raising a hand to stop Narcissa from interfering. “He was the first, but obviously not the last. But Draco was also the first to call attention to my friends when I went off the deep end.”

Narcissa was shocked by this, but she supposed it made sense. She knew her son and Hermione had been on much better terms, going so far as to work together in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. That was all she knew.

“And you… I know what you’re researching with Neville. I know of your plans for Black Manor, and I’ve read your medicinal research on The Practical Potioneer. I believe you both have grown, Narcissa.”

Narcissa had no words, besides a softly spoken thank you. Suddenly bashful, she went back to bottling the last of her potion. Neither witch spoke until the cauldron was empty and dozens of phials had been arranged on the countertop, glittering in the moonlight.

“Speaking of growth” Hermione said suddenly “I wanted to apologize for my comment back at our first staff meeting. The… viper talk.”

Narcissa shrugged, even this she did elegantly somehow.

“No matter. I won’t say we Slytherins don’t deserve it.” She conceded.
“Maybe, but I should have handled it better. I just… I worry about William White” Hermione confessed.

“It is understandable. How could you not? You know exactly what he is going through. You know his predicament better than most.”

“You’re his Head of House; you see his interactions within his House more clearly than I can. How is he?” Hermione dared ask. Narcissa smiled in understanding.

“He has befriended the Wyndham boy, a half-blood, with whom he shares his dormitory. I do not know how his relations are with the others in his dormitory, but he seems to maintain a cordial relationship with most other half-bloods. I know some children from older families are reluctant, but there have been no issues thus far.”

“That seems… Too good to be true.” Hermione blurted out. “I’m sorry” she added quickly, but Narcissa waved her off.

“I agree, to a point. I’m not naïve enough to think that Mr. White’s transition will be totally uneventful.” She turned to look deeply into Hermione’s eyes. “However, we must not make mountains out of mole-hills. By singling him out, he becomes a target – for what, we have yet to find out, and I hope we never do. But for now, things must go as they are – though I believe it would be good if you let him show his worth to you rather than pull it out of him.” She said gently.

Hermione huffed, not entirely happy about it.

“I know, I know… I… I just want to help him. I know I wished someone would have done the same for me when I was his age” she reasoned.

“Be that as it may, Miss Granger, you cannot treat William White as Hermione Granger would have liked to be treated. There is one great difference between you two” Narcissa countered.

“And that would be?”

Narcissa smiled; her voice was gentle, almost teasing.

“He may be a Muggleborn, Miss Granger, but he is still a Slytherin.”
Hermione always loved the turn of the seasons at Hogwarts; they always made the castle seem even more beautiful and grand, not to mention fresher, somehow. She liked the colors and smells of Autumn or the blossoming of spring as much as the next witch or wizard, but what she truly loved was the gradual descent into winter. There was something magical – she laughed at her own observation – about Hogwarts in the dead of winter. The grounds were blanketed with snow, and everything turned quiet… That is, until students started their merry snowball fights and other activities.

The weather was not quite winter-cold yet – November had only started, after all, but she could feel the beginning of changes in the wind. She could track the progression of the seasons quite beautifully from her office window; she had a perfect view of Neville’s greenhouses and the flora surrounding it.

She frowned, remembering her encounter with Narcissa at the greenhouse a few weeks prior. Hermione had been a little embarrassed by her loss of control, but to her credit, Narcissa had taken it in stride. They had even discussed William White.

William White. Hermione groaned, letting her head fall onto the quizzes she was grading with a painful thump.

Miraculously, after her little heart-to-heart with Narcissa, something had clearly changed with the boy. Hermione had called off the Gryffindor prefects she had tailing – checking in with – him, and stopped looking expectantly at him whenever they were in class. It seemed to help, as she recalled.

Hermione had been going over a few theoretical rules of Transfiguration, asking questions as she went, to make sure her students had been reading along. Many seemed to think transfiguration was simply some wand-waving with a clear vision of the end product; that could not be further from the truth.

She had made some question about one of the hardest physical qualities to translate in the transformation of one object to another. To her utter surprise, William White raised a tremulous hand in the air.

“Mr. White!” She all but gasped, clearly startling the boy, whose eyes widened.

“T-the, uh, the t-texture of a p-particular object can b-be tricky. A lot of people f-forget to visualize it.” He stammered, a furious flush creeping onto his cheeks at his every word.

Hermione must had had an utterly bewildered expression, because he only got redder when forgot to respond immediately. Her jaw hanging open was an unfortunate addition to said expression, but to be fair, it was the first time William White had opened his mouth in her class, save for attendance.

“Correct. Five points to Slytherin.” She finally gasped out – students were beginning to look concerned.

That was the first time, but certainly not the last, that William had been participative in her class. Nowadays, he always tried to answer questions; and always got the right answer, too. Incidentally, she remembered correcting his first quiz, and being so shocked by it she went to speak with him the day after – all answers were correct, down to the bonus question on the origins of the
Transfiguration formulaic alphabet. It left Hermione puzzled. He was clearly ahead of the class in terms of reading, so how come his practical results were still below par, even if they were a little better than when he had started?

It was then that she started to realize something. In class practicals, she walked about the room, keeping an eye on the students’ work. Once, as they were trying to transform a match into a needle, she could tell William’s wandwork was close to perfect. Happy and intrigued, she immediately came closer, and as soon as she did, William looked like a deer caught in headlights and botched the last wand movement, creating only a slightly pointier match. He looked at her without a single word, she could only look back with the unsettling weight of her newly-discovered predicament.

She was scaring him!

She thumped her head onto her table again. After her realization, she took a few – or several steps back. Not that she wanted to, but as soon she started to almost ignore William White in practical lessons, the boy began to show results. They were not impeccable like his theoreticals, but they were far from reproach for a first year. In fact, Hermione could see that William White was decidedly average in her subject matter. Ironically, his main trouble lay in visualizing textures. It lead Hermione to come to two conclusions: one, William was simply not naturally gifted in Transfiguration. He’d be able to make good grades, but he would never be astounding. And two, and perhaps most unnervingly, Narcissa had been right on the bloody mark.

Hermione sighed, rubbing her forehead. She had wanted to pull the other witch aside and thank her, but actually speaking to Narcissa Black had proven to be an exercise in futility. The older witch had disappeared from meal times ever since their last encounter. Hermione knew she was still obviously at Hogwarts; they ran across each other every now and then and Potions lessons were still happening.

Clearly the witch was avoiding her. So Hermione decided to try alternative methods. She had gone back to the greenhouse, only to find Neville happily fertilizing some disgustingly stinky pots – it made her miss the eucalyptus smell. She went to Narcissa’s classroom, only to find it locked. She had even gone so far as to try to corner her after a staff meeting, but the witch seemed to always have some pressing matter to attend to.

So, with nowhere to turn to, she had asked Neville – he had spoken of his and Narcissa’s research and how well it was progressing. He was shocked she had even asked.

“Oh? She’s probably trying to give you some space, make you more comfortable. She knows it’s not easy for you, having her here.” He said, tucking into his shepherd’s pie contently.

His response had Hermione seeing red. She had specifically told the woman she did not wish to be treated any differently! She was also inexplicably hurt Narcissa had deliberately gone out of her way to avoid her.

Hermione had left the staff table immediately after dinner, intent on seeing the witch whatever the cost. She would camp out in her office if need be.

She had just turned the corner on her way there when she ran into none other than William White himself. They nearly collided with each other; William was so startled that he dropped a phial of what looked to be Albanian pepper grounds, judging by their bright purple color.

Hermione groaned. She was on a roll for shattering phials.

“Ms. Granger!! I’m sorry, ma’am, I did not see where I was going, and…”
She waved a hand in dismissal, flicking her wand impatiently. William’s eyes followed the phial with interest as it reassembled itself, grounds and all, and floated back into his arms.

“No need to apologize, Mr. White. I was in a rush.” She looked at his bounty. “I see you have a lot of Potion ingredients there; have you been to see Professor Black?” She asked, trying to sound as gentle as possible.

“Yes, ma’am” he said, nodding a little too fast. “She was giving me some ingredients for our Hiccoughing Potion” he explained.

“So she is in her office?” she inquired.

“Yes, ma’am, I was just there.” He confirmed.

“Splendid. Thank you, Mr. White, have a pleasant evening” she said as he scurried away. With confirmation Narcissa was present at her office, her effort to confront the witch was renewed.

The door to Narcissa’s office was slightly ajar, which was why Hermione walked straight in after a courtesy knock which had been merely a formality; she was a woman on a mission. Thus, it was quite vexing to find it completely empty. She looked towards the desk; there were a few papers scattered across its surface.

“Ms. Black?” she called tentatively, furrowing her brow when she received no response.

“Narcissa?” she tried again.

When no answer was forthcoming, Hermione walked over to the desk. There was nothing interesting; the papers were Potions quizzes Narcissa had probably been in the middle of grading before William White showed up.

The boy had left with some ingredients; perhaps Narcissa was still in the stockroom. Hermione made her way there – Narcissa had obviously rearranged the office, so much so that she was not sure which door actually led to the Potions stockroom.

Just in case, she knocked on the door to the left of the other witch’s desk. It creaked open, so Hermione took that as an invitation. The room she had walked into was dark, with only the light of the moon peering in through the half-closed windows. It smelled faintly of eucalyptus.

“Professor Black?”

The fireplace roared to life, and candles floating all around the space lit themselves. Hermione realized these were Narcissa’s private quarters, her sitting room to be exact. The rational Hermione Granger told her to leave immediately, but the annoyingly curious Hermione Granger was held in place by the comfortable room, with its fireplace, several bookshelves, and comfy chairs.

Her eyes snapped to one of the aforementioned chairs in complete and utter shock. There, sleeping soundly on the chair cushion, was a beautiful white fox. Hermione tilted her head in confusion; she had never seen Narcissa with a familiar before. The fox was obviously quite comfortable: its chest moved slowly up and down and again as it snored softly.

Hermione turned away from the animal, resisting the urge to run her fingers through its beautiful, snow white coat. She looked to the bookshelves and the walls, instead. They were filled with heavy tomes, most having something or other to do with potions. *Moste Potente Potions, Bewildering Brews, Brewing for Healers, Perilous Potions…*

The Gryffindor could never resist books. She turned away from one shelf to more closely examine
the other, accidentally brushing by a stack of books that rested precariously on the edge of a side-
table. The entire stack came down with resounding thuds; and the sudden noise woke the sleeping
fox – it stared straight at Hermione through narrow slits in its icy blue eyes.

Hermione groaned as she leaned down to pick them up. Upon further inspection, she realized the
heavy stack was composed not of books, but photo albums. She figured it out as she picked the first
one up by its binding, only to have a flurry of loose photographs fall out from between the pages.

“Bugger, bugger, bugger, shit!” she cursed under her breath, lowering herself even further to gather
all the pictures.

The first one her hand came into contact with had her drawing in a surprised breath. It was a black
and white shot of a heavily pregnant Narcissa. She was wearing a black sleeping gown of some
sort; an opening at the front showed her swollen belly, which she caressed tenderly, a serene smile
gracing her features, partially hidden by her flowing golden locks. She stood by huge windows, no
doubt at Malfoy Manor, as the rays of the afternoon sun peered into the room, giving the entire
photo a pleasantly ethereal feeling as it shimmered off her hair.

Hermione shuddered – she knew she should not be looking. These were obviously private. And
yet, as she picked up picture after picture, she could not help giving almost every one of them at
least a second look.

Another picture showed Narcissa and Lucius, obviously on their wedding day. Hermione had to
admit, the two made a strikingly beautiful couple. Narcissa looked absolutely radiant in her
intricately ornate white dress. Lucius Malfoy was smiling, and Hermione was astonished by how
genuinely happy they both seemed to be. As far as she knew, the Malfoy marriage had been
arranged, like so many other Pureblooded unions. And yet, the young pair – Narcissa looked not a
day over seventeen – were positively beaming, exchanging loving glances with one another before
looking back at the photographer.

Hermione gasped at another picture. It was the wedding, still, but now Narcissa and Lucius were
joined by their respective families. Hermione could easily recognize Malfoy’s strong genes in his
father; the two looked exactly alike, and she knew Draco, too, had inherited the looks. Narcissa’s
father, Cygnus Black, looked extremely proud, her mother, Druella, a bit more understated, but still
happy. It was the two other people in the picture that had Hermione gasping; they were none other
than Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrange.

It was unbelievably odd, to see Bellatrix before Azkaban, and how beautiful she had once been. If
she thought Andromeda looked like her sister before, the picture made them look like twins –
though Andromeda was noticeably absent from the photo, as she had likely already been blasted off
the Black tapestry for eloping at that stage. Still, Bellatrix smiled confidently to the camera, a
happy look on her face, something Hermione did not think possible for the dark witch. Rodolphus,
a handsome young man, had his arms around her waist from behind, and the two raised their
glasses to the new couple, who looked on appreciatively.

She quickly put that picture behind the others; for some reason seeing a human version of Bellatrix
made her feel uneasy inside.

The next picture had her holding in a laugh. Draco, no more than a toddler, whizzed by in and out
of frame on a toy broom, giggling happy. Narcissa, sitting on an easy-chair reading a book, was
startled every time the boy zoomed past her; Lucius, looking every bit the proud father, openly
laughed as he cheered his son on.

How strange it was, to see the lives of her past enemies in such a way. For some reason, Hermione
had always imagined them in stiff Pureblood dinners to the sound of screams in their dungeons, in
darkened rooms full of Dark artifacts, possibly torturing someone as entertainment later. She knew
it wasn’t logical or accurate by any means, but it was still a shock to her system.

The last picture was clearly the oldest from the bunch Hermione had disturbed; it featured the three
Black sisters in their childhood home, or so she guessed. Bellatrix was the only one wearing her
Hogwarts robes, which led Hermione to believe that was her first year at the school. A five or six
year-old Narcissa was on her back; Bellatrix seemed perfectly happy with giving her youngest
sister a piggyback ride, which felt surreal to Hermione. Andromeda, one or two years younger than
Bellatrix, stood close to them, brushing Narcissa’s blonde hair out of her eyes as the three sisters
laughed.

“To what to I owe the pleasure of this unexpected visit, Ms. Granger?” called a voice from behind
her.

“Ah!” Hermione exclaimed, none-too-gently tossing the albums onto the table in her fright. She
whipped around to see Narcissa, perfectly poised on the chair the fox had previously been lying on,
a cocked eyebrow in waiting for a response. Hermione at once recognized the fox’s icy blue eyes
as Narcissa’s.

Her brain cycled through thousands of possible excuses to her clear invasion of privacy. Her
mouth, however, was determined to disappoint her.

“You’re an Animagus!” she blurted out.

Narcissa smirked wickedly as she slowly stood up.

“My, my, Ms. Granger. Surely a Transfigurations Professor of your caliber would be remiss not to
check the Ministry’s Animagus Registry every now and then.” She drawled.

Hermione flushed in embarrassment. How come she had never thought of that?

Narcissa stopped right in front of Hermione, her eyes resting upon the photo albums the brunette
had disturbed earlier. A few photos had slid back out in Hermione’s fearful disposal.

“Ms. Black, allow me to apolo…” Hermione began, only to be interrupted by a finger wagging in
her direction.

“You might as well call me Narcissa. It seems you got to know me rather intimately just now.” She
accused, though her tone held no censure.

Hermione sighed, furiously trying to fight the intensifying rush of blood to her cheeks.

“Narcissa.” She said, amazed at how easily the name rolled off her tongue. “I am so very sorry
for…” she stammered out, somehow unable to complete her sentence. Narcissa leaned closer,
and her hand found one of the pictures that had slid out once again from the album; it was one that
Hermione hadn’t quite seen as she gathered them all. It showed a young Narcissa and her husband
dancing through an illuminated garden – again, possibly in Malfoy Manor. They were beaming.
With the witch so close, Hermione finally noticed the deep dark circles under her glassy eyes. The
blonde looked like she hadn’t slept in weeks – possibly due to that enormous batch of Wideye
Potion Hermione had helped her bottle.

“You look very happy in that photo.” She had meant to think it, not say it, but the words simply
came out. Narcissa gave her a small smile.
“Yes. I was.” She murmured and turned to Hermione. “I suppose it comes as a shock to you, seeing all these people you know as despicable creatures having happy, normal lives.” She commented offhandedly, delicately nestling the photo between the pages of the album.

“I don’t find you despicable.” Hermione whispered. Narcissa did not look at her, but gave a sad laugh in response.

“Perhaps not now, Ms. Granger, but that was not always the case. Just like most of these people you saw” she motioned towards the albums “You once considered me a monster.”

Hermione began to retort, but Narcissa waved her off.

“I do not blame you for the feeling. We all did monstrous things; to you and others like you.”

“You didn’t.” the brunette muttered half-heartedly. Narcissa scoffed derisively.

“You are no fool, Ms. Granger. Please do not act like one.” she said, grasping Hermione’s arm and tenderly pushing away the sleeve to reveal the scar her sister had slashed into the Muggleborn’s skin. Hermione shivered as she felt the chill of Narcissa’s hands tracing the cursed wound.

“I did not do this to you, but I might as well have.” The blonde said coolly, gingerly letting go. Hermione suddenly felt bereft. “I keep these pictures to remind myself no one is born a monster.” Her voice turned severe. “None of us was. Not even Bellatrix. We were all made into despicable people – do not think this excuses our actions, because it does quite the opposite.” Her eyes now seemed to glow as they reflected the light of the fireplace. “It shows we made the wrong choices.”

Hermione trembled at the intensity of Narcissa’s expression, suddenly out of breath.

“But you changed your mind in the end.” She breathed.

Narcissa didn’t answer, choosing instead to make her way back to her chair. Hermione followed, unsure.

“Have a seat, Ms. Granger.” The blonde said.

Hermione did, looking more and more uncomfortable by the second. It didn’t help that Narcissa ceased speaking completely – she looked pensively to the young professor. It finally compelled the Gryffindor to talk.

“I am very sorry about disturbing your evening.”

“That is quite alright, Ms. Granger. What is it that you wanted?” Narcissa asked, summoning a tea tray with a barely perceptible flick of her wand. Hermione accepted the tea cup that subsequently came floating her way.

“Firstly, I wanted to thank you for your… advice in dealing with the young William White. He seems to be doing much better now that I’ve, ah, stepped back.” She said, the flush to her cheeks returning once Narcissa smiled.

“That is quite good to hear. Mr. White shows great potential in so many areas, it would be a pity for him to be left behind in such an important subject as Transfiguration.” She replied.

Hermione was marginally surprised that Narcissa regarded her subject with importance; however, the feeling was quickly wiped away to the sound of a *duh!* in her head. Of course the witch would know the importance of Transfiguration; she was a bloody Animagus!
“I actually ran into William on my way here” Hermione said. “He had a lot of supplies with him.”

Narcissa nodded.

“Yes; unfortunately his family’s financial situation did not allow for him to purchase all of the ingredients and materials he will need, so I have been discreetly supplying them to him. One can always buy used books or cauldrons, but such a thing cannot be done for potion ingredients, and those can be quite dear.”

Hermione frowned. It was not uncommon for Muggleborns to have some difficulty buying their school supplies. They did not own any wizarding currency to begin with, and the exchange rates could be quite intimidating, especially considering muggle money was not gold-based. She was very thankful she had not run into this problem; her parents had been quite well off in their professions. She wondered how William must feel in Slytherin, a House notorious for so many of its wealthy students.

The two witches sat in silence, sipping their tea. Hermione could not help but notice how downtrodden and weary Narcissa looked; she had never seen the witch in such a state.

“You have been away from the Great Hall for a good while.” She mentioned. Narcissa let out a chuckle.

“Yes. I thought I would take a bit of time away after our last encounter.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. So she admitted it!

“Narcissa” she began, the name still a bit unfamiliar on her tongue “I’ve told you, you don’t need to remove yourself for my benefit. You belong at the Staff Table, along with all of us.”

The blonde gave her an unreadable expression, which worried Hermione.

“Ms. Granger” she began, her voice unusually aggravated, “what makes you think my absence was for your benefit?”

Hermione froze. What? Suddenly, it dawned on her.

Narcissa wasn’t avoiding her to spare her the discomfort of remembering that night. She was avoiding her to spare herself the nightmares. The realization came with a pang to her heart – the old Hermione Granger would have scoffed at her weakness; after all, didn’t Narcissa deserve the nightmares and whatever else came with them due to her past role – even if she had cast it aside when push came to shove?

The current Hermione Granger was hardened by war, and she had matured quite a bit – enough to not wish her nightmares even upon her worst enemy. And Narcissa was not that; not even close.

“I apologize for my presumption.” She said. Narcissa waved her off.

“It’s quite alright. Removing myself from your presence was a ludicrous idea to begin with; it helped very little, if not at all.” She confessed.

Hermione was saddened by the woman’s predicament. “Have you been taking the Wideye Potion?” she inquired. Narcissa nodded.

“Every night since that moon.” She replied simply. Hermione felt guilty; she had interrupted the witch’s first sleep in weeks. “The transformation helps, in a way” she continued. “The fox is not
quite as burdened; it gives me a chance to rest.”

Hermione nodded in comprehension. She knew that an Animagus’ feelings, nature, and psyche were often different in their animal form. Sirius had used his to diminish the effects of the Dementors in Azkaban, so she was not surprised Narcissa used hers in a somewhat similar way.

“How long have you been an Animagus?” she found herself asking.

“I always wanted to try it. However, with the rise of the Dark Lord, I took a step back. I did not want to make myself particularly useful with any abilities. I was unsure if my rudimentary Occlumency skills would hold up to the Dark Lord’s probing.” She confessed.

Hermione was nothing short of stunned. Narcissa had held back powers that could have been useful to Voldemort from the very beginning. What did such a thing mean?

“You’re an Occlumens?” she prodded, impressed.

“Yes” Narcissa said. “The nature of my marriage, and in later years living with the Dark Lord in my own home made it an absolute necessity.” Her eyes narrowed. “The years provided me with ample time an opportunity to practice; so much so that Tom Riddle himself could not penetrate my thoughts.” She all but whispered.

Hermione wanted to say that was impressive. Harry had often complained of his Occlumency lessons with Snape, but she knew Voldemort had been a master Legilimens, which made Narcissa’s proficiency in Occlumency quite extraordinary. Hermione had attempted to learn some of it by reading, and got reasonably far. After the war, she tried to train with Kingsley Shacklebolt himself, only to give up a few months later. Her mind had been still too fragile after the war to endure repeated attacks, even if they came from a friend in the form of practice.

Narcissa suddenly looked intently at Hermione; her eyes gentle, but her voice tired.

“Ms. Granger, apologies for my rudeness, but if there is nothing else I may help you with, would you mind excusing yourself? I am quite tired and would like to retire myself for the evening” she said, not unkindly.

Hermione stood, nodding in understanding.

“Of course, Ms. Bla- Narcissa. Again, I am very sorry for disturbing your evening. I hope you have a good night’s rest and return to the Staff Table soon.” She turned to leave.

The last thing she saw as she turned to shut the door on her way out was the white fox, curled up where Narcissa had sat. It snored peacefully.
The year progressed much the same way it usually went – when a power-hungry psychopath with a penchant for mass murder wasn’t in the cards, at least. There were the occasional surprises, such as the time when a couple of daring sixth years enchanted several portraits to whistle suggestively whenever Argus Filch passed by their frames. Besides the occasional detentions, Hermione was very pleased with how the term was going.

She and Narcissa had not spoken again after her intrusion. Though the blonde had since returned to the Staff Table looking well-rested and overall healthier, they had not exchanged more than the passing observation on the weather or on their students. William White, who had been cause for many of their past conversations, seemed to be doing rather well in general. He had yet to befriend any purebloods in his House, but thus far things seemed quiet, so there was reason for Hermione to inquire about him.

Hermione didn’t like their stilted conversations at present. She felt absolutely awful for invading Narcissa’s privacy the way she had, but the witch had waved off any further attempt at apologizing from the brunette. It left Hermione with an odd taste in her mouth and a strange feeling in the pit of the stomach. She wanted to get to know Narcissa. Hermione Granger did not like not understanding things, and Narcissa Black was one of the biggest enigmas she had encountered after she graduated Hogwarts.

It was around mid-December that Victor Krum approached her, completely derailing the thoughts she had over the Potions Professor.

“Professor Granger” he said, in his usual, fake pretentious tone. Hermione grinned. Ever since they had reunited as coworkers at Hogwarts, he had made a big show of always calling her ‘Professor Granger’ whenever they spoke. The joke was that it was much easier to pronounce than her first name, even though his English had much improved over the years.

“Professor Krum” she responded in kind “how may I be of assistance?”

“I had an idea that I would like to run by you. Have you got a minute?”

“Of course.”

They moved to the teacher’s lounge on the second floor, a place Hermione had been astounded to find once she was just hired. She, like Harry and Ron, had thought they knew every inch of the castle – they had found the Chamber of Secrets, for Merlin’s sake! Then again, he supposed Hogwarts would never cease surprising her.

Krum led her to the comfiest chairs in the room, by the fireplace. The lounge was empty, except for themselves and Professor Everett, the Muggle Studies Professor, who was tinkering with what looked to be an alarm clock.

“The idea” he said as they sat, steaming mugs of tea popping onto the table before they could even think about it “is to provide students with more opportunities to engage in practical activities. A bit like extracurriculars.”

“Hm. What do you have in mind?”

“I want to reopen the Dueling Club.” He said.
Hermione sat back, intrigued.

“Oh?”

“And I would love to have you help me run it.” He added.

Hermione immediately tensed up.

After the war, Gryffindor’s Golden girl had an excellent job at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, a job that required a certain dexterity with her wand. She had always been a competent duelist, but the nature of her job made her pursue more practice in order to fine tune her skills. With the trauma of war still deeply affecting her, dueling provided a useful, physically strenuous activity that helped clear her mind in a way – the controlled environment at the Ministry’s Dueling Practice Range helped her separate the sportive aspect of dueling from its battle component. She could be calculating, she could strategize, and, most importantly, she could get things out of her system. For a good while, it kept her from going completely off the bend when her mental health deteriorated.

After Kingsley Shacklebolt saw her obliterate the one and only Harry Potter a few too many times in practice, her took her aside and asked if she had ever thought about trying out for local dueling tournaments.

She hadn’t, but the seed had been planted. After two months of practice, Hermione took first place the Greater London Duelling Tournament, and then again at the All-England Duelling Competition. Through the years, she had even gone to a few international competitions; she got second place in her first tournament with the Fédération Internationale des Duels in Lyon, just narrowly losing to an extraordinary veteran American duelist – the man had once lost to none other than Albus Dumbledore himself.

And so it was that Hermione retained a small collection of trophies and honors from her short-lived dueling career. When she resigned from her position at the DMLE, she decided to stop dueling as well – she wanted a more quiet, calmer life for herself, and she had found it in her post at her beloved school.

“I don’t know, Viktor” she said truthfully. “It’s just… it’s just not who I am anymore, you know? I’m done with all this intensity.”

“And I understand that, Hermione. But think about it – it would be madness to create a Dueling Club without at least the input of a war hero, the Brightest Witch of her Age, and an international dueling champion. Your guidance, at least, would be something wonderful for our students.” He argued.

“Well…” she started, her tone just as uncertain as it had been.

Viktor stopped her.

“Please, just tell me you’ll think about it?”
“Goodness gracious, Draco, what are you feeding this lovely boy? He’s growing like a weed!” Narcissa exclaimed as she bounced her grandson on her knee. Scorpius giggled happily as he grasped at his grandmother’s flowy locks.

“We’ve had our first encounter with accidental magic” Draco commented with a smile. Narcissa looked horrified.

“And you did not see it fit to write me about it?” She demanded.

“It only happened yesterday! I thought I’d tell you in person!” Her son defended. “He exploded all the taps in the townhouse; Astoria thought we’d never get the landing dry again.”

She smirked knowingly, looking down at Scorpius and his bright blue eyes.

“But of course you’re already up and at it, aren’t you, sweetheart? You’ll be a powerful wizard one day.” She cooed. As the little blonde boy busied himself with some paper cranes his father had enchanted, Narcissa turned back to her own son. She could tell Scorpius would look just like his father; those Malfoy genes were strong indeed. Though he had a little bit of Astoria’s nose.

“And how is Astoria?”

Draco sipped on his butterbeer. “She’s off in Albania pursuing a story. Something about an illegal werewolf fighting ring.”

Narcissa shuddered. Her daughter-in-law was a determined reporter for the Phoenix Gazette. Narcissa appreciated the woman’s tenacity, though she sorely wished her work did not have her travelling so often, especially in the pursuit of dangerous stories. Draco’s job was also no picnic. She worried for her grandson.

“And no word on that promotion to Editorial?” she prodded. Draco chuckled.

“I think even if it did come up, ‘Ria would have a hard time accepting it. She likes it in the field.” He explained.

Narcissa huffed. She didn’t blame the woman, but her grandmotherly instincts had to go somewhere.

“I so wish you two were at home more often. I worry about you and your jobs, why could you two not have something a little more… serene?”

Draco laughed. “I think we still want to get the action while we can. Don’t worry, mother, I’ll be up for promotion soon. And then, I promise, I’ll take a cushy desk job. How does that sound?”

She huffed. “Much better, in fact.”

“And besides,” Draco continued “Molly Weasley and the Potters are always happy to have him when we’re both out of town. It works out perfectly.”

When Draco began his work at the Ministry, he inevitably happened to work more and more often directly with the Golden Trio. He remembered the first day he walked into the office. Ronald Weasley came up to him, an odd look in his face.

“Weas…” he couldn’t even finish. Ronald had immediately punched him square in the face, knocking him to the floor. Before Draco could even think of getting up, the ginger was already pulling him to his feet.
“That’s for being an absolute ferret all those years, Malfoy. Welcome to the DMLE.” He said, clapping Draco on the back.

Draco had not appreciated the broken nose, but it did help erase any residual tension that the War brought with him. After a year, he was actually on good terms with the Trio, especially – and perhaps most surprisingly, Hermione Granger. They had worked together on several cases.

Soon Draco found that friendship with the Golden Trio came with an entire red-headed family. He felt supremely awkward when Ronald casually extended an invitation for dinner at The Burrow, and even more so when Astoria convinced him to go. But nothing could have prepared him for the onslaught of kindness and understanding coming from the Weasley’s. It had been too much; he had to excuse himself, close to tears. Potter was the one to bring him back; his second chance had finally begun.

After their respective marriages and the birth of their first children, Draco and Harry became even closer. Ginny Potter and Molly Weasley regularly took Scorpius in whenever his own parents were taken out of town for their jobs, though Draco and Astoria did their best to minimize those instances.

Narcissa’s sad look took Draco out of his musings. He cocked an eyebrow.

“What is it, Mother?” he said, worried as he noticed his mother was on the brink of tears.

“Oh, Draco. I hope you do not think me a wretched grandmother.” She choked out.

Draco immediately panicked; his mother did not usually show this much emotion.

“Why would I ever think that? You’re a wonderful grandmother, you spoil him rotten!” he exclaimed, genuinely puzzled. Narcissa sniffed, getting her tears under control before the child in her lap noticed them.

“It should be me caring for him when you’re away. Merlin knows I do not do it as I should. What must Molly Weasley think of me, leaving my own grandson to her care when his father is away?” she sniffed.

Draco understood. He reached over their table to grasp his mother’s hand in his own.

“Oh, mother. Don’t trouble yourself. We understand. Molly understands.” He scooted closer. “You are busy yourself. You’re working on your Potions Mastery, you got a job – two jobs! And you are doing so much you could never do when you were my age. This is the first time you have ever been able to just live your life; nothing could make me happier than that.” He said truthfully. The change that had come about in his mother as she dedicated herself to her life was tremendous; it was the first time he had seen her happy for as long as he could remember. “And trust me, you spoil Scorpius enough already!” he said, hoping to brighten the mood.

Narcissa laughed.

“You haven’t seen anything yet, darling. As soon as this little munchkin can get on a broom, he’s getting all the best ones!” she proclaimed, letting the subject drop. She did feel like an inadequate grandmother at times, but Draco had been her biggest supporter as she followed dreams she couldn’t have followed in her younger years. He understood she was making up for lost time.

“Just what we need, another Quidditch fanatic in the family.” Draco rolled his eyes.

“What, with you and Astoria both having a history of playing, did you truly think this boy has any
other choice?” Narcissa joked. “He’ll make a fine Chaser. Perhaps a Seeker, too. I’ll accept
anything other than a Beater.”

“No doubt he will. He’s a Malfoy! And I can bet Potter’s kid will play as well. They will create the
biggest Malfoy-Potter rivalry – in the pitch, that is.” He joked back. Scorpius giggled at the
proclamation.

Mother and son took some more time chatting. Since she took her post at Hogwarts, Narcissa had
not had the opportunity to speak with her son other than their almost daily correspondence. He had
a rare long weekend off, so he had taken Scorpius to Hogsmeade to see his grandmother. They
talked for hours at The Three Broomsticks; Narcissa told him about William White, the
Muggleborn in Slytherin, as well as her classes and research. She did not mention her continuous
batches of Wideye Potion.

“I’m glad this William kid seems to be doing well. No trouble thus far, then?” Draco said as Mme.
Rosmerta brought them tea.

“None as of yet. There are whisperings, of course. Some Pureblooded students are… surprised,
still. But it seems Mr. White’s academic skill, and the points he’s won for Slytherin, have put him
in the good graces of many of his Housemates.”

“That is good to hear. What about your side-project with Longbottom? I hear Black Manor is
almost ready?” Draco inquired. Narcissa had tirelessly worked with Neville Longbottom and St.
Mungos Wizarding Hospital to transform her childhood estate into a Wizarding Mental-Wellness
Ward. As far as he knew, his mother expected it to be done by Christmas. Apparently, she had had
a lot of fun getting rid of all of her family’s portraits.

“We are working on the finishing touches. At present, we have a bit of a problem reworking the
wards for the place.” She said. “There are several problems; one is the very old magic guarding the
grounds. Another, many patients suffer from psychological ailments that at times provoke
accidental bouts of magic. We want to create a safe environment, but warding the property has
proven to be exceedingly complicated.” she confessed.

“I don’t doubt it” Draco said, frowning. “Your ancestors were famous for their ancient Blood
Wards. Have you spoken to Granger about it?” he asked casually.

Narcissa gave him a weird look.

“Why would I ask Hermi… Ms. Granger about it?”

Draco thought it strange his mother almost used the brunette’s first name, seemingly without
noticing it, but chose not to comment. “Well, I thought you knew. She was a Ward Specialist with
the DMLE; she single-handedly stripped the Mulciber Estate of its wards when we tracked a Death
Eater cell there.” He commented. “She’s been excellent at warding charms since she was
seventeen.”

Narcissa didn’t need to know why. It seemed Hermione Granger had become proficient at several
things due to the War. She shuddered thinking about how the girl had ended up on the floor of
Malfoy Manor; she was certain that, were it not for the taboo, the Golden Trio would have never
been captured.

“In any case, I think you should talk to her. Perhaps she’d be willing to lend a hand.” Draco
continued, unaware of his mother’s pondering.
“Yes” she murmured pensively. “Perhaps.”

Hermione had thought over Krum’s offer for long after he left the Teacher’s Lounge. She had finally returned to her private rooms, where she had a fitful night’s sleep over the proposition. Part of her missed the dueling, the activity, the strategizing.

She was interrupted out of her musings later that morning, as she sipped tea in her private sitting room. A most unexpected appearance made her almost choke on the beverage.

“Harry James Potter and Ronald Bilius Weasley, what in Merlin’s name are you two doing in my private quarters?? How did you even get in?” she all but screeched.

“Godric’s arse, Mione. Hello to you too” Ron grumbled as she flew in for a hug.

“McGonagall let us in. We have some exciting news!” Harry chirped, a dreamy expression on his face. She narrowed her eyes into slits, she had seen that very same expression before. Once she realized when, she gasped.

“Ginny’s pregnant again!!?” She yelped.

“Wait, what, how did you know?!” Harry choked out as Ron burst into laughter.

“I told you, mate. It’s written all over your face.” He jabbed. Hermione threw herself into Harry’s arms, impossibly happy for her friend.

“What about you, Ron? What brings you all the way from Ireland to my humble abode?” She asked.

Harry rolled his eyes. “How come you can tell with me, but not him?”

“Oi, mate! It’s my news to tell!”

Hermione frowned. “What do you… RONALD WEASLEY!!! Lavender is expecting too!? Is this true?” She couldn’t keep throwing herself to hug one of them at a time, so she simply grabbed Ron strongly by his lapels, pulling him into an awkward, but no less happy group hug.

“Sit, sit, sit!” she commanded once she let them go of her bear hug, summoning the teapot and cups. “When did you find out?” she asked.

“Bloody funny story, really” Ron began. “Harry and I ran into each other at the Apothecary.” He said laughing.

“We both immediately knew what was going on once we literally bumped into each other in the ‘Witches’ Worries’ aisle” Harry explained, a flush tinging his cheeks a bright red. “There was not much we could say when we were both walking out with the ‘The Conceivably Expecting Witches’ Checkup Potion’, was there?”

Hermione laughed. “Have you told Molly yet?”

“Oh, yeah.” Ron said. “She wasn’t too happy about mine and Lavender’s out of wedlock situation, but Merlin, the woman’s so excited for more grandkids she forgot it right quick” he chuckled.
Hermione smiled, genuinely happy for Ron. He had wanted a family for so long, she could practically feel the joy radiating from the father-to-be. Molly would also be understandably ecstatic – Angelina was about to give birth now, and then soon after would come Ron’s and Harry’s newest additions. New life made her hopeful for the future, and seeing her friends’ jubilant faces warmed her heart in incredible ways.

“There’s more, ‘Mione.” Ron said, after they had taken some tea. “Lavender and I… We talked about it, and we want you to be the godmother of our child.” He finished, his eyes brimming with tears.

“Oh, Ron! I’d be honored. Of course, of course!” she said, leaning in to envelop her friend in yet another hug. “This calls for more than tea.” She said, summoning a bottle of butterbeer from her pantry.”

“Mione, it’s not even eleven in the morning!” Harry joked.

“Shut it, Potter. My two best friends are becoming dads – you for the second time. This calls for a toast!” She said, already pouring.

“Hear, hear!” Ron yelped happily.

The three friends toasted and reminisced for a good few hours. Hermione missed having the time to just be with her two boys. They talked about everything and nothing, just like they used to – whenever a murderous lunatic wasn’t on their tail, obviously. Ron was happy, though the unexpected news came with a bittersweet note: his promotion to Ireland had been indefinitely postponed. The Ministry had decided not to put a family man in charge. Though Ron understood the decision, it still hurt, and Hermione felt for her friend. He had been working incredibly hard.

“I’m so sorry, Ron.” She said. He waved her off.

“Ah. Nothing to be done about it” he said, his tone resigned. “I’m probably going to be reassigned to Wales; Lavender’s quite happy about it since she’s got family there.” He reasoned.

“I know, but you worked so hard to establish the Ireland division…”

“Don’t worry yourself, ‘Mione. Dean is bloody competent, he’ll do a smashing job” he said. “And in a few years, who knows, I might find myself back there.”

Hermione smiled, happy with how Ron had grown over the years. The old Ron Weasley would not be taking the news too well; he would have most likely thrown a right fit over it.

“Godric, can we stop talking about me? How’s it going in these parts, ‘Mione?” he said, eager to change the subject.


Hermione brightened red. She had written the two about William White, from the time of the boy’s historic Sorting, up to her talk with Narcissa at Neville’s greenhouse. The boys had ribbed her for her traditional overbearing qualities, they were, in their words, “quintessential Hermione.” She took it in stride.

“He’s doing much better now, thank you. Narcissa has been quite helpful.” She said.

“Excellent, excellent!” Harry said. “I’m glad things seem to be working out. What else is new?”
“Well…” Hermione hesitated. “Viktor approached me yesterday. He wants to reopen the Duelling Club.” She finished, looking at her friends expectantly.

“And?” Ron baited.

“And he wants my help running it.” She finally said.

Harry and Ron exchanged a glance between them.

“I think you should do it.” Harry said confidently. “You are an excellent duelist, you’d be able to show these kids a trick or two.”

“I agree” Ron piped in. “I know you like how quiet everything is now, but don’t you miss a bit of the action?” he teased. Hermione smiled.

“I do… I’m just… I don’t know. Dueling was a way to cope. I don’t really need it anymore.”

Harry nodded. “That’s all well and good, Hermione, but not everything needs to be a coping mechanism. You’re allowed to do some things for fun.” He reasoned.

“Yeah” Ron agreed. “I bet it would be fun to school some of these kids, huh? It’s just for sport, after all.”

Hermione smiled at her friends’ encouragement.

“Alright, fine. But I might call on some of my Auror friends for a couple of demonstrations.” She winked.

“Hell, ‘Mione, as long as you don’t kick my arse again, it’s all peachy!” Harry quipped.
“But Professor Granger, George snores like a gassy hippogriff! And he leaves his dirty socks everywhere in the room; he’s told the elves not to take them just to spite me! I slipped on one just his morning. I could have died!”

“Oh, so we’re holding my breathing problems over my head now, are we, Stuart? Aye, that’s rich. And the socks delimitate the perimeter of my own bed, ya complete twat. I ought to…”

“Mr. Atticks, Mr. Davies! That is enough!” Hermione hissed from behind her desk. She really wanted to smack her two most problematic students over the heads with a book, but it turned out Hogwarts had rules against that type of thing nowadays. What a pity.

“Mr. Atticks, you let the elves take away your dirty socks. No one should live with such a mess; keep in mind your dormitory is still a shared space.” She said as evenly as possible, her eyes narrowed into slits. George Atticks still looked a little too smug for her liking.

“What about his abominable snoring, Professor?” Davies insisted. Hermione turned to him.

“I’m afraid I cannot simply change Mr. Atticks’ respiratory tract problems, Mr. Davies.” She said. “However,” she added as Stuart was clearly about to whine about it. “I can ask the elves to shield your bed from the sound at night. Would that suffice?”

Davies looked like he wanted to complain about it even more, but Hermione must have gotten McGonagall’s signature glare down to a tee, because he closed his mouth without saying anything further.

“Excellent. I would like to ask, Mr. Atticks, that you do not antagonize your dormmates. And you, Mr. Davies; it would be best to try to resolve matters amongst yourselves before escalating it to me. You will share a dorm for the duration of your Hogwarts’ career, I suggest you start getting used to each other. Good evening.” She said, dismissing the two.

Once the students finally vacated her office, she allowed a tired sigh to escape her lips. The year had been progressing quite smoothly, but her two most recent visitors were starting to get on her nerves. George Atticks was quite a popular, talented student, if a bit arrogant and proud. He was friendly with most other students, inside and out of Gryffindor.

And Stuart Davies… Her professional opinion said he was an extremely talented student, particularly in her subject. Her personal opinion – one that she reserved for after her teaching hours were done – was that he could be a bit of a twat. He came from a prominent Pureblooded Welsh family, and from what she could gather, was the first Gryffindor to be sorted in a line of Slytherins. She vaguely remembered he was sorted right before Narcissa began guessing who would be sorted into her House, but she could not recall whether the blonde had been surprised by his Sorting. He obviously had been, and had since had a hard time integrating in Gryffindor – truth be told, he was not making any effort either, preferring to fraternize with some Slytherins and a couple of Ravenclaws.

Hermione massaged her temples. She was done thinking about the two today – they had started bickering any chance they got for a week straight, and it was getting on everybody’s nerves. Davies
would find fault with literally anything, and Atticks would stoke the fire for sport. She half suspected he was faking the snoring.

The young professor sighed, tired of being holed up in her office. She took up some essays she had to grade – her first years’ research on Animagi – and made her way to the Teacher’s Lounge for a change of scenery. Hermione still had about half of the essays to go through, but thus far it seemed like a good batch. She had checked the Ministry’s Official Animagus Registry before she assigned them, and sure enough, there was the Potions professor: Narcissa Malfoy. Malfoy, meaning Narcissa had already been registered before her divorce.

Hermione felt quite stupid for not checking the Registry more often, especially since Animagi were such an important facet of Transfiguration. But in reality, she never needed to – Minerva was happy to give an actual demonstration anytime they had that particular lecture, and the Registry was not really needed in the study of Animagus theory. Plus, what could beat the shocked looks on students’ faces as a cute kitty cat on Hermione’s desk suddenly transformed into their strict Headmistress before their very eyes? Hermione would not miss it for the world – it never got old.

She finally walked into the Teacher’s Lounge to find her two favorite chairs by the fire occupied by Neville and Narcissa. The Herbology professor noticed her at once and stood, motioning for her to approach.

“Come, ‘Mione. I know you like these chairs.” He said, an odd smirk on his face. Narcissa looked at him as oddly as Hermione did.

“Neville, it’s alright, I’m not taking your seat.” She protested. He waved her off.

“Sit, sit! I’m just leaving, anyhow.” He said. He turned to Narcissa. “Good evening, Professor Black.”

Both Narcissa and Hermione looked at his retreating form, puzzled.

“I suppose you should sit.” The blonde finally said, motioning to Neville’s vacated chair.

“I suppose so.” Hermione smiled. “What’s going on with him?”

“I am not certain.” Narcissa admitted. “But he was very excited about a particularly good batch of poison parsley he received from Bulgaria this morning.”

Hermione sat, shaking her head. “Poison parsley? What on Earth could he possibly use those nasty things for, besides knocking out Doxies?”

Narcissa smiled. “I believe he is working on some natural repellent for our project.” She said.

“Oh!” Hermione remembered. “Black Manor. How is that going?”

The blonde shrugged her shoulders. “A little more slowly than I would have liked, to be quite honest. I had hoped to have it ready by Christmas, but now it seems we will have to wait until after the New Year.”

Hermione simply nodded, unsure of what to say. The two women graded in silence for a few minutes – Hermione noticed Narcissa was grading some complicated theoretical work from an upper level class. Unable to help her curiosity, she squinted, trying to recognize something similar she had worked on in her years as a student. It was terribly hard to read upside down.

“Are you naturally this curious, Ms. Granger?” Narcissa said softly, not looking up from the papers
she worked on. Hermione blushed furiously. She started to blubber a hasty apology, but before she could the blonde looked up with a smile.

“Sorry.” Hermione finally muttered. Narcissa’s eyes were full of mirth.

“You can just ask.” She said simply.

“Again, I am terribly sorry” the brunette blabbered on. Narcissa chuckled good-naturedly.

“Ask.”

Hermione let out a breath she did not know she was holding.

“Sorry. Um, what is that you’re grading?”

Narcissa handed her one of the papers she had already graded.

“An assignment given to my seventh-year students” she explained. “They must research a potion ingredient and its properties, and hypothesize on a new utility for it. They must then prove it, after more research, in a practical test.” She shrugged once again. “I advised them to look for something simple, yet some of them insist on trying to rediscover more than the twelve uses of Dragon’s Blood.” She tutted.

Hermione smiled. “New utilities? Is that not what William White did in his first practical?”

Narcissa grinned openly, and Hermione could see a bit of pride in her expression.

“In a nutshell, yes. He had the right idea. However, this assignment is much more complex; it is one thing to substitute an ingredient for another of similar properties. It is quite another to devise new uses for a known ingredient.”

“Indeed.” Hermione agreed. “How do you expect them to do?”

“Oh, I doubt many, if any at all, will be entirely successful. This assignment is designed to teach them a lesson – they all read a potion recipe the same way they would a cake’s.” Narcissa murmured, clearly a bit annoyed. “There are intricacies to the study of Potions that most people dismiss.”

Hermione nodded, looking over the paper Narcissa gave her. The student had received good marks, and as far as she could tell, their reasoning for alternative uses of Wormwood seemed sound.

“How about yourself? What are you grading?” Narcissa asked, subtly tilting her silvery quill towards Hermione’s stack.

“Oh! Just some short essays from my first years’.” She said quickly.

“I see. And what topic would they be on?”

Hermione held in a nervous laugh. “They’re on the history and theory behind Animagi.” She all but whispered.

“Ah” Narcissa said softly, giving the brunette no sign she was thinking of Hermione’s previous invasion of privacy. “Animagi? Seems like a complex topic for a first-year class. We only covered Animagi briefly in fourth year, I believe.” She wondered.

The brunette nodded. “Ordinarily, I would agree with you, and yes, I cover it a bit more
extensively on fourth and fifth years respectively. However, I give my students a series of essays exploring the sub-branches of Transfiguration in their first year.” Hermione explained “We have covered Untransfiguration, Vanishment, and Conjuration in previous essays; Transformation usually takes a bit more time and research.”

“Oh, what an inspired idea. Students should know a bit about the different branches of Wizarding areas of study; I cannot count how many of my students think a Potions Master and an Apothecary are next to equivalent.” Narcissa sniffed.

Hermione laughed – the very idea had to be insulting.

“Yes, I agree. My students were not too keen on writing multiple essays, but they seem to be very interested in Animagi.” She said. Narcissa smirked once more.

“Yes, I agree. My students were not too keen on writing multiple essays, but they seem to be very interested in Animagi.” She said. Narcissa smirked once more.

“Of course they would be, it’s a fascinating thing” She said with an air of faux haughtiness. “Tell me, have you graded William White’s essay?” she asked.

Hermione was a bit taken aback at the question.

“Not yet, he is in the pile. Why?”

Narcissa had a wicked look on her face. “Tell me when you get to his. I am inclined to think it will be positively riveting.”

Hermione gave Narcissa an odd look, but felt inclined to return to her grading once the blonde did the same without another word. The pair carried on for quite a while in this fashion, with Hermione periodically stealing a glance or two at the elegant witch sitting across from her. She once again noticed how concentrated Narcissa was on the task at hand – her entire attention seemed devoted to the papers in front of her. Her blue eyes scanned the pages quickly and efficiently. They continued in silence; the only sound in the room came from the crackling fire and the scratching of the witches’ quills.

It was by chance that Hermione picked William White’s essay from the pile – she had not organized this batch alphabetically due to her little conflict-resolution session earlier, so it came sooner than she expected. She held in a laugh as she read it.

“He interviewed you.” She said suddenly, turning Narcissa’s attention to her. The other witch smiled, at once understanding what Hermione meant.

“Yes, I must say he was very thorough in his research.” She quipped.

Hermione smiled. She liked it when students went a step further in their assignments. William had referred not only to the usual texts, but to the actual Ministry Registry and additional textbooks Hermione had not mentioned. He had even quoted an article from Minerva McGonagall herself, published decades before on Transfiguration Today. As well, of course, as his own Head of House – a little footnote acknowledged her as one of his primary sources.

“He certainly appears to be. He was the only one to feature the Animagus Registry in his paper, even though I directed them all to it.” Hermione said. She looked up at Narcissa. “I even looked at it, for the first time in years – I had never needed to before, since Minerva usually gives demonstrations. I always mentioned it, but hadn’t looked at it in… forever.” She admitted guiltily.

Narcissa chuckled. “In truth, there isn’t much need. There are not many who become Animagi – at least registered ones. I was the only addition since before the War.” She explained. It was true – the Registry had been quite a static compilation since its inception. No more than a couple of
witches or wizards made it to the list every few decades.

“You must have registered immediately after the War – you are still named as Narcissa Malfoy.” Hermione commented off-handedly.

Narcissa’s brows furrowed.

“And that was my mistake. I wonder if I could have that changed. I was just so eager to do it, I didn’t even think. The divorce proceedings would start shortly after, I should have waited.”

Hermione frowned. “How did you even manage it so soon? It can take years to get the opportunity finalize the incantation.”

Narcissa nodded. “It was a combination of preparation, planning, and sheer dumb luck. I had kept mandrakes in my garden at Malfoy Manor, specifically for that purpose. After only three months, I was in France with Draco, and there was a storm perfect for the incantation. I honestly did not think it would work.”

“How did it feel?” Hermione could not help but ask.

Narcissa put down her quill, lacing her fingers onto her lap.

“Terrifying. Unsettling. Exhilarating.” She murmured. “The first transformation was… I don’t think I have the words to explain the feeling. To have your body change so instantly, but to still have it be yours entirely… It is an indescribable feeling.” She finished, her eyes distant.

“I always wondered – is your Patronus the same as your Animagus form? That seems to be the case for most people I’ve known, but there’s not much research on the subject, and I know that a Patronus can change under certain circumstances.” Hermione asked, her brain already in research mode.

Narcissa looked embarrassed.

“I assume so, though I would not know. I…” she stammered, which was unlike her poised nature. “I have never been able to produce a corporeal Patronus.” She admitted, a slight flush of embarrassment tinged her cheeks.

Hermione opened and closed her mouth, unable to contain her surprise. Her shock obviously did not help ease the sudden tension at all, as Narcissa hastily went back to grading her papers, moving her quill vigorously in her discomfiture.

Hermione wanted to kick herself for her lack of tact, but she couldn’t help it. A Patronus was a complicated charm, sure enough – many witches and wizards had trouble with it, it wasn’t a rare occurrence – but Harry had managed it in his third year. If Narcissa was an accomplished Occlumens – something Harry could never do, Hermione couldn’t help her shock at learning the witch had never produced a corporeal Patronus. Clearly the witch was skilled enough; it made Hermione wonder what held her back.

“I do wonder” Hermione blabbed on, unsure of what to say to remedy the situation. “Because if that is the case, if I ever decided to become an Animagus, I would likely turn into an otter.” She smiled at Narcissa. “Not very convenient unless I’m close to a body of water.” She joked.

Thankfully her pathetic attempt at humor seemed to have the desired effect. Narcissa stopped writing and chuckled.
“I don’t think you’d have too many options; here the Giant Squid would probably mistake you for dinner.” She said.

Hermione laughed, and the two witches went back to grading. Hermione was still occasionally stealing glances to the older witch – something about her practiced elegance and poise was oddly enticing to her. It compelled her to speak, but the brunette wasn’t sure what to say, so she remained silent.

The two were interrupted by some tapping at the nearest window. Hermione looked up to see the biggest, most angry-looking owl she had ever seen tapping at the glass with its mighty beak.

“Merlin’s beard, that bird is massive!” She yelped as Narcissa stood up with a grin, clearly recognizing the gigantic bird.

“Draco’s” she said simply. “He’s always been dramatic.” She joked, letting the owl in. It perched itself, surprisingly gently, onto her arm, ruffling its golden feathers slightly. “Hello, Aurelius.” Hermione fought the urge to roll her eyes. Of course Draco Malfoy would name his owl something dumb like Aurelius. Though, she supposed, she couldn’t quite judge – her own owl was named Athena. Still, Aurelius was so… Draco.

The owl let Narcissa take the letter attached to its leg, accepting a few pats on the head. As soon as it had arrived, it departed in a flurry of gold.

Narcissa opened the letter then and there. Hermione gave the woman some privacy, returning to her grading. It wasn’t long, however, until she heard the blonde’s exclamation.

“Oh, by Salazar’s slimy snake!”

The brunette quickly looked up at the uncharacteristic expletive coming from the other witch. Narcissa had a shocked look on her face; she was rattled enough to sink rather inelegantly onto her chair. She pinched the bridge of her nose and let out a heavy sigh, Hermione was at once inexplicably concerned.

“Narcissa?” she said, clearly startling the blonde – a pair of blue eyes snapped up to meet her own, no less shocked. “Is everything alright?”

“Yes, yes.” Narcissa said, shaking her head in disbelief. “Draco has news.” She added, a smile discreetly tugging at her lips.

“Good news, I would hope?” Hermione prodded.

“Yes.” The blonde breathed out. “It seems I’m to be a grandmother once again. Astoria is expecting.” She said.

Hermione muttered something unintelligible under her breath. Narcissa looked at her oddly.

“Come again?”

Hermione shook her head. “Must be something in the water. You might as well know; the official public announcements are coming in tomorrow – Harry and Ron are expecting. I mean, their respective partners are expecting.” She rambled.

Narcissa’s eyes widened.

“Good Godric. Babies everywhere.” She sighed, sinking even further in her chair and massaging
her temples. It was quite a strange contrast to the perfectly poised woman Hermione had seen earlier.

“Pardon me, but you don’t look particularly thrilled at this news.” She said, unsure if she was overstepping.

Narcissa let out a bitter chuckle.

“I suppose it’s selfish” she said, running her delicate fingers over the words on the page. Hermione was instantly brought back to the moment when those same fingers traced over her cursed wound; her arm erupted in goosebumps at the memory. “I love my grandson to death, of course. But he… Well, being called a grandmother, it just… It makes me feel so terribly old.” She confessed in a hoarse whisper.

Hermione was stunned. She assumed it was only logical Narcissa had insecurities and doubts – she doubted anyone who had lived a life like hers would be free from them. But to discover that Narcissa Black feared aging, of all things? The woman hadn’t aged a day since the first time Hermione met her. If anything, she looked younger, without the pressures of her marriage, a war, and having the Dark Lord himself in her home.

“I wouldn’t worry” Hermione said, trying to lighten the mood. “You look beautiful, Narcissa; no one would think you’re a grandmother.” She finished, turning back to her papers before her flush caught up to her cheeks. She still noticed Narcissa’s widening eyes.

“Thank you, M… Thank you, Hermione.” Narcissa replied softly. Hermione ignored the strange shiver the mellow drawl caused to run down her back.

The two looked at each other for a few moments before Narcissa cleared her throat.

“So it seems that Potter and Draco are on their way for child number two… And Mr. Weasley on his first. How about you, Ms. Granger?” Narcissa asked off-handedly.

Hermione choked in her own saliva, strained coughs bubbling out of her throat.

“How about you?” she asked reflexively.

The Potions professor was clearly startled.
“Me? What do you mean?”

“Have you got someone? After the War and the divorce, have you… been with anyone?” Hermione asked.

Narcissa shook her head, a bit too quickly from Hermione’s perspective.

“Oh, goodness, no” she almost hissed, a flush creeping up her chest and neck all the way up to her cheeks. “I am much too old for all of that” she waved her hand vaguely. Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Merlin, you talk as if you were some wrinkly old lady – which you are not. Even if you were, you could still go out and get some. There’s no reason for a gorgeous woman like you to be alone.” Hermione retorted. Narcissa looked at her as if she had grown a third head. “What?” the brunette shot back.

“Gorgeous?” Narcissa asked, a knowing smirk tugging at her lips.

Hermione felt the rush of blood flood her cheeks again. First ‘beautiful,’ then ‘gorgeous’? Had she lost all sense of propriety? Damn her mouth!

“Uh… Objectively speaking, you are, uuh, a very attractive woman.” Hermione tried in vain to recover.

Narcissa merely laughed.

“Thank you, Ms. Granger. But I think that I, much like yourself, am married to my work, so to speak.” She said, thankfully letting the matter drop. Hermione had no clue why she turned into a babbling idiot with no filter between brain and mouth whenever she was around Narcissa. She chalked it up to the blonde’s commanding presence and elegance – she found it all quite intimidating.

The hours ticked by as the two women turned back to their grading. Hermione was quite happy with the results from her first-year class. It wasn’t a hard assignment, and the majority of students had been thoughtful enough to include an extra reference or two for their research. Overall, she couldn’t complain.

As she glanced at Narcissa every now and then, she could tell the blonde grew frustrated with the occasional assignment – she would write notes upon the margins of the parchment in a neat, elegant cursive script. After one essay that left the other professor particularly annoyed, Hermione interrupted.

“Bad yield?” she tried to joke. Narcissa blessedly smiled.

“Quite.” She scoffed in annoyance. “I believe Horace was a bit lenient when he accepted a few students to his NEWT-level class.” She said, tossing the essay she had just graded onto a pile. “No doubt their prominent last names earned them a spot.”

That last part was so softly whispered Hermione wondered if Narcissa meant to say it at all. Still, she responded to it.

“Ah! The infamous Slug Club. I think I already know which students you mean.” She said, with a roll of her eyes.

Narcissa laughed. “Indeed. After Potions, rubbing elbows was Horace’s main specialty. Merlin knows he could scarcely contain his excitement when there were four Blacks under these
enchanted ceilings; I thought he’d have an aneurysm.”

Hermione let out a guffaw of laughter. That sounded like Slughorn.

“Four?” she asked.

“Yes. My sisters and I, and then my cousin Sirius. Regulus came shortly after Bellatrix graduated. I suppose at that time, Blacks were in plentiful supply.” She said wryly.

Hermione nodded. “Sirius never truly liked Potions – or Slughorn, for that matter.” The other witch nodded.

“His little parties for ‘extraordinary’ students… What pitiful nightmares they were” Narcissa mused aloud. “He could justify Bella and I as good students in his disciplines, but Andromeda…” she laughed. “I think she nearly fainted once he announced he had added her to his NEWT class, since she had ‘obviously forgotten’. Dromie was always terrible in Potions.”

Hermione laughed. Part of her was desperate to ask about Andromeda – did Narcissa see her sister now? Andromeda never spoke of her.

“Potions was never my best area either” Hermione said. “Mind you, I got excellent grades, but I never really enjoyed it as much as my other subjects.”

Narcissa smiled. “Yes, the surprise of the Brightest Witch of her Age not being entirely perfect in every discipline. The horror!” she joked. She then looked earnestly at Hermione. “What were your favorite subjects at Hogwarts?”

Hermione beamed. This she could talk about for hours on end.

“Well, Transfiguration – clearly – was always one of my favorites. Charms is up there as well. Herbology, too. But I think… I think Runes and Arithmancy will always have a special place in my heart. How about you?”

“As you may expect, Potions was my calling. Otherwise, I enjoyed Herbology and Transfiguration. Astronomy was also an old favorite.” Narcissa then cocked an eyebrow at Hermione. “Runes and Arithmancy? Complicated subjects, even in my day. It is unusual for someone to like them so much.”

Hermione shrugged.

“Yes, I know. I can’t help but find them fascinating. It was lucky I was so good at them too; they were quite handy at my job in the Ministry.” She explained, thinking back. Damn helpful, they were – Runes and Arithmancy provided her with the tools to deconstruct and dissect even the oldest of spells and enchantments. In her mind, the two disciplines intertwined likely showcased the history of all magic on Earth.

“How so?” Narcissa asked.

“Oh, I was a Wards Specialist for the DMLE. Runes allowed me to develop counter-charms for ancient wards created centuries before our modern warding charms; Arithmancy helped me dissect and reassemble spells and enchantments. Tricky disciplines, but incredibly useful.” Hermione clarified.

“Ah, I remember now. Draco mentioned something along those lines; you broke down the ancient wards in the Mulciber Estate while you worked with him, no?” Narcissa questioned.
“Yes” the brunette confirmed, a bit surprised. “I’ve worked with many types of wards over the years, from simple defensive charms to centennial Blood-Wards.”

Narcissa looked intrigued.

“If I may be so bold, Ms. Granger… Would you be willing to help me in my project with Mr. Longbottom?” she asked. Hermione raised an eyebrow.

“With warding charms?” she pondered a moment. “I don’t see why not. Are there wards you need help with at Black Manor?”

“Yes” Narcissa began. “I am not sure if you know, but my family is notorious not only for it Toujours Pur motto and belief, but for our infamous Blood Wards. The family’s main estate and its grounds are as old as Merlin himself, and thus, so are its wards. Mr. Longbottom and I want to open the manor as a Wizarding Mental Wellness Ward; however, such a thing is impossible until all of its more unsavory wards are torn down one by one.

Hermione nodded, her eagerness for such a project clearly showing. The Black Family’s wards were all but legendary – mentions of wards as old as Wizarding Britain itself were scattered through her many Runes textbooks. The family had been using magic to safeguard themselves – and keep undesirables out – long before the advent of the wand. Narcissa regarded her pensively.

“Do be forewarned, Ms. Granger, the wards in question may be beyond even your expertise.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes, not liking to have her abilities questioned before she even gave the thing a shot.

“I think I should determine that for myself, Ms. Black.” She said, as evenly as possible.

Narcissa stood, glancing at the clock.

“It is not too late” she said. “Would you care for a short trip?” she asked, extending her arm and pulling her polished wand from within her robes.

Hermione stood without a word, her gaze never wavering Narcissa’s. She grasped the woman’s offered hand for what had to be Side-Along Apparition.

“Keep in mind, Ms. Granger, this will not be pleasant.”

And with a loud crack, they vanished.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I know one technically can't apparate to/from Hogwarts, but roll with it for the sake of my dramatics. Maybe I'll add in an explanation later.
~Naralanis
Chapter 11

Apparition, in Hermione’s experience, had always been somewhat of a clumsy, uncomfortable business. Nevertheless, with time, the discomfort was easily forgotten, and the lack of balance that usually plagued novice practitioners was usually gone after a few months of practice. So, while it was not the most pleasant of experiences, it was usually hassle-free if done correctly.

Which is why she was so surprised by the intense wave of nausea that hit her as soon as she and Narcissa apparated on the grounds of Black Manor. To her absolute horror, she had immediately doubled-over in pain, vomiting right by Narcissa’s pristine shoes. She desperately wanted to apologize, but the nausea and subsequent headache made it impossible for her to say anything intelligible.

“Oh, dear.” Hermione heard the other witch say, worry lacing her voice. She felt the gentle tap of a wand right at the top of her head, and a sudden warmth seemed to drip from there over the rest of her body, stopping the vomiting and vanishing her headache.

Narcissa lowered to the ground to face Hermione. She produced a phial of lilac-colored powder from her robes and held it open right under the brunette’s nose.

“Come now, deep breath in.”

Hermione obliged, taking in a strong minty scent that instantly stopped her remaining nausea. Satisfied with the brunette’s state, Narcissa held out a hand to help her up.

“Whew!” Hermione exhaled, feeling much better, but still aware of a low, persistent buzzing in her head. “I’m sorry, I’m not usually such a mess after Apparition, I promise.” She said, embarrassed. Maybe she had become unfamiliar to Side-Along?

“I do not doubt your abilities, Ms. Granger. I am terribly sorry. What you just experienced were the very wards I would like your help with. They were designed to incapacitate any sort of person deemed undesirable to my kin.” Narcissa explained apologetically.

Hermione’s eyes widened. “That’s barbaric!”

Narcissa laughed bitterly. “Believe, me, that was nothing compared to what they used to be. According to the Black Library records, before the Ministry passed laws against it, those of Muggle birth, Squibs, and half-breeds were blinded and burnt alive simply by standing where you’re standing.” She put away the phial. “Now that is barbaric.”

Hermione could only shake her head in disbelief. Rejection Wards were complicated by nature, but most of them were created with the purpose to expel an intruder should they venture to the wrong place. Most often, they were designed to simply confuse and redirect. Never in her life had she encountered Rejection Wards designated for pure and unadulterated punishment and murder.

“Merlin. And the buzzing?” she asked, motioning vaguely towards her own head.

“You are still under the effect of the wards. Unfortunately, we have not been able to stop them; we can only treat the individual symptoms brought on by the Rejection Charms. It has been terribly cumbersome for staffing matters.” Narcissa clarified.

“Good Godric. And how long until it wears off?”
Narcissa looked sheepish. “About ten to fifteen minutes.”

Hermione’s mouth dropped open rather inelegantly. She had no words. “Are you telling me I’ll have to sniff some powder every ten to fifteen minutes to remain on the grounds?”

“In a fashion, yes. However, I do not recommend it; Armenian Rose Powder can be quite destructive to the nasal passages.” Narcissa stated matter-of-factly. Hermione threw her arms up in the air.

“How in Merlin’s name am I supposed to work on wards if I can’t even be here long enough to study them?”

“Ms. Granger, I told you these might be beyond your ability to help. However, there might be a way.” The blonde stated, looking even more sheepish. It was so odd, to see Narcissa so self-conscious and uncomfortable.

“You could have told me that first hand. What is it?” Hermione demanded, a bit annoyed.

“Well. You see… well…”

Hermione thought she had entered an alternate reality. She didn’t think she had ever heard the Potions Professor stutter or stammer in any way, or even stumble over words. Why on Earth was the eternally poised Narcissa so ill at ease?

“Narcissa?”

The blonde sighed, looking a bit defeated.

“There is one way that might render you ‘acceptable’ to these wards.” She started, carefully gauging the younger witch’s reaction. “Usually, the joining of two bloodlines qualifies.”


To her surprise, Narcissa let out genuine laughter.

“Oh, no, Ms. Granger. Nothing so dramatic.” She chuckled, to Hermione’s immense relief. She didn’t know why her brain immediately jumped to such preposterous conclusions at times when she definitely knew better; she chalked it up to Gryffindor impetuosity. “Think, Ms. Granger. In all your years of study in the Wizarding World, what are some conclusions you have drawn from us, conceited Purebloods?”

Hermione took a second to think, understanding dawning.

“You Purebloods are always so bloody literal.” She grunted. Narcissa grinned

“Apt wording on your part.” She said. Hermione smiled back.

“Allright, that shouldn’t be too difficult. It’s only a pinprick, right?”

Narcissa faltered, then raised an eyebrow. Hermione immediately understood.

“I guess, knowing your family, they’re looking to be a little more… what’s the word? Barbaric.” She said. “No offense” she added quickly.

“None taken; you are absolutely correct.” Narcissa regarded the younger witch pensively. “I
understand if you choose not to proceed.”

Hermione shook her head vigorously. “Are you joking? Slice ‘em up, what’s a bit of blood if this Mudblood can infiltrate the deepest of the Black defenses?” she said with a devilish grin. “Orion Black will be turning in his grave!”

Narcissa laughed. “Which Orion? My family had many.”

Hermione smirked. “All of them!”

“Very well.” Narcissa said, reaching into a delicate leather holster within her robes. She took out a small, beautifully intricate silver blade. Hermione recognized it as the kind used to chop and mince Potion ingredients, though she had never had such an ornate instrument herself. It made her want to roll her eyes a bit.

“Spanish steel” Narcissa said, smirking at the blushing Hermione who had been caught in her observations once again. “It cuts through skin like butter; it will bring you no pain.” She whispered.

The blonde reached for Hermione’s right arm – deliberately avoiding the one marred by her older sister – and gently rolled her sleeve. She took the brunette’s hand delicately between her own, and with a brief glance toward Hermione for confirmation, ran it softly over the young professor’s palm.

As Hermione watched her own blood slowly spring up and pool into her palm, she noted Narcissa had been exactly right; she had felt no more than a tickle as the blade cut her hand. The blonde rolled her own sleeve, and very quickly cut her palm the same way she had Hermione’s.

Hermione had seen more than her fair share of blood over the years, her own and other people’s. Still, there was some feeling inside of her, some tugging inside of her chest, that developed whenever she saw how red and vibrant anyone’s blood was. ‘Mudbloods,’ Purebloods, Squibs, house-elves, goblins, werewolves, it didn’t matter, it was all red – the great equalizer. And somehow, that red felt ugly and wrong flowing from Narcissa’s dainty hand; it felt dark and out of place ebbing from such a fair creature.

“Ready?” the woman asked, interrupting her thoughts. Hermione nodded.

Narcissa then took Hermione’s hand in hers, lacing their fingers together and holding on very tightly. Hermione felt more blood flowing out of their wounds at the pressure; they stung, but the pain was very mild. Their bloods dripped over their wrists, wetting the grass and the earth below.

Putting the knife away, the blonde raised her wand to their joined hands.

“Cruor Vinctum, Terra Vinctum.” She whispered.

The wand directed a bright purple light to their hands, and the mild, stinging pain Hermione felt turned into a burn. It hurt, but was not unbearable; what was strange was how it seemed to travel up her arm, through her shoulder blades and back, before settling on her chest. The sensation stayed here and pulsed strongly for a few moments. Hermione had never felt anything quite like it.

Then, in the blink of an eye, the light surrounding their hands vanished, and with it the burning Hermione felt. When she looked, their blood was gone, and she could tell her wound had knotted itself together – she could barely feel the scarring. Narcissa looked at her expectantly, pocketing her wand. Neither witch let go.
“How do you feel?” she asked, her voice a little more breathless than normal.

“Much better.” Hermione replied, pleased to note there was indeed no buzzing or any other symptom.

“Good, good.” Narcissa murmured weakly.

It was then Hermione noticed the blank and unfocused look on the other witch’s face. Narcissa’s grip on her hand suddenly faltered, and Hermione saw the blonde begin to sway backwards, clearly dizzy. Without a second to lose, Hermione swiftly launched herself forward.

She wrapped her arms around Narcissa’s waist just as the woman sunk to the ground. She held on tight as Narcissa’s arms flailed limply at her sides. Hermione was very surprised with how she felt – for someone with such an imposing presence, Narcissa felt very small and frail, so much so Hermione had no difficulty holding on and keeping her up.

“Narcissa? Narcissa, are you alright?”

Thankfully, the blonde’s fainting spell was brief. She blinked and reached an arm outward, holding onto Hermione’s shoulder. The young professor was hesitant to let go, even when Narcissa had regained her footing.

“You alright?” she repeated.

Narcissa nodded, brushing away a lock of blonde hair from her eyes. “Yes, thank you” she breathed out. “Vinctum Incantate is quite a physically taxing charm – I had read about it, but never performed it myself.”

Hermione nodded back, interested by the information. There were several old bonding charms around – many of them used in weddings, which is why her earlier hasty assumption wasn’t completely absurd. She had read about similar charms designed to tie a bloodline to a piece of land; they were common amongst the nobility in olden times, but fell out of fashion just around the Industrial Revolution, so she had never actually seen one performed.

“How do you feel? Is the buzzing gone, completely?” Narcissa asked, stepping away. Hermione almost frowned; her arm felt cold and empty all of a sudden.

“Yup” she quipped. “I don’t feel anything anymore.”

“Splendid. I believe this will also give you access to the Black Family Library.” She laughed as Hermione’s eyes instantly lit up at the mention of a library. “You see, many of its tomes are cursed not to be touched by ‘undesirables.’ You, however, have been blood-bound to this land – they are safe for you to handle now.”

Hermione could not help the beaming grin that overcame her expression. Sod it, she was a bookworm and proud, and she would devour that library at her earliest convenience. She could only imagine the wealth of knowledge contained there, good and bad.

“Now, before we discuss the warding of this place, how about a short tour?” Narcissa asked.

“Would you like to see the fruits of our labors?”

Hermione smiled. “Yes!”

Narcissa gently grasped her shoulder, turning her around. “Then this is where we’ll start.”
Hermione forcefully kept her jaw shut in place, but it was hard. How she had not seen the massive construction she now faced was truly beyond her – but most likely the wards had redirected her vision. Before the two women stood a magnificent building, grander even than Malfoy Manor – truly a noble palace. It was erected in stone, with wrought iron gates surrounding the property. An impeccably maintained garden was adorned with sculptures and fountains, and a neat gravel pathway lead the two women to the ornate doors in front.

“Merlin’s soggy underpants!” Hermione breathed. Narcissa merely chuckled. As they walked, Hermione could distinguish the words onto an embellished golden plaque, surrounded by moving filigree. *Black Manor Wizarding Wellness Ward, a division of St. Mungo’s Hospital.*

The colossal doors creaked open as the two women approached. Hermione could at once see that the inside of the Manor was just as majestic as the outside. What had probably once been a grandiose entrance hall was now converted into a welcoming, though still greatly adorned lobby, with a seating area and circular, black marble information desk. A quick glance at a map of the manor – conveniently located by the information desk – had Hermione seeing stars.

“Godric’s girdles, this place is huge!” she yipped, taking a closer look. “And there are annexes??”

“Yes” Narcissa said. “Well, three that are in use – the old servant’s quarters, a hunter-house, and a guest house. There is also a barn up the West hill, a boat-house by the lake, and a small Quidditch pitch down the hill.” she explained, motioning vaguely where those edifices would be located on another map showcased by the desk.

“Merlin. I couldn’t even fathom what it would be like to grow up in a place like this.” Hermione wondered aloud.

“It had its memorable moments” Narcissa said cryptically. “In any case, I did not live here. We – myself, my sisters and cousins – would mostly come during summers. My grandparents maintained the place. Orion and Walburga, as you well know, lived primarily at Grimmauld Place. My own parents occupied another property, another townhouse in London, and that is where I grew up.”

Narcissa led Hermione through a very short tour of the main house – it was too big for a comprehensive exploration, but it was enough to stoke the brunette’s curiosity about many things. She was perplexed by the care and attention to detail Narcissa – and Neville, of course – had dedicated to renovating the place. An entire wing of the house had been outfitted with several rooms and living areas for patients – those were all primed and ready, with beds, bathrooms, and all other necessities. Many places had designated functions, much like St. Mungo’s itself.

Everything was immaculate; Narcissa had even gone so far as to design areas for residents to interact – the back yard had a small pond, there were small libraries scattered around the house, as well as sitting rooms and tearooms and game rooms. Hermione was incredibly impressed.

“And through there” Narcissa motioned towards a door at one point “are – well, were the dungeons. They have been converted into research labs; mostly for medicinal Potions. Upstairs, in the attic, we have a small Astronomy lab, mostly for the study of the moon for our Lycanthrope Readjustment Range.” Hermione turned to the other witch quickly. “And through the other wing…”

“Excuse me, come again?” Hermione interrupted, too floored by the information Narcissa had just imparted.

“I beg your pardon?”
"Lycanthrope Readjustment Range?" the brunette repeated, eyes wide. "You plan to treat werewolves?" she could not contain the awe in her voice. Despite a few legislative efforts, werewolves were still seen as scum by most of Wizarding Society. St. Mungo’s often refused to treat them for self-sustained injuries, and most were considered incontrollable beasts. She knew Narcissa did not subscribe to her family’s old Pureblooded ideals any longer, but she had a hard time believing the witch would go as far as to shake off the general distaste for werewolves.

To her credit, Narcissa seemed to understand where Hermione was coming from.

"Your shock does not surprise me. I will admit, I am not too thrilled at the idea. But my own blood saw fit to marry one; I can concede that there is at least more to be understood from werewolves.” She sighed. “It is a difficult notion for me to accept, I won’t deny that. However,” she hesitantly grasped Hermione’s left arm, almost unconsciously tracing the scar beneath the sleeve. “If I have understood things I thought impossible before, I must try to keep an open mind. That is all I can do.”

Hermione was bewildered. Was Narcissa saying that accepting Muggleborns had opened her mind to accepting more people – because that was what werewolves were, every night of the month except for one – that she would have thought scum otherwise? More than that, had she just acknowledged Nymphadora Tonks – and consequently her husband and son – as truly belonging to her family? She contained the impulse to shake her head. Everything had gone topsy-turvy.

She had not noticed the long period of time during which Narcissa held her arm; she only noted its absence once the other witch dropped it without another word. She looked intently at the woman’s eyes, their blue clouded by shimmering grey.

“Come with me, I believe you would like to see this.” Narcissa said. Hermione was quick to follow.

They walked through a gravel path that wound down into a small road surrounded by trees and thick shrubbery. Hermione imagined it would look beautiful during the morning light, but thus far it looked quite eerie with nothing but Narcissa’s wand illuminating their path. She had no idea how long they walked, but sensed that something, somehow, was making their walk much faster than normal – they seemed to have covered quite a long distance in a matter of minutes. Before long, she could make the outline of another building, much smaller though still impressive. This edifice had no gates surrounding it, but before they even approached, she could feel the magic of strong containment wards coming off in waves; its energy vibrated so vigorously it even distorted the view of the trees beyond.

Narcissa stopped a few feet from the house. Hermione gazed at the woman, puzzled.

“This used to be the hunting house years ago. There are about twenty acres of forestry beyond.” She explained. In a smooth movement, the light of her wand intensified, and she directed it at a plaque Hermione had not noticed at first. It read, in big, bold silver letters: R. J. Lupin Lycanthrope Readjustment Range.

Hermione could not contain her gasp at what she saw and what it meant. She quickly put all the pieces together: the hunting house and the extremely strong containment wards she just saw. Demarcating and separating twenty acres of woodlands. And, to top off this strange turn of events, Narcissa had memorialized Remus Lupin.

“You are treating werewolves. You’re letting them roam free?” She asked, flabbergasted. Narcissa gave an elegant shoulder shrug – something Hermione hadn’t thought possible.
“As free as it is safe for everyone else.” The witch explained. “The hunting house has been remodeled to provide safe lodging for up to fifteen werewolves at any given time before the full moon. Anti-werewolf wards delineate the acreage beyond the house; they cannot go through while they are transformed.”

“Why?” Hermione could not help but ask.

“As I’m sure you’re aware, most werewolves who take the necessary precautions before the full moon find themselves badly injured in its aftermath. This is not only due to the punishing physical exertion of a transformation, but also due to the conditions in which it takes place. Cellars, small locked cells – the wolf needs more space to roam and…”

“No” Hermione interrupted. “I mean, why? Why do this at all? Why Lupin?” she interjected, pointing towards the plaque bearing the name of her fallen friend and mentor, one of many. Narcissa looked uncomfortable.

“Ms. Granger, I am no paragon of integrity or generosity. Some would say I am precisely the opposite. I would be lying if I said I did not have extreme reservations about this – about all of it. But as I’ve said, there is always more to be understood. This” she gestured towards the house and towards the path they had taken there. “All of this is an attempt to understand several things – to understand and atone, even if the latter may never come to fruition.”

“As for why Lupin” she sighed. “He was well-loved by many. A war hero, not to mention my kin of sorts. If there is such a thing as a good example of a werewolf, Remus Lupin was it. I knew him in school, you know.” Hermione looked like she was about to interject, but Narcissa waved her off. “Make no mistake, Ms. Granger – I despised him them. Not because of his… condition – I was unaware of it at the time – but because of his House and allegiance to one of my best friend’s tormentors. Not to mention, his mother was a Muggle. That was just as shameful as being a werewolf in my book.”

Hermione nodded in understanding, as well as a bit of sadness. Interacting with Narcissa as she was now, it became harder and harder to remember what sort of views she subscribed to not too long ago. The older witch had noticed her now-wistful demeanor, for she approached, a hand gently lifting the brunette’s head upwards.

“My apologies. I can’t help but be aware that talk of such times brings you sorrow. Regrettably, I cannot change the past.” She whispered softly, her eyes gleaming in the moonlight. “I was never someone in the wrong place at the wrong time. All those horrible things – about you, about Lupin, the Pureblood agenda – I followed not because of circumstance, but because I believed.”

Hermione sighed, her hand moving up to hold onto Narcissa’s wrist. “But you don’t anymore.” She hadn’t phrased it as a question, yet it hung in the air.

“No.” Narcissa smiled sadly. “Not anymore.”

“Then that’s good enough for me.” Hermione declared, straightening her posture. Somehow their close proximity had gone unnoticed, but now she was keenly aware of it; it was almost as if that odd buzzing had returned, but instead of lodging itself in her head, it had spread to her entire body. It was not unpleasant.

Narcissa said nothing further; she moved to walk away from the hunting house. Hermione followed silently.

They were almost back at the main house once Narcissa spoke again.
“You are welcome to return here at your leisure, even if you decide not to work on our warding issues. It is late, but I would like to show you Black Library some other time.”

Without meaning to, Hermione let out a disappointed yelp. “Ah! The library! I can’t believe I didn’t see it!!”

Narcissa let out peals of laughter at the brunette’s sudden outburst. Hermione reddened, but pushed onward. “But I would love to work on the wards.” She said, happy with Narcissa’s surprised expression. Did the witch truly think Hermione Granger would back down from such a challenge? She was already vibrating with excitement. “I can’t make any promises, of course, but I would like to take a whack at it.”

Narcissa smiled. “Very well. You are welcome to use all resources at the Black Library – they are at your disposal. We can discuss plans more thoroughly some other time. I think it is time to return to the castle.”

Hermione nodded in agreement. She had no idea how long they had been out, but it was bound to be late. Without a word, she offered her arm to Narcissa this time, taking out her wand in preparation. The other witch took it with a smile.

With a pop, they disappeared.

And with another, they apparated right in the middle of a commotion. Several professors were in the teacher’s lounge; before they could even right themselves, Neville ran towards the two witches.

“Thank Merlin you’re back! There’s been an incident.” He huffed, his face red.


“It’s Mr. William White.” Flitwick said from behind, making the two witches turn quickly and look down. “He’s been attacked – he’s in the Hospital Wing!”
Chapter 12

Hermione and Narcissa had all but run to the castle’s Medical Wing. To the brunette’s unending dismay, Madame Pomfrey only let Narcissa in – saying she had priority as William White’s head of House. The other witch had given her an odd look, but followed the Matron to see the young boy.

Which is how Hermione found herself impatiently pacing by the infirmary doors. Hermione felt betrayed, but also slightly validated – she knew something would happen. She had called it, and everyone had ignored her worries.

Neville had stopped by a few minutes after Narcissa went in, updating her in what had transpired – as far as he knew. Word was there had been some kind of scuffle between a few Gryffindors and Slytherins, and a duel broke out. A few other students had been caught in the middle, he said, among them William White and Spencer Wyndham from Slytherin, as well as Stuart Davies from Gryffindor, which had Hermione shocked. Davies did not seem the kind to be involved in senseless dueling in the castle corridors.

“Well” Neville had said “he was with his brother Edgar. He was one of a few of the older Slytherin students who apparently started the whole thing. My guess is he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Stuart and Spencer had already been discharged from the Infirmary with naught but a few bruises – William had caught the brunt of the spells, it seemed. Hermione seethed as she thought about him being specifically targeted, but Neville had told her otherwise.

His reasoning was that other students had undoubtedly participated, but had not been caught in time by Mr. Filch. The caretaker guessed the fight had broken out between at least five or six other students, all from upper-levels. The young first-years had not been left behind.

The idea did not make Hermione feel any better.

Narcissa followed Madame Pomfrey to one of the infirmary beds covered by a screen, her mind going a mile a minute. As they walked, the Matron filled her in on what had happened – the Potions professor was dismayed to think of her House's role in the scuffle, but she could not say she was in the least bit surprised.

William was quite startled to see his Head of House suddenly appear, so much so he drooled out most of the chicken broth he was drinking. Despite the boy’s embarrassment, Narcissa was quite glad to see he was not hurt badly.

“P-professor Black!” He gasped, wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his hospital gown.

“Hello, Mr. White.” Narcissa said, her tone gentle. William reminded her of a young Draco at times, before her son found his self-confidence. “How are you this evening?” she asked, noting the discolored patches of yellow all over his face, which indicated heavy bruising in the process of healing.
The boy gave her a crooked, embarrassed smile that looked more like a grimace.

“Not too bad, Professor. Madam’s Bruise Removal Paste is much better than mine.” He tried to joke. Narcissa was happy about his attempt at humor.

“I have no doubt, Mr. White, that your paste would have been just as good had you been able to use the proper ingredients.”

William preened a little with the praise. Narcissa smiled briefly before turning a sterner look to the boy.

“I don’t wish to distress you, William, but I would like to ask what happened.” She said. He swallowed.

“It was nothing, Professor.”

Being a mother, a Black, and a former Malfoy, Narcissa could sniff out a lie a mile away. She was even a bit disappointed William wasted such an atrociously bad lie on her.

“I’m afraid I cannot accept that answer, Mr. White. Something clearly happened to leave you here in this state. Madam Pomfrey tells me you sustained heavy bruising, a cracked rib, and I assume the sling you’re sporting isn’t there for aesthetic purposes.” She kept her tone even, but firm.

“Whoever did this must face the consequences; this can be grounds for expulsion.”

“No! Please, Professor, I don’t want to cause more trouble.” He begged, sitting up awkwardly against his pillows.

Narcissa immediately sensed there was more to this situation than met the eye. And she could also sense William might just be stubborn enough not to give any names. While it frustrated her in an administrative sense – she was still the Head of House, after all; it was her responsibility to take care of such matters – it also made her admire the boy’s Slytherin qualities; he obviously had some kind of plan to deal with what had just transpired. She only worried it might not be the best course of action – in the aforementioned administrative sense.

“We will table the discussion of names for now, Mr. White. Are you willing to at least tell me what happened?” she asked a little more gently. She would get to the bottom of this – quietly and efficiently, like any proud Slytherin.

William squirmed a bit in indecisiveness, but eventually relented.

“Spencer and I were coming down from Astronomy. We were chatting and distracted; before I knew it there were spells flying every which way” he breathed out. “I couldn’t even get my wand out.” He added, and Narcissa felt for the shame marring his features. “I wasn’t quick enough.”

Narcissa nodded and stepped closer, sitting on the chair by the side of his bed. She regarded the young boy pensively.

“From what I was told” she began in her gentlest tone “You and Mr. Wyndham were attacked by older students. Older, meaning they have had much more time and practice. Older, meaning they are nothing but cowards for attacking first-years such as you and Mr. Wyndham.” She reasoned, brushing a lock of his unruly blonde hair away from his shimmering green eyes. Narcissa could see very clearly, he still felt inadequate over his defenselessness. How Slytherin of him.

“William” she said firmly. “I am your Head of House. It is my job to deal with situations such as this.”
He nodded somberly, but offered no further comment. She sighed.

“Mr. Wyndham seemed to have no more than a few bruises, William, while you lie here in hospital. That makes us Professors think you were deliberately attacked. Do you know why?”

William nodded once again. “Because I am a Mudblood.”

Nothing could have prepared Narcissa for the shock she felt upon hearing the word coming from her most promising student. She felt something inside her break, and an intense shame washed over her entire being. How many times had she uttered that same word? To how many? She held his hand firmly in between her own.

“You are correct; however, I would like you to refrain from using that word to describe yourself, William. Take it from someone who’s uttered too many times in her lifetime – it does not and will not ever be true.”

William’s expression was somber. “But it’s true. I hear whispers in the corridors, my own Housemates talk about it when they think I can’t hear them.” He said, looking anywhere but at Narcissa. “I’m the first Muggleborn in Slytherin. I didn’t understand it at first, but I’ve read all about it. Salazar Slytherin wanted a particular kind of wizard in his House – I’m not wizard enough to be in it.” He finished sadly.

Only Narcissa’s extensive experience in hiding her true emotions could have prepared her for such a statement. She schooled her features before they had the chance to demonstrate her shock.

“Take it from someone who believed in the concept of blood purity once upon a time, William: none of it, absolutely none of it is true. If the Sorting Hat put you in my House, that is where you belong.” She said stoically.

“What if the Hat made a mistake?” he asked, his voice small.

“The Hat does not make mistakes.” Narcissa said simply, because wasn’t that the truth? “You are as Slytherin as any other pure or half-blooded witch or wizard in this noble House. With our history, perhaps you are just what we need.” She added that last part almost as an afterthought – it did not make it any less true. He looked up at her in confusion.

“What do you mean, Professor?”

Narcissa righted herself in her chair.

“I am sure you are already aware of the notoriety of Slytherin House. Through the years, we have accumulated more than our fair share of Dark witches and wizards. The late Tom Riddle – more well-known as Lord Voldemort – was from Slytherin. I’m not sure how much you know of the past Wizarding War, but he preached blood purity ideals – values that have become inherently associated to Slytherin.” She explained, wondering how much detail she should give the young man. She wondered how much he knew already, how much he had yet to discover.

“I’ve read a little about the war” he said shyly. “About Tom Riddle and his Death Eaters, and about Harry Potter.” He paused. “Professor Granger helped him defeat Voldemort.”

“Yes” Narcissa confirmed “she did. She is one of the bravest women the Wizarding World has known” She admitted.

“I have her Chocolate Frog cards – Spencer gave me some of his. She’s one of the only witches and wizards to have two runs of cards – one for the war effort, the other is for her dueling
championships.” He babbled.

Narcissa smiled. “Yes, Ms. Granger is truly an accomplished witch. She was called the Brightest Witch of her Age. Between us, I don’t think the war would have been won without her.” She smiled.

“She won an Order of Merlin, did she not?” he asked.

“Yes” Narcissa confirmed. “She, Mr. Potter, and Mr. Weasley, as well as a few others, were granted the honor.”

“And… so were you, Professor, right?”

Narcissa frowned in discomfort. Her Order of Merlin, Second Class was not something she liked to bring up. It was an honor most undeserved, and yet, Harry Potter himself, would not hear of anything else. To the former Malfoy matron’s eternal and continuous embarrassment, the Boy-Who-Lived touted her praises, commending her ‘unwavering courage’ to defy the Dark Lord when it mattered most.

Narcissa loathed to hear that crock of shit.

And so it was that she found herself with a prestigious award she did not feel she deserved. If only Mr. Potter knew the shame the title caused her. If he had been a Slytherin, she would have suspected an ulterior motive on his part; to plague her eternally with the guilt the award dug out of her chest every time it was merely mentioned. She hated it.

But of course, Harry Potter was not that kind of person. He was decent, and genuinely believed the woman who lied for her family and nothing else deserved the sodding Order of Merlin for her war effort. Narcissa could not comprehend what went through Potter’s mind -- she and everyone else knew her war efforts were primarily concentrated on the other bloody side. She had the Dark Lord in her own home – what kind of war hero was that?

She realized William looked at her with an odd expression.

“Yes” she murmured uncomfortably. “However, I do not like to talk about it.”

“Why not?”

Narcissa sighed. She did not owe this boy anything. He was her student, and nothing more. Plus, he was much too young to understand the intricacies of her upbringing, of the war, of everything that had plagued the Wizarding World before he found himself to be part of it.

“We can speak about this some other time, Mr. White. For now, I think you should rest. Do not think I have forgotten this incident – I want you to know my door is always open if you change your mind.” She said it a little more coolly than she intended, slowly standing up. William seemed to shrink back into his pillows.

“Yes, of course. My apologies, Professor, I didn’t mean to upset you. It’s just…” he stopped short. Narcissa quirked an eyebrow.

“It’s just what, Mr. White?”

“I’m sorry. It’s nothing.”

“Mr. White?”
The boy sighed. “People talk. I hear them in the Common Room, in the Great Hall. They look at me and they wonder.”

“What exactly do they wonder, William?”

“They wonder how a member of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black can stand having mud like me in Slytherin.” He whispered. “But you have the Order or Merlin for the War. I… I don’t understand.”

Narcissa sat back down, her eyes wide, searching for something in William’s emerald gaze.

“I don’t blame you” she rasped, facing the difficulty of explaining it to the boy. “Sometimes I barely understand it myself. I suppose you have read about my families? Both of them?” she said, because she knew if William had researched anything, he had most likely done it thoroughly. She was willing to bet he knew enough about the Blacks and the Malfoys to draw some unsavory conclusions that would, sadly, be correct. For the most part.


“Then you know how notorious they were, the Blacks specially, about blood purity. The very motto of my family embodies it.” She put a hand over his shoulder, not quite knowing how to phrase things. “I was raised to hate people such as yourself and Ms. Granger solely due to the circumstance of your births and my own. And for the longest time, I believed all the awful things my family taught me – I believed them so sincerely I followed my then-husband into the darkest circle of people I have ever known.”


“Yes. My sister, my husband, my best friend, and even my own son were branded for the Dark Lord’s cause.” She admitted aloud for the first time in years.

“But you weren’t, right, Professor?”

Narcissa let out a bitter chuckle and pulled away the sleeve of her left arm. William gazed at the unmarred skin.

“Not in that way, no. But in another way, William, I was branded for life.”

“But” he said, his voice gaining a bit of confidence. “You changed your mind, no? I’ve read clippings of newspapers; you lied to the Dark Lord. That’s why you got the Order of Merlin. Why?”

“William” Narcissa began, a little exasperated. “Such things are complicated, and truly I am not sure if I possess the ability to thoroughly explain them.” How could she explain that she watched idly by and looked on as a girl, a teenager, a mere child was tortured and maimed in her own house? How could she explain that witnessing that – and other things – had broken something inside her in a way she never thought possible?

“I’m sorry, Professor. I’m just trying to understand.”

Narcissa sighed. “I know, William. Trust me, it’s quite alright – it’s just a hard topic to talk about. In a way, Professor Granger helped me understand the error of my ways. I think it’s best to leave it at that.” As she spoke, she turned to look directly at the boy once more. “In fact, I think you and Ms. Granger have a lot in common. You know she’s not your Head of House, but she would understand many of your worries. She would be able to help you in ways I simply cannot.”
Narcissa was shocked at the vehemence of William’s shaking head. She was about to ask, but William gasped out his response.

“I can’t go to Professor Granger, Professor. She is amazing, and I read a lot about her, but I can’t get any help from her. Please, Professor, it’ll only make it worse. I stand out enough as it is, I can’t be seen going to the Gryffindor Hero of Muggleborns for help.” He said very quickly.

Narcissa understood, but was truly surprised with how intricately William himself seemed to understand his current predicament. “Ms. Granger worries about you, William.”

“I know.” He said “but I can’t just talk to her whenever I please. And at the beginning of the year… People in the Common Room were talking about the prefects she had following me – I know she put them up to it, Professor. I know she means well, but… I just can’t.” he finished in an exasperated tone.

Narcissa smiled inwardly. She had told Hermione about how Slytherins went differently about things. Thankfully the brunette had taken her advice after a few false-starts.

“She does mean well.” She agreed. “In fact, I spoke to her recently about your work in Transfiguration. We’re both very glad you’re doing better.”

William broke out in a grin. “I’m happy too. I happen to like Transfiguration – it’s quite difficult, but I enjoy it. Maybe once things are a little calmer at the House I’ll speak to her. I could use some help.”

“Well, why don’t you see her now?” Narcissa said, the idea just now occurring to her. After all, it was one thing for William to go trotting to Hermione’s office hours; it was quite another for a Professor to check on a student in the infirmary.

His eyes narrowed. “Now?”

“If you are up to it, of course.” She replied gently. He seemed to take a moment to think, but his grin returned after only a few seconds.

“Alright!”

The sudden opening of the Medical Wing’s heavy doors startled Hermione enough to make her miss a step in her pacing. She nearly faceplanted onto the floor, but managed to gather her bearings impressively quickly. Unfortunately, it seemed Narcissa had witnessed her slip – the blonde sported a raised eyebrow and a smirk tugged discreetly at her lips.

“Ms. Granger?”

“Yes?”

“Would you like a minute with Mr. White?” Narcissa asked politely. She chose not to mention the other witch’s look of surprise.

“Oh, yes, absolutely. Is he alright? Does he know who was responsible for the attack? Has he told
you?” Hermione shot off in a hurry.

Narcissa shook her head. Gryffindors. “I assure you, Mr. White is doing quite well – given the circumstances. He seems to know who was responsible, but is not willing to tell me. I believe he plans to deal with the situation on his own.”

Hermione looked bewildered.

“But why?! We must do something, we can’t just stand by!”

Narcissa stopped the woman from advancing with a gentle hand on her shoulder. Always so eager, those Gryffindors; the world was always so black-and-white.

“I agree, Ms. Granger. But Mr. White does not wish to tell us – we can only assume he has his reasons.” She said, giving the brunette a meaningful look. The other witch huffed in exasperation.

“This is going to be one of those underhanded Slytherin things, isn’t it? Where we don’t do a thing we’re supposed to do because another thing affects the thing we’ll do, so we’ll find another, more subversive way to do the thing?”

Narcissa could not contain her laughter. “Something like that.” She looked at the brunette, a question in her eyes. “Will you be alright with our ‘underhanded’ Slytherin ways?” she asked.

Hermione let out a breath. “Let me make this clear – I don’t like it. If William was in my House, I’d deal with this differently. I would never let a student deal with things on their own. But” she raised her hand when Narcissa looked to be on the verge of interrupting her. “He’s not a Gryffindor. You talked to him. I’ll refer judgement to you.”

Narcissa gave the other witch a nod of acknowledgement. Truth be told, she was somewhat surprised the other witch had been so graceful – earlier in the year Hermione would have fought tooth and nail for the chance to do things her way. She was glad the witch finally understood.

“Good. Now, I’ve asked William if he would like to speak with you for a little while. He will not go to you as any other student would – he understands he will look weak to his peers if he goes to the Gryffindor Golden Girl, champion of Muggleborns throughout the land” she said in jest. Hermione rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “But he admires you” she added more seriously, taking in the brunette’s look of surprise.

Without another word, Hermione let herself be led deeper into the Hospital Wing. As they turned beyond William’s privacy screen, she could not contain a smile upon noticing the boy had done his best to sit up straight and tame his mussed blonde hair so he could look a little more presentable.

“Hello, Mr. White. How are you feeling?” she asked.

He gave her a shy smile.

“Much better, Professor, thank you”

Hermione regarded William pensively for a few moments, and the boy returned her gaze in kind. She could tell he was gauging what she knew, what Narcissa had told her, and, most importantly, what she would ask of him. Luckily for him, there would be no more interrogation tonight. As much as she disagreed with her methods, Hermione would let Narcissa handle it.

“That’s good to hear. I’m not terribly fond of the Hospital Wing – I spent my fair share of time here as a student.”
“Whatever for, Professor?”

Hermione laughed. Where to even start? She was never injured due to Quidditch or other strenuous activities – the very thought of Hermione Jean Granger hopping onto a broom willingly made her want to cackle with the absurdity.

“Well, it seemed every year my friends and myself were destined to be Madam Pomfrey’s guests at least once or twice. I’m sure she tired of seeing our faces by my second or third year.”

Narcissa left William and Hermione talking in the Hospital Wing, excusing herself so that the two Muggleborns could perhaps bond. She was no fool – Hermione Granger would in time become a great asset to young William, but for now, he needed to mark his place in Slytherin house on his own terms.

She made her way to the Astronomy Tower, an old haunt of hers when she was a student. In her younger years, she had loved the discipline, and the Tower had become a favorite place to study, to think, and to ponder. The place was such a contrast to the Slytherin Common Room and her Potions classroom – it took her from the deepest corners of the castle to its highest peak. It was there where she had made a most unusual friend as a young girl, one who would undoubtedly prove to be tremendously useful in her quest to find out what young William White was hiding. She had yet to pay him a visit now that she had returned to her beloved castle as a Professor – it was long overdue.

The Tower, to her, had always been beautiful at night, even if it now carried an aura of deep sadness and loss. She shivered thinking of her son standing there, tasked with the impossible. She sent a silent thankful thought to Severus Snape for watching over him so diligently, Unbreakable Vow or not. She thought about Albus Dumbledore and his kind eyes.

The faint rattling of chains broke her away from her thoughts. Narcissa smiled.

“Lord Albert, I summon thee.” She spoke to the darkness.

The rattling stopped. A cold draft crept up the space, chilling her to the bone. It had been so long since she had felt such a sensation, she had to stop her teeth from clattering. A few paces in front of her, mist coming from nowhere seemed to slowly condense itself into a solid form.

There he stood, with his blank eyes and his gaunt countenance. The silvery shimmer of bloodstains in his robes glittered eerily in the moonlight, and the heavy-looking chains he carried swayed slightly, dangling from his arms. Narcissa’s smile widened.

The Bloody Baron stood tall, taller than Narcissa. She had not seen the specter since she left Hogwarts all those years ago. While most of the school feared the spirit due to his frightening appearance, an eleven-year-old Narcissa had been intrigued by his silent and restrained demeanor. She often saw or heard him clanking his chains and moaning in the Astronomy Tower, and didn’t mind the noise, as she was much too concentrated in her study of the skies above.

The Baron, on the other hand, seemed miffed to have an intruder so often. Of course, students always came and went through the Tower – they attended classes there, after all. But Narcissa was
always to be found there after hours, almost daily. To make matter worse, the child was relentlessly inquisitive.

“You seem to rattle around here quite often. Why is that?”

As usual, the Baron did not deign to respond. Young Narcissa wondered, as she gathered her Astronomy texts in a pile on the Tower floor, if anyone in the castle had ever heard him make a sound other than his ghoulish moans in the night.

“Everyone calls you The Bloody Baron. What is your name?” she tried. A response never came.

She kept asking every night she saw the ghost. He never responded to any of her questions, but she still babbled on as she mapped Ursa Major or studied the craters of the moon. Sometimes the Slytherin ghost would not even make an appearance, but Narcissa could still hear his chains rattling onto the stone floors. Every now and then, a chill overtook her, and she knew it was just the Baron taking a stroll.

Now, years later, he looked at her with his blank eyes as fondly as ghost could. Who knew all it took to open up the frightening Baron was a persistently impertinent child’s questions over the course of seven years? It was in her second year that she had found out his name – Bella had gotten her a book from the Restricted Section, an old tome detailing the first generations of students to attend Hogwarts. The Baron Albert Bruce Gregory had been a pupil of Salazar Slytherin himself.

“Lady Black, ‘tis my pleasure to welcome thee back to Hogwarts.” He said pleasantly. Though his appearance was ghastly, his voice was a smooth baritone that rung clearly within the walls of the tower; it was a voice so beautiful none would think it a ghost’s – especially considering his ghoulish moans.

“Thank you, sir. I am glad to be back.”

“‘How may I serve thee, Madam?’ he asked with a gallant bow. His manners reminded her of all the etiquette lessons she and her sisters had to attend, along with their cousins.

“My friend, I know you see all in our Noble House. You have encountered the Muggleborn student sorted this year, I presume?”

The Baron nodded solemnly.

“I has’t seen the young sir” he said gravely. “Roaming the halls alone whilst tongues of nobler birth whisper ill-thoughts.” His void eyes seemed to harden into stone. “Danger lurks wherever he goeth.”

Narcissa furrowed her brows. “There was an incident earlier today. William was attacked, but he does not wish to share the names of his attackers.”

The specter nodded in some kind of silent pondering. “A most cunning gent – a mind like thine very own.” He commented.

“My friend, did you see who attacked him?”

“I myself has’t not, Madam. But Peeves, the knave, spake just now of students crossing wands in the corridors.”

Narcissa smiled inwardly. What luck that the one ghost she’d befriend at Hogwarts just happened to be the one and only capable of reining in the blaster poltergeist.
“Will you find out, Lord Albert? Be my eyes when I cannot see. I wish for William to prove himself in Slytherin, but I cannot let such abuse go unchecked.”

“Thy wish is my command, my Lady. I shall watch over the young sir and for any villainy against him committed.”

“Thank you, my friend.” Narcissa said gratefully.

The Baron turned and began to disappear after another courteous bow. Narcissa felt a deep chill permeate through to her very bones. A clank was heard in the dark of night, and then the Baron’s voice, echoing distantly:

“Watch for him I shall, for soon the pale-faced moon shall look bloody upon the earth.”
Chapter 13

As Christmas approached, a bustle seemed to ingrain itself deep into the castle. Students were excited for some time off – as were their professors – and the general cheerfulness that usually accompanied the installation of Christmas decorations was palpable. The enchanted ceilings of the Great Hall seemed to show white snowy skies every day, much to Hermione’s delight. She loved winters at the castle.

But this Christmas, she looked forward to much more than the customary dinner and gift exchange at the Weasley’s. In true Hermione Granger fashion, she was looking forward to the time off she’d get to do what she always did best: research. This was to be a special kind of research though; she’d be bent over piles and piles of historical tomes finding all she could on the Black Family Wards with Narcissa.

After the commotion over William White’s attack had died down, Narcissa had made good on her promise and took Hermione to the Black Library. Hermione had scoffed in annoyance when Narcissa jokingly whispered “Please, do try to contain yourself, Ms. Granger,” before she opened the heavy oak doors.

Of course, once the older witch had opened them, Hermione’s eyes almost rolled into the back of her head – and there was nothing sarcastic about the gesture. In fact, it had been entirely involuntary. The place was unnaturally massive, with incredibly ornate floor-to-ceiling shelves as far as the eye could see. Huge windows let in a beautifully ethereal amount of light, and there were desks and comfy chairs elegantly arranged through the space. Plush rugs and exquisite artwork hung on the walls, completing the feel of the room.

“Good Godric!” she had exclaimed in awe. Narcissa had only chuckled smugly at her side.

The library rivalled Hogwarts’ in size. It certainly won over in terms of aesthetics; the entire place was absolutely gorgeous. Hermione felt like she had just stepped into a more somber version of the library in Beauty and the Beast. Not that she mentioned that to Narcissa – it was highly unlikely the blonde had ever even heard of such a movie.

In any case, Narcissa seemed very happy that Hermione liked the library – a bit relieved, as well, even more so when Hermione had tested a few of the more unsavory titles there contained. Thankfully, even some of the most expertly guarded books had no problem accepting Hermione’s touch, all the proof they needed in knowing that Narcissa’s Vinctum Incantate had worked exactly as it should.

As Hermione organized her materials after a class, she looked at the pale white line now adorning her palm. It was neat and clean, with no angry scarring, but she presumed it would never disappear. She found that she didn’t mind it. It was strange to think she had been marked by two of the Black sisters, but it gave her some inexplicable comfort to know how different the two scars were in their nature. Bellatrix had marked her in hatred, in disgust for her filth. Narcissa had then brought that supposed filth into the ‘purest’ of lines.

If that was not some kind of poetic justice, Hermione had no idea what was.

In a way, that thin white line on her palm comforted in her nightmares. They did not happen often, but when they did, her Mudblood scar would throb painfully – Narcissa’s spell mark would feel oddly soothing.
Narcissa had been a bit more reserved in the castle ever since William White’s incident. It puzzled the brunette somewhat, but the older witch truly opened up whenever they were back at Black Manor – which was at least two or three times a week these days. They had long, deep conversations by the candlelight illuminating their research, about family, Hogwarts, and the War. Touchy subjects, to be sure, but Hermione was glad they were navigating them so well.

She recalled one instance, when they sat together at Black Library. Narcissa was helping her pick a few tomes for her research on Blood Wards.

“Merlin, there must be a million books in here” she groaned under the weight of about six heavy volumes. Narcissa smiled, carrying a much more manageable pile in her arms.

“I’m not certain. There is a number somewhere – this was painstakingly catalogued – I just don’t know what that number is.” She said, carefully placing her load onto one of the desks. Hermione’s bounty was soon approaching thirty books, and the brunet could not be happier about it.

“I’m just saying; I might be the biggest bookworm to have ever lived, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many in one place!” she said truthfully. Was Narcissa blushing?

“Ms. Granger, I highly doubt that. You, such a worldly, travelled witch must have seen your fair share of beautiful libraries around the world.” The blonde countered bashfully.

“Not really.” Narcissa seemed surprised. “Not at all? Why, didn’t you travel around the world during your time in the Ministry?”

“I suppose” Hermione said, frowning at the realization that she had, indeed, travelled around the world for her job, and yet she had seen next to nothing of it. When she was in Paris, she was busy dismantling an international wizarding terrorist cell; in Rome, she and Draco had almost gotten themselves killed pursuing Death Eater sympathizers; in St. Petersburg she had been knocked unconscious by an errant curse, and so on and so forth. “I guess my job didn’t really give me time to see the sights.” She finished lamely.

“What a pity.” Narcissa whispered, separating the newly acquired tomes into neat piles onto the table. She sighed. “You must take some time someday, to see the great libraries of the world.” Her expression became dreamy. ”Lucius took me in our honeymoon – Coimbra, Vienna, Paris... The oldest, most magnificent libraries, Wizarding and Muggle alike. He knew how much I loved books."

Hermione hoped she had contained her expression of surprise, but it was in vain – once again, it was as if Narcissa had read her mind.

"His care for me surprises you.” The blonde said evenly. It wasn't a question.

"I can't say that it doesn't." Hermione confessed, and wasn't that the truth? Ever since she had seen Narcissa’s pictures – her wedding, her pregnancy, she and Lucius dancing happily in the garden – she had found it difficult to understand the true nature of Pureblooded relationships. "I thought your marriage had been arranged?"

Narcissa nodded, neatly arranging her pile of books so it stood perfectly straight onto the desk. "Indeed, it was. " She commented flatly.

"Then... why did you seem so happy?” Hermione asked before she could think better of it. The blonde's features immediately darkened, causing the younger witch to backtrack.
"My apologies. It seems my nosy Gryffindor nature still gets the best of me at times." Hermione hissed out, mentally kicking herself.

"Oh, don't trouble yourself, Ms. Granger." Narcissa said. "I don't expect you to understand. I assume the nature of marriage is quite different for... for people of your lineage." She finished awkwardly, and Hermione smiled.

"Yes and no" she explained, drawing a confused look from the older witch. "In ancient times, the nobility often arranged marriages, you know, to keep the power and the prestige in the family. Even nowadays, some Muggle cultures practice arranged marriages, but I assume Pureblooded marriages are more closely related to the former."

Narcissa quirked an eyebrow. "Yes, I suppose. It is not totally unheard of, you know, for love to blossom out of arranged marriages." She commented. Hermione nodded in understanding.

"I suppose." The brunette agreed.

"That, of course, was not quite what happened to me and Lucius. Our marriage had my mother livid." Narcissa said, a hint of amusement in her tone.

"Excuse me? I thought your union was arranged?"

"Oh, it was. But the history behind it is quite complicated – you see, when my mother was young, she had promised to Abraxas Malfoy." The blonde clarified.

Hermione thought her chin would hit the floor. She only registered Narcissa's soft hand as the blonde gently pushed her mouth shut with a laugh.

"I know, quite unexpected. But yes, they were once betrothed, and the legend goes my mother was truly infatuated with him... So once he married some Half-Blood from France, you understand how she came to despise the Malfoy family."

"But I thought... I thought Pureblooded unions for uh... families of your caliber were often arranged from birth?"

Narcissa nodded. "That is true. But think of it as a financial or political arrangement. Times change, and so do needs and preferences. There is little the groom or bride-to-be can do to change their situation – their respective families, parents specifically, hold all that power."

Hermione took a few moments thinking about what Narcissa had just revealed. What a different world it would have been, if Druella had married Abraxas. Draco wouldn't exist. The Black Sisters, even.

"It's funny" Narcissa interrupted, an odd smile on her face. "I wonder, had my mother married Abraxas, if the Malfoy streak would have been broken."

Hermione quirked an eyebrow. "Streak?"

"My father was always disappointed Druella never gave him any sons." Narcissa said matter-of-factly. "I wonder if that would have been the same with Abraxas – the Malfoy firstborn has always been a male. What if Lucius had been... Lucia?"

The sudden thought of a female with Lucius Malfoy's indomitable sneer was enough to bring forth a rather inelegant snort of laughter. It was enough to make the former Malfoy matriarch let out peals of laughter herself, and soon the two women were practically wheezing with the hilarity of
the thought.

"In any case" Narcissa continued, wiping a tear of laughter from her eye "She was staunchly against my marriage to Lucius. But my father, of course, had the final say. Not that I minded – Lucius and I had always had a certain fondness for each other."

"I wonder who you'd have married, if not Lucius." Hermione said. Narcissa gave her an odd look, which led the brunette to babble on. "I mean, surely there must have been men knocking down your door. Your beauty has always been legendary at Hogwarts and..." She practically clicked her mouth closed as a flush furiously overcame her features.

"I suppose" the blonde said with a knowing smirk, obviously relishing in the younger witch's embarrassment. "There were always others waiting in the sidelines. Others were certainly considered. Rabastan, for example, was one – he was meant to marry Andromeda, you know?" She finished sadly.

Hermione's eyes widened. "But... Andromeda had already run off with Ted Tonks?"

"Yes" Narcissa confirmed, suddenly playing with one of the ornate rings she adorned, her discomfort uncharacteristically evident. "She and Ted ran off before she started her seventh year. They married that summer."

A heavy silence descended upon the two women. While they had been able to talk about almost anything in their little research rendezvous, Hermione was quick to ascertain Andromeda was off-limits. Which was very strange, in her opinion – Narcissa had opened up about so many deep, dark secrets from her past, why could she not speak of her last living relative?

Narcissa's discomfort did not sit well with Hermione. With that in mind, the brunette decided to switch gears – another Muggle expression she'd have to explain some time.

"Rabastan, huh?" She said, a look of feigned disgust upon her face. "You could do better."

Narcissa smiled, evidently grateful for Hermione's effort.

"I did." She quipped.

Hermione had not realized the sun had set as she mused over past conversations. Her desk looked impeccably organized, more than it usually did – it was a clear sign she had been on auto-pilot, moving things around as she let her mind wander. She smirked to herself; not that was a useful quirk.

It was close to dinnertime, she noted, leaving her pristine office. A few scattered students were quick on their way to the Great Hall, and the Transfigurations Professor followed, leisurely strolling through her beloved castle.

A loud bang and the squeals of children startled her as she turned the corner. With the practiced ease of an experienced dueler, Hermione had her wand in hand before she had even truly seen the commotion: Peeves was making it rain pots, pans, and cauldrons over unsuspecting students.

"IMPEDIMENTA!" She shouted, stopping the volley of metal in the air. The targeted students ran off before the spell could wear off, and Peeves the poltergeist floated above it all, laughing and doing pirouettes.
"Peeves!" Hermione hissed. It had been a while since she had to deal with the exasperating poltergeist. Anytime she had to do it again, it was always too soon. "Stop this racket right this minute. Don't make me send for the Baron!" She threatened. Peeves wolf-whistled.

"Grummy-grubby-Granger not up for a night of mischief? Settle your sanctimonious self, sad, sad Granger!"

"Peeves! I *will* send the Baron after you!"

"Send for some slithery Slytherin to search for other sly slithery Slytherins! Someone's been naughty today already, sneaking and stealing stockings of sassafras and all sorts of slimy stuff; don't come speculating after sorry spectres such as I!"

"Peeves." A voice came, calm and collected, from behind Hermione, making the brunette spin to see Narcissa staring angrily at the jokester.

To Hermione's surprise, the poltergeist's demeanor changed completely once he directed himself to the blonde.

"Lady Black, Lady Black, do forgive us, ma'am! No need to summon the Baron, Peeves is quite well behaved, there's no need to trouble yourself, Lady Black, Lady Black." He said, disappearing in a sudden puff of pink smoke. The pots that had been suspended in the air came clattering down, crashing and banging onto the marble floors.

Narcissa waved her wand absent-mindedly, instantly vanishing the mess.

"What in Merlin's name just happened?" Hermione broke out, stunned. Narcissa merely quirked an eyebrow.

"I beg your pardon?"

"How did you just make him go away so easily? Poof, just like that, and he was gone." She said, still unable to process how effortlessly Narcissa managed to get rid of the pesky spirit. "I'm usually sat there threatening him for a half-hour" she finished sourly.

Narcissa only smiled. "Being Slytherin's Head of House certainly comes with a few perks" she explained, gracefully putting her wand away. "The Baron is quite amenable to my requests."

"I'm not going to lie, that makes me insanely jealous." The brunette quipped, much to Narcissa's delight.

The two walked in companionable silence to the crowded Great Hall. Most students and staff were already seated and eating, and Hermione noticed the Bloody Baron float through the space above them, sparing them – or Narcissa – a short nod in acknowledgement. Strange.

At dinner, Neville was particularly excited to speak to them about the progression of what he called 'The Manor Project'. Narcissa didn't care for the name, Hermione secretly loved it.

"It's unfortunate we had to push it back, but do you think we'll have it ready by summer?" He asked enthusiastically over a plate of stew.

"Mr. Longbottom, Hermione has just started her research. Let's try not to get ahead of ourselves." Narcissa said tactfully.

"I don't know, Ms. Black – you know Hermione is pretty good at this research stuff" he said,
"Thanks, Nev. But I did just start. I've found lots of interesting things, but nothing concrete to help us just yet." She admitted bashfully.

"Keep in mind, Mr. Longbottom – those wards are among some of the most ancient in Britain." The older woman countered, daintily swirling her honey-wine in her goblet. "To truly crack them, one needs a great deal of time and an even greater deal of talent."

Neville mock-scoffed at Narcissa. "Madam Black, do you not think the Brightest Witch of her Age has what it takes?" He snipped, hand resting dramatically upon his heart. Hermione laughed.

"Au contraire, Master Longbottom" Narcissa said, but her gaze was fixed upon Hermione's. "I have no doubt Ms. Granger will easily exceed even our wildest expectations." She finished with a sip of her wine.

Hermione couldn't help but preen under the praise, though Narcissa's cool gaze sent unfamiliar shivers down her spine. She did not have time to think about the reaction, however, as a commotion broke out at the Slytherin table.

"Help! Somebody, help!"

The three professors immediately turned to the direction of the shouts. Narcissa and Minerva were already rushing down to the Slytherin table, where a handful of students were desperately clawing at their necks, red-faced and foaming at the mouths.

"Clear out! Give us space!" Narcissa shouted, and it was the strangest sound Hermione had ever heard – she had never witnessed the blonde raise her volume in such a way, and it sounded unnatural and frightening.

Hermione and Neville joined other professors, quickly moving curious students away from the commotion; they directed a few Prefects to help trying to control the throng as Narcissa knelt by a fallen student Hermione recognized as Edgar Davies, cupping his cheeks, which were beginning to turn blue.

"Accio Bezoar!!" Narcissa whispered harshly, and soon enough students and teachers alike were ducking out of the way from flying boxes, no doubt summoned from the Potions Professor's quarters.

"Minerva, Poppy, take some; this looks like a common poison, we have no time to..."

Narcissa was unable to finish her efficient commands as the most absurdly strange thing happened. Davies' skin started to bubble, his choking began to calm. All looked to the fallen boy with a mix of uncertainty and curiosity; Narcissa had quirked an eyebrow when it happened:

An angry green rash began to form on Edgar Davies' neck and cheeks; a viscous purple plant began to sprout out of his nostrils and ears. One quick look around the area showed the six students affected, all of whom had previously been choking desperately, in similar predicaments.

Davies looked like a deer in headlights as he began to pull at the plant coming out of his ears. "What's happening to meerg!!" He barked, as fistfuls of dirt began to form in his mouth. As he panicked, he noticed the green rash – it had spread from his face to his arms and hands, slowly turning the boy into a walking vegetable.

Narcissa stood with a mighty roll of her eyes, helping the gob smacked young man to his
feet. Pomfrey and McGonagall stood petrified, bezoars in hand and unsure of what to do, waiting for the Potions Professor to direct them.

"It's nothing to be afraid of, Mr. Davies" Narcissa said softly, trying to pry Edgar's attention from the dirt still spilling from his mouth. "It is merely a Green-Fingered Draught." She explained, much to the shock of most present. "I'm afraid you've been tricked by a gardener."

The declaration made the earlier gasps of horror and shock turn into crazed peals of laughter as the students witnessing the spectacle realized their peers were not in any danger. The entirety of the Great Hall erupted in raucous laughter, the Prefects' and teachers' calls for order going ignored.

"Silence!" Came Minerva McGonagall's booming voice, reverberating off the walls thanks to a Sonorus charm and quieting the Hall at once. "Prefects, lead your Housemates to their Common Rooms. You may all finish your supper in your Common Rooms; food will be brought to you. Dismissed!"

It was a good hour and a half later that all Professors were tightly packed into Minerva's office, after seeing that the affected students had been properly cared for. As it turned out, the Green-Fingered Draught was mostly innocuous – according to Narcissa, it had been created by naturalist Wizards eager to 'become one' with their gardens. She also explained it had some significant hallucinatory effects to it, which is why Edgar and the other Slytherins targeted had been confined to the Hospital Wing for observation – they had begun to see butterflies and badgers where there were none. They were also trying to pick flowers from each other's heads.

"Poppy, how are they?" Asked Minerva, turning an apprehensive eye to the Matron.

"I have separated them – the effects are harmless, but quite a handful. They should be fine by morning or soon after."

"Good" agreed the Headmistress. A wave of relieved nods seemed to permeate the room. "While the potion is fortunately inoffensive for the most part, students were essentially poisoned during dinner. That is unacceptable behavior" she said, looking stern. "I ask all of you to remain vigilant – pranks, as we know, are all too common, but this is a step too far. If someone somehow tampered with these students' food, that opens up all sorts of much darker possibilities."

Minerva then turned to Narcissa. "Ms. Black, what else can you tell us about this Green-Fingered Draught?"

"As Poppy said, it is harmless. It is a fairly simple potion to brew – simple ingredients, simple method, and simple instructions. Anyone could have brewed it."

"A student?"

"This potion is not in the curriculum, though it is not impossible for a student to have come across it during research. They would, however, come upon some difficulties in procuring all the necessary ingredients."

Minerva raised her brows in interest. "Why would that be, Ms. Black?"

"The main active ingredient for the Green-Fingered Draught is Sassafras Pulp. It is not in the ingredients list for any year, and I have just checked my stockroom – there is none missing." Narcissa pointed out. Hermione almost didn't listen to what the blonde was saying; instead, her mind was running a mile a minute.

"Peeves!" She exclaimed suddenly, startling all present.
"I beg your pardon, Ms. Granger? Do you actually think Peeves the poltergeist *brewed* a potion?" Flitwick commented, his air baffled.

"No, no, no!" Hermione said, shaking her head. "It was something he said earlier" she turned to Narcissa. "When he was dropping all those pots in the corridor."

Narcissa and Minerva looked at her with interest. "What did he say?" Narcissa asked.

"He said something about someone 'stealing stockings of sassafras and... and all sorts of slimy stuff', I think" Hermione breathed out.

"Ms. Granger, Ms. Black checked her stockroom. There was no Sassafras missing, so no one could have stolen it." Minerva said, looking a tad confused.

"Wait," Neville interjected. "Did he specifically say 'stockings of sassafras'?"

Hermione nodded. "I'm almost positive."

Neville looked triumphant for a moment. "I know where they stole it from. Come with me."

Minerva dismissed most of the professors from her office while she, Hermione, and Narcissa followed hot on Neville's heels. He spoke animatedly as they made their way down and out of the castle, walking swiftly over a grassy pathway leading to the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest.

"There's an old, old greenhouse just down South of here" he said, gesturing over the path they now walked.

"It was used for NEWT-level Herbology and Apothecary Sciences at the turn of the century. I rediscovered it last year and was thinking of making it functional again."

The group stopped by an old edifice that had obviously seen better days – a thick mesh of vines seemed to be holding it up; its stone structure was completely covered with it, and the few remaining panels of glass were either broken completely or too murky to even look like glass. But what caught Hermione's attention were the foul-smelling leather pouches hung all around, on the greenhouse, on nearby trees – there were hundreds scattered everywhere she looked.

"Sassafras stockings." Narcissa murmured.

"Yes." Neville said. "The sassafras plant keep rodents and other undesirable critters away. These pouches contain the fresh sassafras inside, left to ferment – the smell cleanses spaces of unwanted weeds, as well."

"Merlin, I think it cleanses the space of anything that breathes. Good Godric, that is foul!" Hermione snipped, covering her nose with the sleeve of her robe.

"This can't be it. The Green-Fingered Draught requires fresh Sassafras Pulp; the fermentation would render the plant ineffective." Narcissa said. Hermione saw her face return slightly to the odd look she sported when they first met – that of someone who had shit under their nose. The brunette held her laughter; at least now the blonde had an excuse.

"Maybe, but Sassafras takes months to ferment. The ones here at the front were put in two months ago. But I have several others down at the back that I only put on this morning. They'd still be fresh."

"This morning?" Minerva pressed, undeniably impressed. She turned to Narcissa. "How long does
it take to brew this Green-Fingered Draught?"

"Less than a day. It's quite a simple concoction."

"We have to find Peeves" Hermione interjected. "I'm sure he saw someone. He can tell us who."

"We should also look at students who missed any classes today" Narcissa said suddenly. "While the potion itself is quite simple, one needs to watch it constantly; missing the adequate points of addition render the entire batch useless."

Hermione immediately volunteered to check the attendance records for the day. Narcissa followed, while Neville took his time examining the greenhouse to ascertain how much sassafras had been stolen. Minerva said she would personally take care of Peeves, and the group quickly disbanded.

It was shortly an hour later that Hermione and Narcissa found themselves elbow deep in attendance sheets. Hermione had come to a startling revelation: a lot of students skived off class. Narcissa had only laughed when the brunette pointed it out.

"Really, Hermione, have you never missed class in your lifetime?" Narcissa asked with a chuckle. Hermione shook off the strange tingle she felt whenever the blonde called her by her first name.

"Only under extraneous circumstances! Such as being petrified, or on the run from a genocidal maniac." She muttered sourly. She looked at Narcissa from the corner of her eye. "You?"

"I must have skipped half of my Divination lessons" Narcissa admitted with a knowing look. "I must admit I'm surprised you didn't do the same, given your dislike for the discipline."

Hermione could not help a smile, but groaned with one look at the pile of sheets on the table before them.

"This is useless" she moaned. "Many of these were in the Infirmary, and several others were in their rooms all day – no House Elves mentioned anything about students brewing potions in their dorm rooms."

"Which means the person responsible did it somewhere else." Narcissa said in a defeated tone, tossing a sheet back in the pile. "Think: what is a good corner of this castle to do things unnoticed?" She said, overly seriously, but with a hint of mirth in her eyes.

Hermione cackled. "Let me see... there are about a million." She laughed as Narcissa joined.

"Oh, this is hopeless." Narcissa snipped. "It's no use."

Hermione sat down, her head in her hands. "There must be an easier way to do this. But maybe if we talk to Edgar Davies..." She drifted off suddenly, her eyes wide as saucers.

"Ms. Granger?" Narcissa called, eyebrow quirked. "Hermione?" She tried again when the brunette said nothing.

"Davies!" Hermione suddenly shouted, startling the other witch.

"What about him, Ms. Granger?"

"He was in the scuffle with Will White! Neville told me he knew a few older Slytherins, Davies among them, were involved. But William never wanted to give us any names." She said, speaking unnaturally fast. She whipped her head towards Narcissa. "Who were the students poisoned by the
Green-Fingered Draught?"

"Edgar Davies, Andrew Miller, Sarah and Louis Bodart, Genevieve Hawthorne, and Samuel Cambria." Narcissa drawled out, understanding dawning on her features. "They're all Edgar's usual posse."

The two witches looked at one another in shock, a heavy and strange silence hung in the air. Hermione was the one to break it in a baffled whisper.

"I think Will White may have done this."
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait. Truth is, sometimes you have to take a little time, and I just needed more time than I thought I would. The world is full of ugly, sad, painful things, and there are times when we have to take a step back to see the good in it. Tip of the day is to take some time to breathe, take some time for yourself, and do at least one little thing with your day only for yourself. Just focus on getting through today - tomorrow may be better, or even worse, but it won't be today.

1-800-273-8255 (US)

116 123 (UK)

188 (BR)

~Naralanis

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The ‘Vegetable Incident’ was forgotten quite quickly by the vast majority of the student body by the time Edgar Davies and his crew were released from the Hospital Wing. The tips of their noses were still tinged slightly green for a few more days, but aside from that, they were not any worse for the wear.

A few professors, however, had not so easily forgotten, especially Narcissa and Hermione. Narcissa had used her influence upon the Bloody Baron to inquire as to Peeves’ whereabouts when the sassafras had been stolen. To their dismay, though Peeves had indeed seen a student run off with the smelly plant, he had not seen his face, only the back of his head.

And, to thwart the two professors’ suspicions over the Slytherin Muggleborn, the student Peeves had seen was decidedly not blond.

With no new leads to pursue, Narcissa and Hermione had resigned themselves to giving the young William White the benefit of the doubt. At best, he had not taken part in the ill-advised prank; at worst, he had an accomplice. Were the latter easy to confirm, Narcissa could even guess who – Spencer Wyndham – but with nothing concrete to tie to the two boys to the unfortunate occurrence, there was nothing they could do about it. Furthermore, they still had not determined how the potion had been added to the students’ food – it had been done in plain sight after its appearance in the Hall, for the kitchen House Elves had not detected any tempering. Hermione had not liked the state of things of course, but even she had to admit their hands were tied thus far.

As it was, the thrill of Christmas had proceeded unimpeded through the castle. Students chattered excitedly about their plans for the long-awaited holiday, and even those very few who chose to remain at the school talked animatedly about possible snowball fights and other shenanigans.

It filled Narcissa’s heart with an odd kind of nostalgia, as well as a new sort of anticipation. She had never spent Christmas at Hogwarts as a child, but this year she would be spending Christmas Eve at the castle while Draco spent it with his wife and her family. She’d get to spoil her grandson
rotten on Christmas Day – she’d probably ruined a few other children’s Christmas with the amount of toys she’d bought. A Black never did anything in halves.

She overlooked her office, tidying quietly after an afternoon spent in harried grading. She’d never given much thought to how much of that she’d do as a Professor – she had also not anticipated how many students would come running to her office begging for another chance at last minute assignments. Some of her sixth and seventh years were struggling; however did Slughorn accept them into his NEWT program with their abilities, she couldn’t guess.

Narcissa looked over at the notice board in her office. It mirrored the one for students’ use in the Slytherin Common Room, not that her students knew it. It made it incredibly handy in the event of inappropriate usage; just last week Rodney Hamptom had been baffled to be caught immediately after posting some less-than-savory adverts.

Its main use at the moment was keeping track of the students who were to stay over for the Holiday, along with her teacher’s ledger. Today was the deadline for declaring their intent to stay, and thus far only a handful of Slytherin had opted to.

However, now it lit up slightly – signaling another entry – as another student scribbled on their name. Narcissa was a bit surprised to see the clumsy W’s forming William White’s name, but she took note of it on her ledger and did not think of it again.

Page Break

“Thank you, Ginny, but I think I’ll pass.”

“Not again! ‘Mione, come on. You gotta say yes sometime.”

“I’ll agree to a blind date when I very well please, thank you. Remember last time? You set me up with a convict!”

“Ex-convict! And how was I to know? If you can’t recall, he had stolen someone else’s identity.”

“You just made my point abundantly clear.”

“And that point would be?”

“Stop trying to set me up.”

The redhead groaned in deep annoyance as she downed the last of her pumpkin juice. Ginny had come to meet Hermione at the Three Broomsticks for ‘drinks’, though in her pregnant state, all she was allowed to have was pumpkin juice and fizzy water. It did not stop her from trying to live vicariously through Hermione, who was on her third Butterbeer of the night. Thank Merlin it was not a Hogsmeade night – having students see her inebriated would be undignified.

“Save it, ‘Mione. Mum’s close to a conniption fit because you’re the only one not married or on your way to married.”

“Why do you sound drunk when all you’ve had…”

“The point is, ‘Mione, you need someone to warm your bed in the winter…”

“Can one get drunk on fumes? Don’t breathe in my butterbeer!”
Ginny smacked her playfully. “I’m serious, ‘Mione. My mum keeps nagging us over when you’ll grace the world with your litter of bushy-haired geniuses.”

Hermione pulled a face. “Litter?”

“It’s a Weasley thing, haven’t you noticed?” Ginny laughed.

“So why is Molly so worried about me? She’s got grandkids already and some more on the way.”

“Yeah, but she sees you as a daughter, and wants you to get out there. She always says how you’re so good with Teddy, maybe you and Andromeda should have given it a go.”

Hermione wasn’t expecting to spit out her butterbeer – or for it to come gushing out her nose – but that was exactly what happened. Ginny herself almost drowned in her own saliva at the brunette’s reaction and resulting coughs.

“What?” the brunette practically screeched, her sinuses burning. Ginevra was still laughing.

“The look on your face!”

Hermione’s look soured at her friend’s amusement. “Gee, thanks, Ginny. Now I have butterbeer all over my robes.” She said sarcastically.

“Oh, come off it, Granger” Ginny quipped through her giggles, deftly waving her wand and vanishing the mess Hermione’s impromptu spit take had made. “Why haven’t you?” she added.

Hermione raised a brow. “Why haven’t I what?”

“Given it a go.”

Hermione’s eyes widened to the size of saucers – causing her friend to laugh even more.

“With Andromeda? Ginny, how much of my butterbeer have you inhaled?”

Ginny simply whacked her arm once more. “Why wouldn’t you? You’re both good-looking, bloody smart, and you’re so, so good with Teddy.”

“That doesn’t mean I should have a relationship with her. Might I add, she’s a mother and a grandmother!”

“Not that she looks it.” Ginny quipped with a suggestive waggle of her eyebrows. It was Hermione’s turn to whack her friend in annoyance.

“Alright, alright” Ginny relented, putting her arms up in surrender. “I’m not actually serious. But can you answer me something?”

“Sure.” Hermione replied with a roll of her eyes.

“Does the age thing bother you? I mean, were it a man, would it bother you?”

Hermione took a moment to think.

“I don’t think so. Honestly, I think as long as I can have a connection, a person’s age becomes secondary, you know?” she chuckled. “All I want is stimulating conversation.” She joked.

Ginny had her in. “Among other stimulating activities, I hope.”
Hermione tossed a piece of bread at her.

Despite Ginny’s nagging, it had been nice to see her friend again. With the end of term, Hermione had been busier than ever grading essays and late assignments, so it was good to take a little time to unwind.

She made her way back to the castle on foot despite the bitter cold, even deciding to forgo a warming charm in favor of feeling the gentle bite of the wind on her cheeks. The vision of the castle blanketed in snow was worth it.

Hermione had just turned a corner on her usual path leading back to the illuminated castle when movement caught her eye. There it was, the unmistakable faint flicker of a candle, coming from within Greenhouse One.

The young professor sighed in annoyance. What was it with greenhouses and suspicious movement after hours? The culprit was unlikely to be Neville – he had been with Luna at the Three Broomsticks when she left. The conclusion led her to believe there was a student messing about the greenhouse... far after curfew.

Somewhat miffed she’d be forced to play the hard disciplinarian so close to the holiday while slightly intoxicated, Hermione took out her wand as she surreptitiously made her way inside. She had barely crossed the glassy threshold when she heard the snipping of garden shears.

Hermione rounded a corner of bushes only to find William White kneeling by a short vase, pruning yellow petals into a leather pouch. The young boy seemed completely lost in his work, pruning buds and separating their petals deftly, in quiet concentration.

“Mr. White?” Hermione spoke softly.

“Augh!” the boy yipped in shock, almost knocking himself over with the strength with which he turned on his knees to face his professor. “P-professor Granger!”

Hermione sheathed her wand with a sigh. “Mr. White, can you please explain to me why you’re out here past curfew, pruning flowers?”

William looked terribly sheepish. “I’m sorry, Professor. I was collecting some Arnica buds – I want to practice making some Bruise Removal Paste. I must have lost track of time, ma’am.”

Hermione looked at her watch in disbelief. “Bruise Removal Paste? William, it’s the last day of term, why would you be practicing something I hear you’re already quite good at?”

William blushed, his embarrassment tangible. “I... I wanted to make it a gift for my mum. I can’t... I can’t buy her anything from the Wizarding World, so I thought I’d make her something. I needed a few more buds for my mixture” he confessed.

Hermione couldn’t help a smile at the boy’s sweetness, though she had to admit Bruise Removal Paste would make an odd gift. “That’s very nice, Mr. White. But why Bruise Removal Paste?”

To her surprise, William looked as comfortable as she had ever seen him. He chuckled good-naturedly, shrugging his shoulders. “It’s something I’m good at” he said with a smile. “And I thought my mum would get a kick out of it, too – she's a clumsy lady, always with a little bruise here or there.”

Hermione was mollified by the answer. Still, he was out of bed apst curfew, and she was a Professor. “While I admire your good intentions, Mr. White, you ought to know it does not excuse
your breach of the rules. You know about curfew.” she said, doing her best not too sound too severe.

William looked defeated. Hermione paused to think about what his snootier Slytherin classmates would think of the Muggleborn losing them House points – even the measly five or so points that usually followed a first infraction of this kind.

“However,” she continued after pondering “since it is your first infraction, and it’s practically the holidays already, I’m inclined to let you go with a stern warning.” She finished with a smile. “I’m in a giving mood. Christmas spirit and all that.”

William smiled back. “It won’t happen again, Professor, I promise!”

“Good. Now, Mr. White, off to bed with you. Don’t let Mr. Filch catch you roaming the corridors this time of night.” Hermione warned.

With a quick nod, William gathered his supplies and swiftly made his way out of the greenhouse. Hermione could not help feeling a little bit of relief over their strange exchange; William seemed a lot more comfortable around her. She was even somewhat glad he was the one out of bed past curfew, other students would most likely need a firmer hand – her troublesome Gryffindor Atticks, to name one. Extinguishing the candle left by the student with a silent spell, she too left the greenhouse.

Hermione was almost through the courtyard when her attention was once again caught by movement coming from her peripheral vision. A shimmer of white dashed through the side, and she turned her head just in time to make out the snowy white fox that was Narcissa’s Animagus form.

Page Break

Hermione’s morning started with a dry throat and a throbbing head. Despite her care the previous night, it seemed she had become unaccustomed to drinking so late in the night. She would need a good dose of Caldwell’s Crapulence Concoction if she ever expected to make it down for breakfast without hurling.

It was on her way down to the Great Hall that she met Narcissa. The blonde looked a little better-rested than she had in previous days, though Hermione suspected her late-evening stroll in her Animagus form had something to do with it.

“Good morning, Hermione.” Narcissa greeted her with a smile. She seemed to be in a good mood.

“Good morning, Narcissa.” the brunette responded in kind, still oddly thrilled to hear the impeccable woman call her by her first name. It had happened several times now, but somehow it always sounded foreign and so good to hear.

The two walked side by side, in a rhythm that felt familiar. Despite the early hour, the Great Hall was packed – students were overly excited in their last hours in the castle before going home, and those who were staying were eagerly planning out their holiday at Hogwarts. Hermione caught sight of Neville – Luna at his side wearing big sleigh-bell earrings.

“’Mione! Ms. Black! Come on over here, look at the size of these flapjacks!” Neville cheered, his cheeks rosier than ever.

Narcissa quirked an eyebrow and Hermione laughed as they took their seats. Luna was quick to intervene.
“Don’t mind him – he’s had a few too many of Hagrid’s eggnog.”

Hermione cackled. “Nev, I’ve told you repeatedly that stuff is potent. Shouldn’t have it before dark.”

“Pish-posh!” Neville scoffed, waving his hand. “Lookit: the pot calling the kettle black! You’re the one who had a few too many last night, didn’t ya?”

Narcissa’s eyebrow quirked a bit more; she smirked. “Well, Ms. Granger, it seems you cannot fault Mr. Longbottom” she quipped in an over-the-top snooty tone.

Hermione laughed, happy with the air their side of the staff table carried. “I’ll have you know, Narcissa, Neville imbibed just as much yesterday as he’s done today.” She looked at her friend. “You’re just continuing the party.”

“Right, right” Neville conceded, handing Hermione a goblet. “How was it with Ginny?”

“Infuriating as usual” Hermione replied, taking one sniff of the offered goblet and immediately rejecting the eggnog.

“Oh?” Narcissa interjected, stopping Neville’s attempt to offer her some eggnog with a single pointed glare. “And how is Mrs. Potter?”

“Positively glowing” Hermione said. “Pregnancy suits her well, though she tends to get a bit overbearing.”

“I’ll say” Narcissa chuckled. “That must be why she’s joined her mother in her efforts to owl me all through this month.”

Hermione stopped the spoonful of porridge she had been directing toward her mouth. Molly and Ginny owled Narcissa?

“Ginny’s owled you?”

Narcissa simply nodded. “All through this month and the last. Her mother does it every year for Christmas – at times Mr. Potter will join.”

“What are they owling you for?”

An elegant shoulder shrug was the blonde’s initial response. “Molly has tirelessly invited me to the Weasley Christmas dinner. I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve had to politely decline. They’re quite stubborn, those Weasleys” she said, though her voice held no malice, only amusement.

Hermione could not quite wrap her mind around the fact that Molly had been habitually inviting Narcissa Malfoy/Black to *Christmas Dinner*. Had anyone ever been planning on telling her that?

“I assume you’re busy with Draco and Astoria.” The brunette replied, opting for tact, but still puzzled.

“Oh, but Narcissa, aren’t Draco and Astoria spending Christmas Eve with the Greengrass clan this year?” Luna suddenly butted in, surprising the two other professors. They had forgotten the quirky Ravenclaw was with them.

“Is that so?” Hermione blurted out, unable to help herself. “Narcissa... you’re not spending Christmas Eve alone, are you?”
The Transfigurations Professor could tell the blonde had flushed a bit at her assumption, but Narcissa had expertly reigned it in with an expression of indignity.

“Oh, stop it, all of you. I’ll be perfectly content. Frankly, I could use some peace for a change.”

Hermione couldn’t resist rolling her eyes. What a fraud was Narcissa Black.

“Come off it. Why don’t you go to the Burrow?” Hermione said defiantly. “I’m sure you wouldn’t want to miss a night with your favorite Transfigurations Professor” she said smugly, hoping to defuse any potential awkwardness. Surely Narcissa would prefer spending an evening with her – and several Weasleys – than completely alone. Wouldn’t she?

Somehow, Narcissa’s already pale face gained an unusual pallor. “Ms. Granger... I wouldn’t want to impose.”

“You wouldn’t be. Molly invited you, didn’t she? So did Ginny?” Hermione pressed. Narcissa’s face was tinged with green.

“Be that as it may, I would rather not inconvenience others that may be present at this... gathering.”

Hermione figured she looked as puzzled as she felt; Narcissa’s face was contorted in an expression of deep embarrassment. Was she missing something painfully obvious? Luna was the one to interject again.

“I wouldn’t worry, Narcissa” the young woman said, betraying not a care in the world. “Andromeda is taking Teddy to see some of Ted’s family this year.”

Hermione wanted to kick herself, though the feeling didn’t last long. It was replaced by her biggest asset and biggest fault in one, her morbid curiosity. Was the relationship between the last remaining Blacks so frayed they had to continuously avoid each other?

“Oh, Narcissa, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize...” Hermione began. “But in all seriousness, do consider coming – you can come as my guest.” She added.

Narcissa still looked like she desperately wished for the ground to open up and swallow her whole.

“Yeah! Come on, cut Molly a break. She’s been inviting you since forever.” Yipped Neville, who had been preoccupied with yet another serving of eggnog.

“Oh, alright, alright, if I must. I suppose it won’t hurt to spend a few minutes – Mr. Potter may stop nagging me as well. That’s an added benefit.” Narcissa finally relented with a sigh.

Hermione could not suppress the genuine smile that tugged at her lips. She even felt a little smug – for what, she had no idea.

“And wipe that smirk off your face” Narcissa warned the brunette, waving a fork in her direction. “It’s undignified” she huffed.

The Great Hall had been largely emptied out a half hour later. Neville and Luna had excused themselves, but Hermione and Narcissa had remained at the staff table, chatting mostly about the blood wards they’d been so painstakingly researching. Their work had been much slower than
either of them preferred, but meeting in the lounge and apparating directly to the massive Black Library had become a pleasant sort of ritual through the weeks. Hermione was looking forward to doing even more thanks to the holiday.

Somehow, the conversation turned to Christmas. Hermione was not the least surprised at how formal and stiff the Black celebrations turned out to be. She was, however, surprised to learn how Bellatrix and Andromeda had been fond of pranking a young Narcissa by hiding all of her presents, year after year. The blonde’s reminiscence made Hermione itch to ask about the situation with Andromeda, but the young professor held her tongue.

“And so it went,” Narcissa continued the story she had been telling previously. “Bella enchanted the reindeer decorations to do all sorts of unspeakable things on Christmas morning. Merlin, I thought Father’s head would explode right then and there.”

“Hah!” Hermione laughed, choosing to ignore the weird feeling she got in the pit of her stomach whenever she heard of Bellatrix doing anything even remotely human... or fun. “I’m sure similar things happen at Hogwarts all the time – Fred and George certainly would have loved to do something like that.”

“Did you not spend your Christmases at the castle?”

“Uh, maybe one or two. I spent some with my parents, others with the Weasleys... Once in a cemetery.” Hermione recalled, a shiver going up her spine. Everything that had happened, so long ago now... It did not bear thinking about.

“This would have been my first Christmas spent at the castle” Narcissa confessed. “I can’t help but admit to feeling ever so slightly curious.”

Hermione smirked. “It’s good fun. The Christmas Eve banquet is incomparable – but don’t you dare tell Molly I said that.”

“My lips are sealed. I’m surprised by how few students are staying behind; I always thought more would like to spend the holidays here.” Narcissa pointed out.

“Not really” Hermione said, her tone a little sad. “It’s a time for families. Those who stay behind usually don’t have a ton to look forward to in that regard. At the very least, they’ve got their Hogwarts family here to welcome them.”

Narcissa turned pensive. “I wonder then, why William White is staying behind. Perhaps he feels alienated by the Wizarding World? I’m uncertain of how a Muggleborn would deal with such a situation.”

Hermione paused and turned to look at the blonde in question. “William White? But he’s not staying; he’s going home. He told me so last night, when I caught him out of bed after hours.”

Narcissa’s eyebrows shot up. “That cannot be. It was only yesterday when his name was added to my list.” She paused to take her wand out of her sleeve and discreetly waved it under the table in a movement that resembled a Summoning Charm to Hermione. Suddenly, a bulge appeared in Narcissa’s side pocket, and the blonde gingerly lifted a book from it.

“My ledger” she explained to Hermione, who at once understood. Teacher’s ledgers were incredibly useful – attendance, notice boards, grades, even detention slips – practically everything was enchanted into it. It was a great way to keep track of everything. She calmly flipped through a few pages. “William’s name appeared on my notice board early yesterday evening.”
The blonde found what she was looking for, given her sigh. “And sure enough -- it was crossed out.”

“That’s very strange.” Hermione commented. Why would he sign up to stay and then change his mind so suddenly?”

“I’ll tell you what else is strange” Narcissa added. “You say you caught him after hours? I see no record of a detention slip or a reduction of points for the infraction.”

Hermione gave a sheepish sigh. “Oh, no, that was me. I let him go with a warning.”

Narcissa pursed her lips. “What was he doing after curfew?”

“Gathering some plants at Greenhouse One. He was using them for a gift for his mom, I believe.”

“That’s a serious infraction, Ms. Granger. You should have deducted points, even if just a few. This could be interpreted as preferential treatment on your part. What would his traditionalist classmates think?”

Hermione bristled – she had been precisely trying to avoid issue with said traditionalist classmates. One look at Narcissa’s expression, however, and she decided to let the matter drop. The woman was an expert on the Pureblood modus operandi -- it would be best to defer to her.

“I’ll keep that in mind. My apologies.”

“No matter” Narcissa said, deftly flipping the ledger and vanishing it wordlessly. We have another matter to discuss. It’s of great urgency and importance.”

Hermione was all years -- it sounded serious. “What is it?”

“I face the strangest of predicaments.” Narcissa turned to pierce Hermione’s eyes with her steely gaze. “What in Merlin’s name shall I bring to a dinner hosted by Molly Weasley?”

Hermione laughed. “Anything related to Celestina Warbeck.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all my readers for your continued support. I am tirelessly working on my life at the moment, but Perhaps and For The Better WILL continue.
Chapter 15

Thank you for your continued support. Figured I’d post as I finished writing. This chapter ended up massive, so I broke it up in two. Hopefully the second part will come out later this week after a few edits.

~Naralanis

“How dare you break into my house! How did you manage to get past the wards?!”

“You may blast me off the tapestry, but I am still your blood. You married into this House – as far as it knows, the blood of your blood is welcome here.”

Narcissa could feel the pain traveling up her arm from clenching her fists so hard. The silhouette standing in her personal library would haunt her dreams forever. The hand that held her wand was stiff as a board to her side, clutching it in a desperate grip, and yet it trembled so at the sight of her sister.

“Leave, now! Bella already suspects me. You shouldn’t be here.” Her voice felt cold and dead; she dared raise her wand towards Andromeda, who had just seconds before sheathed her own in a gesture of surrender. She made no movement to arm herself once more, but her eyes betrayed total and utter disappointment – it made Narcissa fell dead inside.

“You would raise your wand to your own sister?”

Narcissa found it in herself to snarl. “That is nothing compared to what Bella will do to you if she sees you. She will kill you.” She said it and at once believed it – the fury with which Bellatrix had burnt Andromeda’s name from their tapestry was just the tip of the iceberg. Narcissa had never seen hatred so pure, ire so intense.

“I can handle Bellatrix” Andromeda said with disgust. Narcissa couldn’t tell whether she believed it or not.

“Listen to yourself. No one can handle Bellatrix – not even the Dark Lord.”

“Leave this place, Cissy. Come with me.”

Narcissa’s arm faltered. Andromeda couldn’t be serious.

“You must be out of your mind. My son is here, I will not leave him!”

“Then we’ll take him with us! The Order will protect you, Cissy, I promise. Come with me, please, speak to Dumbledore – he will harbor no ill will towards you and Draco.”

Narcissa laughed; her laughter was dry and humorless. It made Andromeda back away -- it was the only time Narcissa ever reminded her of their oldest sister.

“You think it’s so easy, don’t you? You think anyone can pack up and leave, just like you did. You
think anyone can turn their back on their family like you!” She accused, her wand hand trembling more than ever. Hot streaks of tears marred her cheeks; Narcissa resolutely refused to acknowledge such weakness.

“It wasn’t easy! I never wanted to leave you Cissy; it was the most difficult thing I’ve ever had to do! Please, I beg of you, come with me. Bring Draco; you can still have a family!” Andromeda pleaded, daring to take a step in Narcissa’s direction.

“Do not take another step!” Narcissa practically screeched. Andromeda froze in her tracks, her face bellying her shock. “I have a family! My son, my husband, my dying father! And I have my sister, the one who never abandoned me and never will, the one who loves me as a sister should!”

“I love you, Cissy! Bellatrix will abandon you; her only love is to her Dark Lord. She will leave you if it comes to it. It’s her nature.” Andromeda reasoned, her eyes resolute.

“Never!” Narcissa barked back. “You don’t know what’s she’s like, you don’t know what she’s been through or how she’s felt since she lost Ophelia. You left! She needs me!”

Andromeda’s expression held a hint of tenderness. “I cannot even begin to comprehend the pain of losing a child. But Bellatrix was on her way to madness before then, surely you must know that. She’s lost Cissy, lost forever to His darkness. Please don’t go the same way.”

Narcissa lowered her wand, and made an enormous effort to inject as much venom as she could in her voice. “Unlike you, I stay for my family. I stay for those who need me.”

The moonlight hit, unobstructed by clouds, just at the right angle for Narcissa to see the tears glimmering from Andromeda’s eyes. She gripped her wand with more fervor; it wouldn’t do to falter now.

“Cissy... please. I’m your family. I need you. I love you.”

Narcissa righted her wand. “You were my family. You left us, you left me.”

“Cissy, no. I beg of you, don’t do this, please.”

Narcissa could not move a muscle; Andromeda tried one more step towards her sister. Suddenly, the library door and surrounding wall exploded in a million pieces, scattering rocks and dirt on its wake. Both sisters coughed with the cloud of dust and turned to face the intruder; Andromeda was quick to grasp her wand and point it in their direction.

“Well look what we have here... a wee family reunion, it seems? And no one thought to invite me. I’m hurt.”

Narcissa’s blood turned cold at Bellatrix’s voice; she did not dare spare Andromeda another glance.

“Bella...”

“Not a word from you, Cissy. I should have known. I’ve suspected it for a long time, but I never thought you’d stoop so low as to associate with filth. Frankly, I’m disappointed.” The oldest Black said, twirling her wand in her fingers, not in the least threatened by two wands pointed at her.

“Lower your wand, Cissy; don’t you dare defy me.” She shot at her youngest sister. Narcissa’s response was immediate – her arm lowered automatically, before she could even think about it. “Look at you. Pen-pals with mud! You disgust me!”
“Bella, no, I...” Narcissa tried weakly, her voice trembled with fear.

“I said not another word!” Bellatrix snarled, effectively silencing the blonde. Her gaze turned to Andromeda, whose wand arm visibly shook as she pointed it to Bellatrix’s chest.

“And you... You’ve got a lot of nerve, showing your face here, Drommie.” She gangly stepped forward, the click of her heels echoing menacingly on the marble floor. “But I’m glad. I’ve been itching to blast your face, just like I did to the tapestry.”

“I’m not afraid of you.” Andromeda declared stoically, though her expression betrayed her fear.

“We shall see, won’t we? Do you really think you can best me in a duel, filth?” Bellatrix cackled; she felt so at ease she had yet to stop twirling her wand. Nothing about her posture announced her intention to attack, yet both sisters knew full well she needed but a split second to do a lot of damage. “You, who always excelled in... what was it, let’s see... Herbology? Astronomy? Valid disciplines, of course, but if I remember correctly, you’re well known for your in-depth analysis of... Muggle Studies, is it not? So in-depth, in fact, you spread your legs and accepted mud!” she shrieked.

“Mock me if you want, I don’t care. I’m leaving, and I’m taking Cissy with me!” Andromeda barked, her determination as evident as her fear.

Bellatrix suddenly froze, and her steely gaze found Narcissa’s panicked blue orbs. “Is that so, Cissy? You’d dare leave me for this traitor and her half-breed child?”

“No! Bella, I... no!” Narcissa wailed, tears freely streaming down her cheeks. Bellatrix was unfazed.

“You monster!” Andromeda hissed. “She’s your sister, not some pawn in your sick game!”

Bellatrix chuckled darkly. “Ah, yes, she’s my sister.” She said, her voice sickeningly sweet as she stalked towards the trembling Narcissa. “Unlike you. And she’ll stay right here where she belongs – with her family.”

“Stupefy!”

Bellatrix deflected Andromeda’s clumsy spell without even blinking, and her blood-red lips tugged upwards in a shark-like grin at the pathetic attempt. The only emotion her features betrayed was maniacal glee.

“You’ll regret that, Drommie.” She made to raise her wand.

“Propulso!”

The spell came from the other side of the room. Suddenly, Andromeda’s body shot through the window like a bullet, out of Bellatrix’s range, shattering the glass in a deafening burst. The force of the impact was enough to push Bellatrix backwards. Before the Dark witch could fully regain her footing, she heard the unmistakable crack of Andromeda disapparating away.
“No!” she howled in fury. Her head turned, fast as a whip, to where Narcissa stood, her eyes wide, the wand that had just expelled Andromeda out to safety tremulous in her hand.

“B-Bella, I’m...”

“You!” Bellatrix hissed wrathfully. Before Narcissa could blink, Bellatrix had stepped over to where she was, a hand painfully grasping her long blonde locks by the roots, pulling her head backwards in one swift, furious movement.

“Bella, no!” Narcissa cried in pain; her wand clattered to the floor. Bellatrix ignored her cries as she pulled and pulled with irate force.

“I had her! You’d rather save a traitor, Cissy? Is that what you want, to join Andromeda and her Muddies? Is it? Answer me, filth!”

Hot tears flowed from Narcissa’s eyes as she shut them; she didn’t want to risk opening them and meeting her sister’s murderous glare.

“Bella!” Narcissa sobbed as she felt her sister’s wand softly touching the skin of her throat and travelling to her chest, leaving a painful trail of heat and fear.

“You need to learn, Cissy, and pick where your loyalties lie. Maybe I’ll go have some fun with my nephew; what do you think of that? Maybe that’ll help you make up your mind?” Bellatrix quipped, practically singing.

“Please, no! Bella, please, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, please don’t hurt him!”

Bellatrix’s grip on her scalp tightened, Narcissa whimpered. “You’ve been a bad girl, Cissy. I have to teach you a lesson.” She whispered through gritted teeth at Narcissa’s ear.

“Bella... no...” Narcissa protested weakly.

Suddenly, Bellatrix’s hand and wand were gone; Narcissa dropped to the floor on her hands and knees, weak and terrified. She heard Bellatrix’s heels stalking around her until they suddenly stopped. She did not dare look.

“Open your eyes, Narcissa.” Came Bellatrix’s voice, as cold as Narcissa had ever heard it. “I want you to see what I’m about to do to you.”

Unwillingly, Narcissa tentatively opened her eyes. Bellatrix had her wand pointed directly at her – her arm was perfectly still. She was like a statue; Narcissa couldn’t even tell she was breathing. Bellatrix smiled wickedly.

“You need to know how much I mean this.” She said in the same cold tone. Narcissa could not stop her trembling.

“Crucio!”

Narcissa woke with the scream stuck deep her throat. Her body jolted from her bed in sheer terror, and somehow the walls of her room seemed to reverberate with the echoes of her sister’s curse. Worst still, her body felt as if the curse itself had rekindled anew, leaving a deep, agonizing burn in its wake.
The vivid memory of the first and only time Bellatrix Crucioed her had fueled several of her nightmares through the years. The last time they had plagued her dreams, however, had been when news of the mass breakout from Azkaban had reached her ears – Bellatrix herself had followed such news not long after, pallid and gaunt and crazy, barely a shadow of her former self. All that remained was the madness, ad Andromeda had warned her so long ago. Narcissa had walked the halls of her own home afraid of her sister – every twitch of her dark eyes made her flinch in expectation of the pain.

Narcissa ran a hand over her forehead, finding it dripping with sweat. Her sheets were soaked, and her nightgown clung uncomfortably to her body. It was still dark outside – not that it mattered; she would not be able to sleep again.

Huffing in disgust at her state, she angrily grabbed her wand from her nightstand and vanished the evidence of her terror as best as she could in her altered state. Another frustrated flick of her instrument summoned the clacking of a tea set in her kitchen; yet another made the water boil.

It was Hermione Granger’s fault. What was Narcissa doing, accepting the offer after the measiest kind of peer pressure there was? Her mind had withheld the scrutiny of the Dark Lord himself; surely she could decline an invitation to dinner.

But no, not when Hermione Granger and her insufferable insistence were concerned. All Hermione had to do to convince her was bat her big brown eyes.

Did it make her terribly selfish, to enjoy the girl’s companionship? Narcissa had become practically a recluse in the years after the war; it was refreshing to have intelligent conversation. Who would have thought she’d find it in Hermione Granger? Could she not have it with someone less complicated?

No, she pondered. Her choices in life had made her life complicated, and so it would be until the end. That was not something she could or would ever escape.

Making amends in silence and discretion was one thing. Narcissa would rather build a dozen Wellness Wards than suffer through one dinner under the scrutiny of all her former enemies. She didn’t fool herself to think they could ever be her friends – she did not deserve any. Surely Molly only invited her year after year out of pity or at Potter’s behest.

At least Andromeda would not be present, she mused. The thought filled her with regret and relief at the same time – Andromeda was perhaps the most complicated part of her life. Narcissa padded her way through her sitting room, her bare feet cold on the stone floors. She had a stack of rejections from Gringotts, all signed Andromeda Tonks. Andromeda would not accept her kind of apology, and Narcissa would never be able to offer anything more.

Hermione woke up late on the morning before Christmas. Her room smelled pleasantly of gingerbread biscuits – a little present from the castle House Elves. Her bed was warm, but the day ahead was one full of excitement, and a little last-minute shopping. Never let it be said Hermione Granger wasn’t a planner. She just happened to overplan – it was either finishing her grading or buying presents. The Professor in her won out in the end.
It was no matter: Hogsmead was positively glowing with holiday cheer. Even the Hog’s Head, usually so dreary and grim, managed to participate in the festivities – the actual Hog’s Head at the storefront sported red hats with enchanted bells: one on the head and one for each tusk.

For Teddy, Hermione found a beautiful desk set that came with an enchanted phial of ink: it would change color as he wrote. The young woman thought he’d get a kick out of it, especially as his first year was fast approaching.

For George and Angelina, who had welcomed little Fred into the world earlier that year, she bought a crib with a Quidditch mobile, charmed to fly around. For Ron and Lavender, she went full-Muggle – a baby monitor. Mostly, she just wanted Ron to struggle and then end up loving it.

Most of her gifts had already been bought. Now, however, she had to account for an extra guest – she had repeatedly told Narcissa not to worry about bringing gifts, but she had not included herself in that warning. She wanted the blonde to receive a gift from at least one person, especially since she’d probably have an awkward time during the dinner. It was up to Hermione to make it go as smoothly as possible – avoid the heavy talks about the past.

The past. That gave Hermione a grand idea.

“Oh! Look at us! We’re so Christmassy!” the brunette exclaimed once Narcissa opened the door to her quarters. She desperately wanted to roll her eyes, but Hermione actually looked well put together in her deep red dress. The dress had a discreet silver trim; it was festive in an understated way.


“I should say the same to you, Madam Slytherin Green. It looks gorgeous, don’t get me wrong, but also very... predictable, as you say.” Hermione quipped right back.

Narcissa shrugged her shoulders in that annoyingly elegant way Hermione came to associate only to her. “What can I say? I look good in green.” She defended, her voice light and airy.

“That you do” Hermione agreed, hiding a slight flush. “Shall we get going? Our Portkey will go in a few minutes.”

Narcissa groaned. She detested travelling via Portkey. Hermione was sympathetic.

“I know, I know, but it’s better not to apparate in the Burrow. It can get cramped, y’know.”

“Ms. Granger, are you trying to come up with more reasons for me not to attend this little soirée?” Narcissa drawled. Hermione just laughed.

“Soirée! I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone actually use that term, uppity.”

Narcissa finally did roll her eyes. The night would be long.

Despite their humorous banter, Hermione could tell Narcissa grew more and more uneasy as they made their way to the Portkey she had arranged in the courtyard. She grew silent, and her posture gradually became rigid. Her mouth had set into a thin line.
“Hey” Hermione murmured, lightly touching the other woman’s arm. The Portkey – a candle holder – had begun to emit a faint glow. “We can leave the moment it gets too uncomfortable to you.” She reassured. Narcissa’s eyebrow rose up.

“We?” She inquired.

“We.” Hermione confirmed with a smile, reaching for the Portkey. “I’m the one who got you into this mess, am I not?”

Portkey travelling was as unpleasant as Narcissa remembered. Thankfully, they landed on their feet; Hermione was there, hand at her waist, ready to catch her at the slightest imbalance. They appeared exactly at the illuminated center of what looked to be an open tent, obviously charmed for warmth, where the entire Weasley Clan – plus a few others – had gathered. Their arrival dropped a blanket of complete silence onto the festivities; Narcissa wanted to disapparate on the spot, but Hermione still held onto her wand arm.

“‘Mione! Ms. Black! You came!” Cheered a joyous voice nearby.

Harry James Potter personally stepped forward to greet the new arrivals, and just like that, the party resumed. The music started back up, as did side conversations, floating trays of drink that had stopped in their tracks zipped through the air once more.

“Harry!” Hermione cheered back, letting go of Narcissa to envelop her friend in a bear hug. Thankfully, Narcissa did not have to stand alone for long – Potter quickly directed himself to her in a respectful, overexaggerated bow.

“Ms. Black, allow me to say how happy we all are that you accepted our invitation. Please, make yourself at home!” He said.

“You are very kind, Mr. Potter. I apologize for not coming sooner.”

Introductions were brief, but pleasant. Narcissa dreaded meeting Ronald Weasley, but he was so assiduously hospitable it threw her for a loop. Lavender Brown, his betrothed, was equally kind and pleasant to be around.

Narcissa had always known there were many Weasleys, but her limited and stiff interactions with the clan over the years had not painted an accurate picture. They were everywhere, and she wondered how such a family managed to proliferate so efficiently. Molly Weasley had been a busy woman, and clearly so were all of her kids – Harry and Ginevra had one rambunctious toddler and another one on the way; Bill and Fleur had an inquisitive daughter, George and Angelina touted their young son – Fred – wherever they went. Even Percy Weasley, a bespectacled man Narcissa had known from Fudge’s Ministry, married to Audrey Campbell, had managed to grace his family with twin girls – Molly and Lucy, two vivacious little devils that would no doubt bring their father several headaches.

There were simply too many to keep track.

It wasn’t long after dinner until the Weasley matriarch herself set her eyes on Narcissa. The blonde had been dreading that particular encounter, going so far as to occupy herself in conversation with almost any other Weasley she could find, even Arthur – after all, Molly had killed her sister... Narcissa’s family had made the Weasley’s lives unbearable at every opportunity. It was bound to be tense.
Once again, she was proven wrong. Molly, now finally free from cooking and fretting about everyone else, saw her and resolutely made her way through the throng of family surrounding them; before Narcissa could get a word in edgewise, the matron’s arms had snaked around her, squeezing with all their might.

Hermione, Ron, and Harry could not stop the peals of laughter that bubbled up once they saw the ever-stoic Narcissa Black on the receiving end of one of Molly’s famous rib-crushing hugs. Narcissa looked pathetically childish in Molly’s arms, especially with the way the woman swung her from side to side.

“You came!” Cried Molly, clearly overjoyed – for what reason, Narcissa couldn’t fathom. “I’m so glad you came! I never thought you’d come, but Draco has been adamant that it was only a matter of time! I’m happy Hermione could make you come to your senses!” She practically squealed, finally letting the other woman down.

“Thank you for your kindness, Ms. Weasley” Narcissa finally said once the air returned to her lungs. She found it in herself to shoot the Golden Trio a glare – their laughter stopped immediately.

“Call me Molly, dear. Come, let’s talk about that adorable grandson of yours!”

To Narcissa’s surprise, the evening passed incredibly quickly. At some point, everyone went from the tent to the cozy Weasley living room. Molly grilled her on all things she could talk about with ease – her grandson, her work, Draco. Before she realized, a tipsy Hermione had taken a seat by her side, and an equally inebriated George Weasley settled at her other side. They both looked giddy.

“Now! The kids ‘ave gone to bed” George whispered conspiratorially. “Time for us big kids to open presents!”

Hermione laughed; her cheeks were rosy from the eggnog she had consumed, no doubt. Narcissa found it in herself to chuckle at the brunette.

The gift exchange proceeded in utter anarchy – each Weasley seemed to compete to hand out gifts faster than the other. Each and every one comically declared their gift to be the best of gifts ever gifted. Narcissa was surprised to receive a fancy bottle of Honeywine from the Potters, as well as a rare tome on the history of the study of Potions from the Longbottoms. Molly gifted her a pair of cozy, homemade mittens that were astoundingly comfortable – though they would not go with any of the expensive clothes she owned, Narcissa truly appreciated them.

“Don’t worry about it, no one expects you to give them anything in return.” Hermione had said at one point, clearly mistakenly reading some trepidation into her posture. Narcissa rolled her eyes for the second time that night.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ms. Granger” she said, her adopting a faux-haughty tone. “Do you truly think I would come to such a soirée” she put heavy emphasis on the word, eliciting laughter from her companion “without being adequately prepared?”

“Oh, come off it!” Hermione quipped, nudging her on the arm. She was truly inebriated for such a familiar gesture. “You didn’t have any time to prepare; don’t even pretend you managed to snag things for everyone here.”

“Ms. Granger, you underestimate me.” Narcissa said with a wicked gleam in her eye. In one swift motion, she stood in the Weasley’s cramped living room – all conversations seemed to
automatically stop as her presence grew in the room.

“I would like to thank you all, especially Molly, for the wonderful evening. I appreciate your kindness from the bottom of my heart – I hope to give you all a few things as a token of my gratitude. Do accept my apologies; I was rushed to acquire them, but I do hope you like them.” Narcissa said, her voice clear and airy. All eyes were on her, and more than a few puzzled looks were aimed in her direction. Nevertheless, she continued.

“To all the fathers in this room” she said, deftly waving her wand. “I give you all a season’s pass to all Premier League Quidditch matches for the coming year.”

“By Merlin’s saggy tits!” Came Ron’s delighted squeal from one corner, followed by the playful muted smack of Lavender’s hand connecting with the top of his head. Ginny managed to contain a similar outburst from her husband with a mere glare.

“To all the mothers” Narcissa continued with a smile “I give one year of service at Madame Dubois Wizarding Spa in Provence, France.”

“By Rowena’s perky tits!” Shouted Angelina with a happy grin as the room broke out in laughter.

“To Molly, our gracious hostess, I give something a little more special. Thank you for your hospitality, your kindness, and your welcoming arms – though I will pass on further hugs.” Narcissa quipped, earning a Molly-patented eye-roll – a good-natured one. “Molly, to you I give tickets to every show on Celestina Warbeck’s upcoming tour.”

Glass shattered, screams were heard. Narcissa was once again grasped by the waist and swung side to side as Molly hysterically thanked her.

It was a long night, but in the best of ways.

“Neville told me about Black Manor. That is a wonderful, wonderful thing you’re doing, Narcissa.” said Molly, after thanking the blonde about a million times.

The party had died down. Some had gone home, some were scattered about the Burrow, napping, eating, or relaxing by the record-player. Narcissa had remained on the same couch, and Molly had joined her at some point in the evening.

“Thank you, Molly” Narcissa said, still timid around the woman, despite her display of confidence earlier in the night.

“It is incredible, what you have done with your life, darling. Harry has kept us updated, and so has Hermione. It seems you’re settling well at Hogwarts, aren’t you?” Molly inquired, her tone and eyes kind as could be.

“Yes” Narcisa confirmed. “Yes, I believed teaching suits me quite well. When I’m not dealing with incompetent seventh-years, that is” she added dourly.

Molly laughed. “Oh, I’m sure you’ll get them back in NEWT shape in no time. Hermione told us a bit about your Potions research. When is it that you’ll get your Mastery?”
“By the end of term, if all goes well.” Narcissa was inwardly giddy at the prospect of receiving her Mastery so soon. It was something she had wanted since she was a little girl.

“It will, I’m sure it will!” Molly said, and Narcissa could tell that she meant it.

Narcissa was working on formulating a response when a breathless Ronald dashed into the living room, his face beet red.

“Mum! Ms. Black! Oh, uh, there’s, uh, there’s someone you should see!” He yapped in a breathless groan.

“Move, Ronald. It’s time I speak with my sister. Will you excuse us, Molly?” came a silky smooth voice from behind him.

Narcissa felt her blood turn cold in her veins; she had gone years on end without hearing that voice, but it was unmistakable. She felt as if she had just heard it pleading with her in her personal library at Malfoy Manor.

Andromeda walked into the comfortable space, beautiful and cold as Bellatrix had once been.

“Happy Christmas, Cissy.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Don't get accustomed to this onslaught of chapters... But it turned out putting a little work into this story helped me in more ways than one.

ALSO, quite a few people messaged me on FFNet asking if I meant to imply Blackcest in my previous chapter. Just to make it clear, the answer is uh... No. Sorry if that's what you're after, but I'm so not comfortable with writing anything in that vein.

Anyway, thank you for your continued readership and support!

~Naralanis

Narcissa could tell part of Molly desperately wanted to stay. Andromeda’s gaze, however, was enough for the woman to slowly stand and make her way out with nary a glance to spare in her direction. Narcissa, for her part, could only stand and stare at the apparition that stood before her very eyes.

Seeing Andromeda hurt much more than she ever expected. The two oldest Black sisters had always looked incredibly alike – some even mistook them for twins early in life. But in living with Bellatrix post-Azkaban, Narcissa came to realize she had forgotten her oldest sister’s cold, devastating beauty. Andromeda looked so much like her it was like seeing a long-forgotten memory of Bellatrix.

“Don’t I deserve a greeting back? Where are your manners, Cissy?” Andromeda drawled, so much like Bellatrix her voice sent chills down Narcissa’s spine.

“I shouldn’t be here.” She gasped. Her heart felt like it could burst at any moment; she couldn’t stand hearing Andromeda’s voice coming out of this body that looked so much like Bellatrix.

“Shouldn’t you? I heard you were invited.” Andromeda said with a quirk of her eyebrow. “In fact, I heard you’ve been invited for years. How interesting you decide to turn up when I’m away.”

“I have overstepped. My apologies” Narcissa said coolly to mask her trepidation. She took a step in the opposite direction, decided on leaving the premises as soon as she could.

“Ah, I see leaving family isn’t so hard after all. If we’re still even family, that is.”

Narcissa froze in her tracks, shocked at Andromeda’s disappointed tone. Her voice was tremulous when she spoke again.

“Do not... do not even presume to understand...”

“Understand what, Narcissa? How difficult it is to lose your family? To be alone? Believe me, I understand perfectly well.” Andromeda hissed. Her words sounded angry, yet her features revealed only deep sadness.

This wasn’t how Narcissa ever imagined it would go. In fact, she had never dared imagine a
reunion with Andromeda at all – this was all too much. She couldn’t pick one feeling or emotion to go with; there were too many swirling at the surface: anger, sadness, and so, so much guilt.

“I lost everyone. My sisters. Mt husband. My darling daughter, my Nymphadora.” Andromeda said, her tone getting sadder every word she spoke. “And then, my baby sister, my only family in this world, continuously avoided me like the dragon pox. I thought you needed space. Imagine my surprise when I finally do hear from you, it’s through Gringotts.” She now sounded accusatory. “After all these years, you were trying to buy my forgiveness? I don’t want your bloody money!”

“Drommie...” Narcissa murmured through tears she felt ready to surface. Andromeda raised a hand to stop her speaking.

“I wanted to come see you; Merlin, how I wanted to. Every letter unanswered was like another stab in my heart, until I stopped trying. It just hurt too much.” Her eyes were angry now. “But not as much as those blasted letters from Gringotts.”

“It hurt me, too!” Narcissa defended, hating the way her voice cracked. “How could I see you, Drommie? After everything I’ve done – to you, to your family, your friends? How could I just come back into your life after being this cold-hearted monster for so long?”

Narcissa could see her statement had shocked Andromeda, but she had found some strength to keep going.

“How could I ever write you? How could I beg for your forgiveness when it is the very thing I least deserve in this world?” She practically sobbed. “I sent you away.”

Andromeda didn’t look sad or angry any longer; she looked puzzled.

“You what?”

“That night” Narcissa hissed in pain; her heart felt like it would give out. The memory carried by her nightmare was still too fresh in her mind. “When Bella found out about the letters. I sent you away.”

Andromeda’s expression took a turn to dumbfounded. “You saved me, Cissy.” Andromeda pointed out, her voice suddenly gentle. “I can’t imagine what Bellatrix would have done to me had you not expelled me from your library – Merlin, I can’t imagine what she did to you afterward.”

Narcissa visibly shuddered at the memory of Bellatrix’s Cruciatux, made fresh by her dream. Before she knew it, Andromeda had crossed the distance between them; her hands tentatively found Narcissa’s shoulders. Though the touch was timid at best, Narcissa could not contain her shiver from the long-lost contact.

“You’re all I have, Cissy.” Andromeda whispered sadly.

“Don’t say that.” Narcissa bit back. “You have a grandson – whose parents are dead because of a madman I put myself and my family behind. I’m part of the reason why Ted’s dead, Dromeda. Ted, Remus... Nymphadora.”

Andromeda’s grip suddenly tightened on her sister’s shoulders; it hurt to the point of bruises.

“Bellatrix. Not you.” She said resolutely.

“Andromeda...” Narcissa began to protest; surely her sister couldn’t be so blind?
“Bellatrix killed my Nymphadora, Narcissa. Not you.” Andromeda declared with strength to her tone.

“And I was on Bellatrix’s side for most of my life.”

“Not when it mattered.” Andromeda argued.

“Especially when it mattered!” Narcissa cried. “When you ran away, when Bella married, when she lost Ophelia, when you came for me, when the War began again – every time except one, I was right there by her side! I stood by when she did all those terrible things, I stood by while she tortured an innocent girl in my home. How can I see you again when I can never be forgiven for any of it?” She gasped, her shoulders shaking from the force of her sobs.

Narcissa desperately tried to free herself from Andromeda’s vise-like grip, only to be dismayed when the latter only tightened her hold, bringing her into an embrace. There was nothing the blonde could do but wait for her sobs to cease in her sister’s arms.

“You’re a bloody idiot, Cissy.” Andromeda said out of the blue.

“Excuse me?” Narcissa babbled, confused.

“One letter, for Merlin’s sake. One bloody letter and I could have told you I’ve already forgiven you!” Andromeda hissed in equal parts amusement and frustration.

“What?”

“Face it, Cissy. The only reason you haven’t come see me is not because I can’t forgive you – it’s because you cannot forgive yourself.” Andromeda said sagely. “I’ve forgiven you ages ago. You’d know it if you had opened even one of the letters I sent you.”

Narcissa straightened herself in her sister’s embrace, thinking she probably looked just as idiotic as she felt. “What do you mean?”

Andromeda rolled her eyes. “What’s happened to you? You were never this slow.” She laughed, brushing a rogue lock of blonde hair from Narcissa’s pale face. “I’ve said it, and I shall repeat it. I’ve forgiven you, Cissy.”

Narcissa shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“There’s nothing to understand” Andromeda declared emphatically. “I’ve been robbed of my sister for far too long. I want you in my life – you’ve been out of it long enough.”

“I don’t understand” Narcissa repeated. “How is it so easy for you? How can you forgive me when I myself cannot?”

“Cissy. Look around you – look at where you’re standing, where you’ve been for the past hours. Look at where you work and with whom! We have all forgiven you. We cannot let this War tear us apart any longer – it has destroyed enough.” Andromeda asserted, her eyes boring deep into Narcissa’s blues.

“I don’t deserve anybody’s kindness, least of all yours.” Narcissa said, her confusion still evident. “I don’t understand how you give it so freely.”

“Because I had no one to give it to.” Andromeda said with a shoulder shrug. “I give it to you freely – no need to buy it from me with your gold” she quipped. Narcissa found it in herself to laugh.
“Your gold” she affirmed strongly. “All I’ve been sending you is what is rightfully yours as one of the last descendants of the House of Black” she pointed out. “You’ve rejected every one of my attempts to give it to you thus far, so I’ve set it aside on a separate account for... for your grandson.”

Tears sprung from Andromeda’s eyes. “Bloody hell, Cissy. With such kindness, why are you surprised we are so ready to forgive you? Why can you not forgive yourself?” She said with a tender smile.

“I’ve got too much to atone for.” Narcissa said simply. It was the truth. There would never be enough atoning.

“Consider yourself atoned. Harry told me about Black Manor. He told me about your work in St. Mungos. He told me about your Potion’s mastery. You’ve been forgiven, Narcissa – by all except yourself.”

Narcissa couldn’t help the fresh onslaught of tears. She returned Andromeda’s embrace with a fervor she did not know she possessed, taking all the time in the world to get lost in her sister’s warmth and comfort like she couldn’t have since she was a little girl.

“Merlin, you haven’t changed a bit. So emotional” Andromeda quipped with a laugh, though her own eyes were wet with tears. She leaned deeper into the tight embrace. “You even smell the same. Eucalyptus.” She remarked, drawing a chuckle from her sister.

The tender reunion that had been so fraught with guilt and regret came to a close much the same way it had started: with an inebriated presence running into the room with a belated warning.

“Narcissa, we’ve got to scram! Andromeda’s here; sorry I lost track of...” Hermione stopped dead on her tracks at the scene before her: Narcissa and Andromeda not only in the same room, but hugging.

“I think you’re a little late, Hermione.” Andromeda said with a wide grin. “But don’t you worry, she’s safe and sound.”

Narcissa rolled her eyes at Andromeda’s joking tone. “Very funny, Drommie.”

“Look at her face, Cissy! She thought I’d kill you or something.” Andromeda laughed. Hermione still looked like a deer caught in headlights.

“Cissy? Drommie? I take it things went, uh... well?” she asked, testing the waters.

“Yes, Ms. Granger” Narcissa said. Though her intervention had come too little, too late, Narcissa was glad.

“In any case, I must go” Andromeda quipped. “I’ve left Teddy home while I... sorted this out.” she confessed.

“I’m glad we... sorted it.” Narcissa added awkwardly. They had sorted one thing yes... but how to sort out decades of their lives, missed by choice and circumstance? She believed they would eventually find a way to navigate it – it would open old wounds, that much was certain, but it only took one look at an Andromeda happy with her presence to reassure Narcissa it would all be worth it in the end.

“So am I.” Andromeda’s gaze turned intense. “Don’t be a stranger, Cissy. I couldn’t bear it.”
“I won’t, I promise. And I shall read your letters.” Narcissa vowed. Andromeda looked confused.

“I won’t need to write you, I hope. You can Floo me anytime.” She pointed out kindly.

“I mean the ones you’ve sent me.” Narcissa said tenderly. “I’ve kept them all.”
Narcissa’s first Christmas morning in Hogwarts was an odd one. Besides Minerva and Madam Pomfrey, she was the first Professor to arrive at the Staff Table. There were only a few scant groupings of students at their House Tables – not a single Slytherin among them.

“Happy Christmas, Ms. Black” called Minerva once she caught sight of the Potions Professor. The Headmistress had broken out her Christmas-themed tartan robes for the occasion; they made her look comically less severe and more like a kind grandmother than the strict Headmistress they all knew.

“Likewise, Headmistress, Poppy.” Narcissa greeted back as she sat. “Nary a soul in sight this morning.” She commented. Pomfrey laughed.

“Oh, I believe Ms. Granger will be making her way down soon – as soon as the dose of Caldwell’s Crapulence Concoction I gave her has any effect.” she said with a humorous grin.

“I take it dinner went well at the Weasleys, then?” Minerva inquired.

“Very well” Narcissa confirmed, still giddy from her reunion with Andromeda. She would spend some time during the holiday catching up on years of letters she had not dared open. “I met with Andromeda. All is well.”

Minerva broke out in a genuine smile. “I’m very glad. It’s about time.” She quipped kindly.

Narcissa was happy to engage in pleasant conversation as Christmas breakfast continued. Apparently, a few students attempted to charm snowballs to fly around the Great Hall the night before, only to have them go rogue and begin an impromptu snowball fight. Minerva spoke of the occurrence with a bit of annoyance, but the Potions Professor could plainly tell Madam Pomfrey was thoroughly amused – as she tended to be when shenanigans did not result in visits to the Hospital Wing.

After a good half hour of tea and talking, Hermione finally dragged herself down for breakfast, her face still tinged slightly green – a common side effect of the Crapulence Concoction she’d had to down after a night of holiday drinking.

“Good morning, Ms. Granger” Narcissa called with a knowing smirk.

“You don’t look too worse for the wear” the blonde said with a laugh.

“Thank Merlin for potions such as Caldwell’s. I don’t think I’d survive the Muggle way.” Hermione quipped, groggily scooping some eggs into her plate.

“What is the Muggle way for curing drunkenness?” Narcissa asked, her curiosity piqued.

“Paracetamol, a glass of water, and a prayer, usually.” Hermione grumbled.

“Para-what?”

“Paracetamol. It’s medicine. Muggles sometimes use it for headaches.” The Muggleborn explained, remarkably patient considering her state.

“I see. Is it effective?”

Hermione laughed. “Not nearly as much as a Crapulence Concoction!”

Hermione’s mood -- and overall physical state – much improved after breakfast. On a whim, she invited Narcissa for a walk on the snow-covered grounds, and was quite pleased when the blonde agreed. The two left the Great Hall directly for the castle courtyard. As soon as they crossed the doors, Narcissa wordlessly let a warming charm drift onto them.

“I had forgotten how beautiful Hogwarts looked in winter” Narcissa said as they walked. Hermione led the pair through the path she usually took in her late-night walks – towards Hagrid’s hut, then down by the edge of the Forbidden Forest and back to the Black Lake. They had just passed the groundskeeper’s residence; the little hill they found themselves on provided a breathtaking view of the castle.

Hermione turned to look, squinting with the brightness of the sunlight reflected by the thick blanket of snow. It was beautiful indeed.

“It’s quite something, isn’t it? Remind me to bring you back at sunset – the snow turns a million different colors as the sun sets.” She turned to face Narcissa.

“I wanted to apologize, for not really keeping an eye on you yesterday. Though I think it turned out OK.”

Narcissa smiled. “Yes, thank you. I feel quite stupid, to be perfectly frank” she confessed with a muted whisper.

“Stupid? Why?”

“So many things” the blonde said, waving a hand around herself “but particularly for wasting so much time in reconnecting with Andromeda. Having her there turned out to be the greatest gift I’ve ever received.”

“Ah!” Hermione suddenly exclaimed, startling her companion. “Gifts! I completely forgot” she yapped, comically slapping her own forehead. “I’ve got you something, but I must have been truly sloshed yesterday to have forgotten to give it to you.”

Narcissa looked taken aback. “Ms. Granger, there’s no need for you to give me anything. I certainly did not get you a gift” she added guiltily.

“Are you joking? You added me to the Black Family Blood Wards -- that’s the best thing anyone
has ever given me. The very thought of Walburga turning in her grave is just delightful!” Hermione proclaimed with just enthusiasm for Narcissa to know she truly meant it. The Potions professor could only chuckle.

“I guess that may count for something – certainly not as a Christmas gift, but something.” She conceded.

“Tough luck. I’ve got you something and I’m actually excited to give it to you” Hermione declared, catching Narcissa off-guard with her eagerness. “Would you like to come up with me to my quarters? I’ve left it there last night.”

“Lead the way” Narcissa said with a grin, though she was puzzled.

The two made it back to the castle just in time for Narcissa’s warming charm to wear off. The corridors were eerily silent, with most remaining students choosing to linger in the warmth and comfort of their dormitories.

Once they finally arrived at Hermione’s private quarters, Narcissa could not contain her surprise at how the Transfiguration professor kept them. She had known Hermione to be a bookworm as a child; as a Professor, Narcissa guessed she was impeccably neat and thoroughly organized in every aspect of her life.

She had been entirely off the mark.

While Hermione’s office and sitting room had quite a cozy feel, they were littered with books, papers, academic journals, and stray pieces of parchment. Narcissa counted at least four quills, all half-used and stained with ink. Hermione’s fabled reputation as a bookworm very clearly preceded her – there were more books cluttering the space than anything else. The brunette even had no fewer than five portable chalkboards, two of which were floating neatly behind her messy desk, covered with complicated strings of Ancient Runes and complex Arithmancy equations. There was a massive birdcage in one corner – the bird was absent, but the cage was mercifully clean. At another corner, Narcissa spotted a haphazard reading nook, surrounded with several of the books Hermione had taken from Black Manor.

Hermione must have sensed Narcissa’s shock, for she turned to explain herself with a sheepish look. “My apologies. I promise it doesn’t usually look this... disorganized.”

“Merlin” Narcissa muttered before she could help it. “You are aware we’re on holiday, Ms. Granger?”

“Perfectly” Hermione retorted with a roll of her eyes. “That’s precisely why it looks like that. I got carried away with research. I promise you I’m normally much tidier than this.”

With that, the brunette stepped into a doorway that most likely led to her private bedchamber. Narcissa caught a glimpse of dark woods and drapes that were not the expected Gryffindor red, but periwinkle blue. She busied herself with examining one of the floating chalkboards as she heard Hermione rummaging through her bedroom.

It was fascinating, Narcissa mused. In her school years, she had been quite adept at both Runes and Arithmancy, especially the former, since her family had always been a kind of authority on the subject. Still, Hermione’s dusty scribbles were exceedingly complex; from what she could understand, the young woman had been trying to use a few select principles of Arithmancy in an attempt to reorganize and restructure the age-old Warding charms from Black Manor. Narcissa was nothing short of impressed, and was eager to learn more about that particular theory -- she had
never seen the two disciplines being used concurrently in such a way.

“Here it is” came Hermione’s voice from behind. Narcissa turned to see the brunette with a small, wooden square box in her hands. Somehow, the young woman’s posture seemed awfully timid in comparison to her bubbliness from just moments before.

Hermione seemed to take note of Narcissa’s silent gaze. “Sorry.” She said. “Just wondering if I went a bit overboard with this.” She added cryptically.

Narcissa did not know how to respond to the pronouncement, so she let Hermione continue.

“I just wanted to say, it’s been really good to have you here as a colleague, Narcissa” she said, and Narcissa could see she spoke truthfully. “I know we’ve had our differences, but I’ve greatly enjoyed getting to know you. We’ve had a difficult past, the both of us. So, I wanted to give you a little something to remind you to look to the future.”

With that, she shyly handed the box to the older woman. Narcissa murmured a nearly-silent thank-you, but she knew Hermione had heard her.

The little box was beautiful by itself; an intricate intercalation of expertly fitted pieces of wood, alternating in color and tone. While it wasn’t heavy per se, she could feel that whatever it contained had a considerable weight taking into account its size.

Overboard, the brunette had said? That simple statement had filled Narcissa with trepidation for whatever reason. Talk about the past – and the future – usually had that effect.

With her heart beating a bit faster than she’d like, Narcissa clicked the box open. She saw what looked to be a silver chain inside, then loops, no, rings of metal surrounding glass. She gasped, looping the polished chain delicately on her fingers and lifting the item from the velvet that surrounded it, just to make sure she wasn’t going mad.

She wasn’t. Hermione Granger had given her a Time-Turner.

“How...?” She didn’t even know where to begin.

“It’s broken” Hermione was quick to say. “That’s part of the message, I guess. Can’t change the past, look to the future.” She suddenly pulled a face. “Sorry, this all sounded much better in my head, I promise.”

“I thought all Time-Turners had been destroyed.” Narcissa said, still in awe at the instrument. Its metal rings moved slowly on their own accord, but the glass was cracked, and the enchanted sand usually housed within was noticeably absent.

“Broken beyond repair, perhaps, but not destroyed, not completely. Not all of them.” Hermione said, a hint of sadness in her voice. “It’s a pretty trinket more than anything else. But I happen to like its meaning.”

Narcissa could only stare at the magical apparatus in her hand, overcome by wonder. She had known about Time-Turners, of course – the Malfoy Family even had a few that were turned over to the Ministry for safekeeping shortly after she married Lucius – but she had never seen, much less held one before. It was even a little difficult to process how powerful the little trinket had once been. But now, stripped of its function, it carried much deeper meaning. She at once understood what Hermione meant by going overboard, but Narcissa did not mind it at all. She was grateful.

“Thank you” she said in a hoarse whisper. Narcissa hoped Hermione could tell just how much she
meant it. “For everything.”

“Everything?” Hermione asked in confusion.

“This” she held up the Time-Turner. “For being so accepting and kind to me, when you of all people have no reason to be. For your conversation, for your company... For dragging me to the Weasleys, for helping me reconcile with Andromeda, even if inadvertently. Thank you for believing in me.”

Hermione suddenly looked bashful. “Narcissa, you give me far too much credit.” She argued.

“I hardly think so.” Narcissa countered, grinning from ear to ear. “It is thanks to you and your friends – thanks to you I’ve been allowed to start anew, even after everything I’ve done. That, Hermione, is the most priceless gift. It’s because of you I even have the chance to think about the future.”

Hermione only smiled.

Narcissa lingered in Hermione’s private offices for long after the brunette had gifted her the Time-Turner. She was eager to talk about the intensive research the young woman was so obviously absorbed in. While both of them had been selecting tomes from the Black Library for weeks, Narcissa hadn’t thought about how far Hermione would go if left to her own devices. From what she could see, it was very far indeed.

“Explain it to me again.” She asked, practically giddy with her excitement. Her life after Hogwarts was wretchedly deprived of academia and intelligent conversation, and she hadn’t realized how much she had missed the thrill of discussing research with someone else until Hermione demonstrated the same level of unbridled excitement. It was refreshing.

“Well” Hermione preened, fully aware Narcissa was impressed, and relishing in the feeling. “I’ve borrowed the Arithmantic Transmutation Theory in order to see how I could adapt the existing Runes that form the estate’s Blood Wards. In theory, one should be able to tweak and adapt the runes so they may perform a different function.”

“I understand how one may create and mutate the arithmantic composition of a spell or enchantment; but how would this practice translate to ancient runes? They were invented before the advent of numerology.” Narcissa countered.

“Indeed” Hermione agreed, but there was a twinkle in her eyes that belied the thrill she felt at explaining it “But think about how many properties a spell, or even something as simple as a single number, may have. There are several magical properties to the number seven, for example – the same is true for every spell, every charm, every curse. The true challenge lies in redirecting its objective.” She said, motioning to the various sketches on one of her many chalkboards.

“Just as like any spell or number, Runes have their own multitude of properties.” She continued excitedly.

“But these wards were established before Wizardkind even carried their own wands. How could we
establish their originally intended properties?” pressed Narcissa, amazed but skeptical.

“Therein lies the challenge” Hermione conceded, her brows furrowed. “We know it can be done: your relatives changed how the wards would deal with undesirables through the years, though the last significant change was about four hundred years ago. We need to find records on how they managed; that would be a good start.”

“That will take forever.” Narcissa said with a pout. “Is there any other way?”

“There might be one, but I’m not sure if it would take any less time, to be perfectly frank.” Hermione said. The two women stared intently at the messy chalkboard with furrowed brows.

“Well, what is it?”

“I’d need to see specifically which Runes were used. For that, we need to find the exact location of the original wards that were created solely by using Runes.” She said, an expression of utter annoyance overcoming her features.

“Merlin! That would be impossible: the property is older than Merlin himself, not to mention enormously large. And who’s to say more Runed wards were not added in later years? How could we determine which were made when?” She countered, mirroring Hermione’s expression of discontent.

“Now you see what a headache this is.” Hermione quipped. She stared at her sketches in deep concentration. “Of course, perhaps a simpler solution would be to create a ward within a ward, or a cancellation ward, if you will – providing the initial wards won’t have provisions against that sort of thing” she mused out loud.

“Now there’s an idea. That would be much simpler, no?”

“Yes and no” Hermione grunted with a defeated sigh. “If we do it and it works, that’s all well and good. However, if the existing wards were projected against something like that, the consequences could be disastrous.”

“Such as?” Narcissa asked, already dreading the answer.

“Best case-scenario... the wards close completely. No one comes in or out.” She took into account Narcissa’s expression of disbelief. “Worst case... Instant death – knowing your family, I wouldn’t be surprised.” She said. “No offense.”

“None taken” the blonde sighed with a shrug. “Is there a way to find out whether the wards were projected against creating a... a cancellation ward?”

“It takes us right back to where we started.” Hermione proclaimed. “Either we find accurate records detailing what they were projected for, or we find the original runes.”

“Well... that’s disappointing.” Narcissa lamented, leaning against Hermione’s desk and pinching the bridge of her nose in defeat.

Hermione found both the gesture and the position oddly intriguing – Narcissa was never anything other than perfectly composed, no matter the occasion. Now, she languidly leaned back; the soft rays of light coming from Hermione’s open window illuminated her golden hair while leaving part of her features obscured. Hermione caught herself staring for much longer than was considered appropriate – she immediately felt the blood rushing to her necks and cheeks. Thankfully, Narcissa was too intrigued by the Runes on the board to notice.
“Sorry” Hermione thought aloud.

“Whatsoever for? This is already much more than we had – it’s just disappointing so many patients and patrons will have to wait so much longer.” Narcissa replied, genuine concern marring her beautiful features.

Hermione was thankful Narcissa hadn’t realized what she was apologizing for, but she was also quite alarmed by a startling realization of her own – one that she had been moderately aware of for quite some time, but that then and there, after their shared enthusiasm for the blasted runes on her chalkboard, made her breathing hitch and her heart thump a little erratically. It suddenly hit her like a galloping Hippogriff

Narcissa Black was breathtakingly beautiful.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

MAN, this chapter turned massive. I planned on splitting it, but didn't really like how I'd end up doing it, so there ya go. Had a bit of fun with this one. Hope you enjoy!

~Naralanis

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Saying Hermione felt relieved once Narcissa excused herself from her quarters to spend Christmas Day with her family was the understatement of the century. Hermione thanked her lucky stars Narcissa did not seem to notice anything amiss in her behaviour as she saw the blonde out. It was a damn miracle too – Hermione was sure Narcissa would be able to hear her heartbeat pumping away maddeningly by the strength of pulsing she felt in her eardrums.

It was shock, it had to be. Such an idiotic realization to have, Hermione thought bitterly. Every wizard and witch on this green earth knew Narcissa Black was beautiful; that wasn’t exactly news. Knowing she was beautiful wasn’t exactly news; what was news was how Hermione’s stomach turned itself into little knots whenever she looked at the blonde too long.

Hermione wanted to bang her head on her desk in frustration, but she’d end up knocking a bottle of ink or several in her path of self-destruction. There had to be a logical explanation.

And there was, she suddenly thought, overtaken by a wave of optimism. It was Narcissa’s mysterious allure, Hermione was sure of it. It wasn’t that she was attracted by the woman, Merlin no. That was evidently out of the realm of possibility. She was simply intrigued, because Narcissa Black was an enigma that needed solving. And Hermione Granger was, first and foremost, most importantly, above all else, a problem solver.

That had to be it, the young professor concluded, more than happy to ignore the wretched shred of doubt that tormented her as soon as she even thought of it. She had other things to attend to.

“Happy Christmas, Narcissa. Come in!” called Astoria’s pleasant voice.

Narcissa walked into the modest foyer with a smile – she could already hear her son and grandson in the kitchen, probably up to something that would see half the house covered in flour before they were done. It was absolutely heart-warming.

“Happy Christmas, Astoria. How are you coming along?” She said, linking arms with her daughter-in-law as the two made their way to the dining room. Astoria showed practically no signs of being pregnant despite nearing her fourth months. Just as with Scorpius, the young woman’s pregnancy would likely only become blatantly obvious in the later months – with her firstborn, the Malfoys had managed to keep the secret up to the seventh month.
“Very well! No morning sickness with this little one thus far, but I’ll let Draco tell you all about my odd cravings. He didn’t appreciate having to track down a bulbous Norwegian wild garlic for my soup the other day.”

“That’s because I’m positive that blasted thing doesn’t exist!” Quipped Draco, carrying a giggling Scorpius on his shoulders.

Any worries Narcissa had about being a grandmother at her age always melted away at the sight of her chubby grandson laughing away. Seeing Draco’s family always made her want to cry a little – tears of happiness for the opportunity he had to build a family of his own, free of the awful burden she and Lucius had unwittingly placed upon his young shoulders. Nothing made her happier than seeing Draco smile like he did now.

“Of course they do!” Astoria huffed indignantly.

“You two can bicker on your own time” Narcissa said, stretching her arms out to Scorpius. “Let me hold this beautiful boy – it’s time for his Grandmother to spoil him.”

True to her word, Narcissa had spoiled the kid rotten that Christmas Day. As the Malfoys settled in after a good Christmas roast to exchange gifts, Scorpius was clearly having the time of his life opening present after present from his doting grandmother. Narcissa openly laughed when Astoria turned a little green at the toy broom set she had gifted him – Draco, however, was incredibly excited.

“Look, Scorpius, you’ll fly just like Daddy!” He exclaimed cheerfully, kneeling with his son among the piles of torn gift-wrap. Before long, little Scorpius was being herded by his father on a diminutive broom that floated about two feet off the ground. Narcissa couldn’t tell who was having more fun going around the living room – Scorpius, who grasped the broom handle with pure childish delight, or Draco, who followed on foot grinning ear to ear.

“Narcissa, you know I was hoping to not get this kid on a broom for at least a few more years!” Astoria chided her humorously.

“Nonsense!” Narcissa quipped over her cup of tea. “Why, Draco had just turned three when Lucius bought him his first broom.” She reasoned.

“Yes, I’ve heard that story” Astoria retorted with a chuckle. “Didn’t that first broom also lead to his first trip to St. Mungo’s, as well as several broken heirlooms?”

Narcissa quirked a brow with mirth. “It certainly taught Lucius not to leave his things everywhere” she commented. Astoria sighed dramatically.

“Here I thought I could keep this house intact for a couple more years...”

Narcissa laughed at her daughter-in-law. “Dream on, Astoria. I heard of what little Scorpius did with the taps – he’s remarkably young to show such magic. He’ll give you plenty of trouble yet!” She added, practically giggling at Astoria’s groan.

“Although, that reminds me” Narcissa continued more seriously. “Draco! Come over here. I’ve got another gift to you two.”

Draco wordlessly spelled Scorpius’ broom to keep floating in lazy circles as he flopped back down onto the couch. Astoria seemed to have sensed Narcissa wanted to discuss something important.

“Now, I know how you two are sick of hearing me complain about this house.” She began.
“Merlin, here we go again” Draco complained. Narcissa silenced him with a glare.

“Don’t you start with me, young man. This house was perfect for a young couple just starting their life together. But you have Scorpius now, plus another little one on the way.”

“Mother, the baby won’t come for a good few months. Could we not have this discussion then?”

“Absolutely not.” Narcissa retorted firmly. “Scorpius’ room used to be your home office. You have no space for a nursery, for a library, for entertaining.” She reasoned.

“We’re wizards. We’ll make the space.” Draco countered.

“Unacceptable. You won’t magic a house for years on end – that is simply not practical. I want your children to have a good, happy, carefree childhood. This gift is not for you, but for them.” She produced a small box from her robes, handing it to Draco with a look that brokered no argument. “It’s time for them to make happy memories.”

Draco took the box from his mother with a sigh of defeat. He quickly undid the white satin bow; his hand paused on the polished lid for only a moment before opening.

Inside was a sizeable skeleton key made of gleaming silver. Draco could hear Astoria’s muted gasp from his side.

“Mother...”

“Do not start with your protestations, Draco. My mind is quite made up.” Narcissa interjected. “I am not a Malfoy any longer; I don’t belong in the Manor. You’re the head of the family now – take them there. Make it a happy place.”

“How can I?” he whispered, uncertain.

“Redecorate, for a start” Narcissa quipped, coaxing a smile form him. “Look around you, Draco. At your beautiful wife, at your son. The moment you step through those doors, you’ll have started already.” She said, holding Draco’s cheek like she had done so many times before. No matter how he had grown, no matter that he had children of his own, she would always see him as the cooing bundle of happiness Lucius had placed onto her chest after a night of pain all those years ago. He was worth every tear, every wound, everything.

“What about you, Narcissa?” Astoria asked, tears of happiness in her eyes. “Please, come live with us, at least for the summers, when you’re not at Hogwarts.”

“We shall see” Narcissa conceded, very much aware Astoria would not let the matter drop. “For now, I am quite happy where I am. But do not even entertain the notion I won’t be visiting – and often!”

“Hermione, dear, you’ve barely touched your pudding – and it’s your favourite!”

Hermione played with her spoon for a bit, her mind wandering. “Sorry mum” she apologized, still a bit distracted.

As was her custom every Christmas Day, Hermione went to visit her parents. After the war, she and the DMLE had tirelessly worked for over a year to track Wendell and Monica Wilkins down
and restore their memories.

Removing her parents’ memories of her had possibly been the hardest thing Hermione had ever done. Finding them after their move to Australia had been a frantic exercise in hopelessness for far longer than she had anticipated them. Nothing in this world, Wizard or Muggle, could even begin to describe the relief she felt when she not only found them, but was able to fully restore their memories. That was her grandest accomplishment, as far as she was concerned. Not her part in the war, not her Order of Merlin, not her teaching, but her parents’ memories of her.

Of course, William and Katherine Granger’s first reaction to the news – memory erasure, life as the Wilkins, then memory reconstitution – was of complete and utter outrage, especially when Hermione explained the circumstances that led her to alter their memories in the first place.

Knowing your only child is off fighting a shadow war would do that.

Thankfully, the Grangers had taken long, laborious steps to repair their fractured relationship. With time, Hermione’s parents came to understand why she had done what she did, though they would never truly approve.

Hermione, for her part, was just glad to have them back.

“I know what that is. It’s a boy, innit?” her father said, comically narrowing his eyes. Hermione accidentally inhaled some of her pudding, and the resulting coughs only made him laugh. “See! I told you, Katie, ‘Mione’s thinking about a boy. What, with that far off look and all.”

“Not a ‘boy’, for Merlin’s sake. I’m thirty!” Hermione protested over her coughing fit.

“Fine, a man then. Tell us about him.” William pressed, still laughing.

“Oh, Will, leave her alone. Whenever she does find somebody, I’m sure she’ll tell us.” Katherine defended, only to immediately look at her daughter with an odd look. “Right, darling?”

Hermione glared at her mother. “There’s nobody! I’m just thinking about some research I’m doing, that’s all.”

“Oh, what about? Anything interesting?” William asked, his interest evident. After their reacquaintance to the Wizarding World, William and Katherine had resumed their friendship with the Weasleys – Hermione’s father was known to spend hours with Arthur in the latter’s shed, discussing Muggle objects and how tinkering with magic would affect them.

“Very, actually” Hermione said, happy to talk about research and academia – it had always been her forte. “Though quite complicated, if I’m honest. I’m trying to find a way to alter very, very old spells to do something different than they were designed to.” She simplified. There was no need to go into the intricacies of Runes and Ancient Blood Wards.

“Sounds difficult. What are they designed to do?” questioned Katherine, drawn in at once.

“Well, they’re called wards. They were made to keep certain people out of a property.” Hermione explained.

“Like a magical gate, then?” William asked.

“Of sorts” Hermione confirmed, trying to summarize it in the simplest terms. “But invisible. It keeps certain people out, prevents others from even seeing the place. We want to make them not keep people out, but it’s quite hard since the magic used is terribly old and unbelievably complex.”
she explained.

“We? Who’s we?”

“Oh, I’m helping Narcissa. Narcissa Black; she’s the Potions Professor this year.

“Black? Is she related to that man you and Harry spoke about, what was his name...”

“Sirius” Hermione said, slowly getting uncomfortable with where the conversation was heading. “Yes, they were cousins. Narcissa is also Draco’s mother.”

“Ah!” Katherine exclaimed in recognition. “Yes, of course. I don’t think we’ve ever met her, have we?” she asked. Katherine adored Draco – he had taken the Grangers to visit Hermione in St. Mungos every day once her mental state deteriorated. Hermione had never expected it of him, and yet, there he was with her parents, day in and day out, unwavering. She was glad he had grown to be such a good friend.

“Yes. She’s turning her old family estate into a Wizarding Wellness Ward; she plans to treat several magical maladies there, but we’re running into some issues because of the wards I’m researching” Hermione explained, fighting the blush that she felt creeping up for Merlin only knew why.

“Oh, that’s wonderful! So good of her. I imagine her family home must be quite big then, no?”

Hermione could only laugh at that. “You have no idea, mum. The Blacks are one of the oldest, richest Wizarding families in Britain. Remember when we visited Chatsworth House? It’s got nothing on Black Manor.”

The Grangers seemed suitably surprised, and with reason.

“Good God, they must have been rich indeed then” William grumbled.

Hermione wished she could put into words the amount of wealth amassed by families such as the Malfoys and the Blacks. The thought had just occurred to her – Narcissa, the only lawful Black descendant since Andromeda’s banishment and recipient of most of the Malfoy fortune. She might have even gotten the Lestrange fortune, seeing as Bellatrix and Rodolphus were the last of that line. In any case, one thing was crystal clear: the woman was filthy rich.

“Were and still are. Narcissa is the sole heir of the Black family, plus she got the bulk of the Malfoy fortune when she divorced Draco’s father. She must be the wealthiest woman in Wizarding Britain, or something like that.”

Katherine laughed incredulously. “You don’t say! And she teaches at Hogwarts, you said?” she pondered for a moment. “I wonder why such a woman would choose to teach if she has so much money lying around. It’s hardly the most rewarding profession.”

“Hey! You’re talking to a teacher, mum.” Hermione quipped, annoyed.

“Didn’t mean anything by it, honey. But you’ve got to admit, it’s not the easiest job in the world” her mother reasoned. Hermione could only sigh.

“Maybe, but it has its own kind of reward. And in Narcissa’s case, it’s the first time she’s been able to do anything for herself.”

Her parents’ looks of confusion were enough to make her groan. It was time for another in-depth
analysis of Pure-blooded customs; sometimes she forgot how little her parents actually understood of the Wizarding World.

“Narcissa and her ex-husband were part of very old, traditionalist Pure-blooded families. Their marriage was arranged, and Narcissa wasn’t permitted to work.”

“That sounds... old-fashioned.” Katherine observed.

“Sounds utterly backward.” William quipped.

“Sort of. Traditionalist families are like the nobility of old: several rules, restrictions, certain etiquette and customs... All of that is sort of a big deal to them. Narcissa was a good student in school and wanted to be a Healer, but being married forbade her from ever seeking a career. Her role was as the Lady of the House at Malfoy Manor” Hermione clarified. Her look turned dour.

“She followed her husband as he followed that lunatic we fought against.”

“So she was on the other side?” Katherine questioned.

“Yes, so was Draco” Hermione said, a little defensively. “She lied to Voldemort in the end. If she hadn’t, I wouldn’t be here.” How strange that the fate of so many had been unwittingly bestowed to the hands of none other than Narcissa Malfoy. How ludicrous could fate and chance be? Hermione would sometimes lie awake at night, wondering what would have happened had Voldemort sent anyone – literally anyone else – to check if Harry had indeed fallen to his curse.

She would be dead, no doubt about it. Her parents would likely still be Wendell and Monica Wilkins – if Death Eaters hadn’t somehow tracked them and killed them. Who knew what the possibilities were?

Hermione left her parents’ house later in the day feeling happy, but drained. It was often difficult to remember how she had fared so well mingling in between two worlds when she was younger. As the years wore on, she found it increasingly odd to be in the Muggle world. The little things, such as switching on the lights or seeing the telly on, had drifted out of her everyday life to such a degree that she was always a bit startled when she returned to her parents’.

It made her feel like she was losing a part of her identity. Hermione didn’t like the idea whatsoever.

The night was young, she thought as she walked through Muggle London, something she had decided on doing after that little identity crisis. After the initial transition, she found that those Muggle sounds were oddly soothing. But she couldn’t just walk around London forever.

Her apparition to Black Manor was almost nearly as unintentional as an apparition could be; one minute she was walking down a darkened alley, the other she walked through the heavy iron gates of the massive estate.

Some more rifling through that massive library would do her mind some good. Maybe Hermione could even find some time to explore the rest of the place; Narcissa had made it quite clear she was welcome to without her company.

So, Hermione took the long way to the main library. She had yet to peruse the entirety of the main house, it was simply too big. The darkened halls were eerie when the only sound echoing from their pristine walls came from her trainers squeaking on the marble.
She tried to imagine what it would be like to be a child in such grandeur. No wonder the Blacks always behaved with such entitlement; how could one not, when surrounded by such splendour from birth? As much as Hermione tried to imagine she would have behaved differently in such circumstances, she found it hard to find any evidence to support it. Being accustomed to servants, grandeur, and so much money had to have some long-lasting effects.

Hermione passed several rooms she had not yet seen in her previous perusals. Narcissa had done a remarkable job in creating a medical care facility out of a family estate, but there were still certain rooms, certain nooks and crannies that belied the building’s initial purpose.

One such room was a small sitting room in the East Wing of the House. It had clearly been connected to sleeping chambers in the past – which had most likely since been turned into patient lodging or other such purpose of more utility. But what caught her eye in the space were the massive bay windows overlooking the manicured gardens.

Hermione instantly recognized them: Narcissa had once stood by them, heavily pregnant, tendrils of light illuminating her from behind. It had been the picture she had seen in Narcissa’s study all those months ago, when she unwittingly intruded the Potions Professor’s quarters.

How odd that the picture was taken there; Hermione had thought it was at Malfoy Manor. Did Lucius frequent Black Manor? If not, then who had snapped the photograph?

Hermione leaned closer to the window; it provided a stunning view to the beautifully arranged beds of flowers surrounding the fountain by the main gates. If she leaned closer still, Hermione thought she’d be able to see as far as the edges of the forested area that delineated the Lycanthrope Readjustment Range. So she did, grasping onto the ledge of the window nook for support.

Almost immediately she felt the forceful tug on her navel that signalled something akin to Portkey travel. The room began to spin, and Hermione instinctively tried to let go of the ledge, only to find it impossible.

She landed heavily in a heap onto a hard floor. Hermione panicked for a brief second upon hearing a loud snap, thinking it was her wand, but the sudden jolt of pain up her arm told her it was her wrist – she was too distracted with the pain to even ponder if she should be relieved or not.

“Augh!” she groaned as she moved, taking a moment to inspect her left wrist. It was definitely broken, just how badly she couldn’t tell. Perhaps a simple Episkey should do the trick, but Hermione did not want to risk doing something wrong without knowing what exactly was broken and how badly.

“Ferula” she intoned with a groan, grateful for the conjured splinter and bandage that magically tightened themselves just enough around her arm to immobilize it, easing her pain considerably. It would have to do.

Hermione turned around to ascertain where she had ended up. The whole room smelled heavily of dust; her body had left a grotesque imprint on the layer of dust covering the floor. It was dark and musty; the only light came through threadbare curtains on the other side of the room. There were few furnishings, all covered with white sheets: a side table, a couch, and a high-backed chair. Wherever she was, Hermione did not plan on staying long enough to find out.

She turned on her heel and concentrated on her private study, clearing her mind for apparition. As she waved her wand, however, there was no crack, no tugging. Nothing but a few measly sparks coming from her wand.
Wherever she was, she couldn’t apparate out. To make matters worse, whatever had served as a Portkey there was nowhere to be seen. That certainly complicated things; she had to find a way out, at least to somewhere that made apparition possible.

Hermione made to walk to the curtains to look outside, but she was startled by a shrill voice coming through the door.

“Who goes there?! Is it you, you insufferable pest? Spoiled, ungrateful child, come and look at me when I am speaking to you!”

Breathing deeply to get over her initial fright, Hermione armed herself with her wand and stepped through the open door into a long corridor, following the sound. Whose house had she been transported to?

“Hello?” She called tentatively.

“Come to me when I speak to you, child!” shrieked the voice, much closer now. Hermione turned to an open door though which the voice seemed to have come from. She stepped inside, only to find it as empty and abandoned as the one she had been in before.

“What in Merlin’s name...” she murmured, before once again being startled by the same screams.

“Who are you? How dare you invade my Noble House! Away with you, scourge of the street!”

Hermione looked to the side of the room, only to see a massive portrait of a rather severe-looking woman, with black undulating hair, pink lips and hard, heavy-lidded eyes. She wore old-fashioned, but intricately decorated, doubtlessly expensive robes. The frame surrounding her was made of ornate gold; a nearly identical one made of silver hung next to her, but the portrait was empty. Hermione took one look at those harsh eyes and recognized them almost immediately.

She was looking at painting of Druella Black.

The woman in the painting was evidently not happy with Hermione’s look of utter befuddlement. She glared at the brunette, her mouth contorted into an expression of sheer displeasure.

“Who are you, loathsome little chit? Speak!”

“Uh... My apologies for the intrusion, Ma’am” Hermione said, quickly thinking on her feet. If this woman was anything like the portrait of Walburga Black, it would be wise to keep her cards close to her chest. Judging from her outbursts, Hermione wasn’t willing to take her chances. Not a word that would betray her heritage, extreme politeness, and perhaps with a little luck Druella may help her find her way out. “I’m not quite sure how I got here; it was an accident.”

Druella looked sceptical at best.

“One does not get into my home by accident! This is Narcissa’s doing, isn’t it? That deplorable girl, careless, and irresponsible, bringing strangers to her ancestral home!” The woman shrieked, her eyes wide and practically popping out of her head.

Hermione’s breathed had caught; ancestral home? She only knew of one Black ancestral home beside Black Manor.

“We’re in Grimmauld Place?” she asked on reflex, even if deep down she knew that couldn’t possibly be the case: Harry had been living in Grimmauld Place for years.
Druella looked all-consumed with impatience at her ignorance.

“Of course not! Grimmauld Place is my sister Walburga’s home, you ignorant peasant!” Her eyes narrowed. “How come you know of Grimmauld Place? You don’t seem the kind of witch to frequent it.” she said acerbically, pointedly looking at Hermione’s Muggle attire.

“I’ve met Walburga” Hermione said quickly. It wasn’t technically a lie. Though Walburga had been dead for quite a while... She had no idea when Druella had died, but perhaps it was safer to refer to somebody that she had met in the flesh. “I work with Narcissa.” She backtracked

“I beg your pardon” Druella said, clearly scandalized. “Did you just say you work with my ill-tempered daughter?” she squawked.

Whoops. Apparently that had been the wrong thing to say.

“I mean I do some research with her. Research. On... on Ancient Wizarding History” she lied through her teeth. Part of her was really curious about why Druella seemed to harbour such animosity towards her daughter, but that part was silenced by the priority of needing to get out of there.

Druella didn’t look like she was buying it, but nevertheless relented. “A spoiled urchin, impudent child she is, always has been. How come you have found yourself in her wretched company?”

“I’m friends with her son, Draco. We knew each other in Hogwarts.”

“Did you now?” Druella said, her eyes narrowing even further in her inspection of Hermione. “You do look slightly familiar to me... But you were not in Slytherin. A Hufflepuff Fawley? No, no, Ravenclaw, perhaps? Are you the daughter of one of the MacDougal’s?”

“Yes!” Hermione said a little too quickly, desperately clinging to the lifeline Druella had unwittingly thrown her way: Isobel and Morag MacDougal had been sorted into Ravenclaw the same year she had found her home in Gryffindor. With any luck, Druella wasn’t that familiar with the family to notice any difference. “Isobel MacDougal at your service, Ma’am.”

“You look nothing like your mother, child. But we all know that is probably for the best; Meredith was never a pretty thing to look at.” The woman said with the nonchalance Hermione had seen Narcissa display so elegantly. “I can see she also neglected to instruct her daughters on the proper manners befitting a lady of your station. Where is your formal greeting for an elder, Ms. MacDougal? Such incredible impropriety; not even Narcissa would forego a proper greeting!” She chastised Hermione.

How in Godric’s name was Hermione to formally greet a Pure-blooded matron such as Druella Black? Their etiquette was so unnecessarily complicated!

“Uh...” she babbled, thinking on her feet. “Deepest apologies, Ma’am. The usual greetings have fallen out of fashion; I thought it would be improper to perform one given your status.” She shot in the dark.

Could portraits flush with embarrassment? Druella certainly looked at little pinker.

“Narcissa, that impertinent child! How dare she not keep me informed!” Druella hissed angrily. Hermione had to contain her sigh of relief for dodging that bullet. “That is so like her, insubordinate and bird-brained!”

“Hm, Madam, if I may?” Hermione dared to interrupt. Druella looked vicious, but gave her a nod
as if she was permitting her to speak. “But where exactly are we?”

“I shall forgive your ignorance just this once, Ms. MacDougal.” Druella huffed. “We’re at Charles House, my family home in London.” She turned a severe glance to Hermione. “How exactly did you find yourself here, Ms. MacDougal? I heard your racket as you arrived.”

Hermione felt just a little bit giddy when she heard she was in London. That meant she could get out and eventually apparate some place.

“I’m not quite sure; I believe I was Portkeyed here, though I have no idea how.” Hermione said, the first completely truthful thing she had said to the portrait.

“Impossible!” Druella cried. “Only members of the Black Family can trespass the wards without the proper invitation. Who invited you?”

Hermione took a moment to ponder; her eyes subconsciously dropped to the faint silver scar on her palm. Druella followed her gaze.

“Impossible!” She repeated with a screech, clearly very aware of the mark’s origin. “Who dared bind you by blood to the Black Family?! Narcissa, no doubt; oh how that insolent girl vexes me so! That is the limit of all impropriety, to violate the sacred bond of blood with another witch!”

“Madam Black, I assure you, there is no impropriety!” Hermione immediately retorted with a furious blush tingling her cheeks. Pure-blooded witches were obviously not too keen on context. She didn’t want to stay another minute in Druella’s presence. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I will find my way out. I’ve got to find somewhere to apparate from.”

Her statement seemed to stop Druella in her tracks. “Are you unable to apparate within the premises?” she questioned darkly.

“I’ve tried and I couldn’t!” Hermione said, then looked at the woman in the painting. “Should I?”

To her surprise, Druella’s features turned to complete and utter relief. “Oh! Merlin, my apologies, Miss MacDougal; I didn’t mean to jump to conclusions so quickly. Only those born or married into the House of Black are able to apparate to and from Charles House without proper invitation. You see where my confusion came from.” She said, her tone bordering on civil.

“Well... thanks, I guess” Hermione huffed, tired of dealing with the painting. “Now, my apologies, but I really must get going” she made to leave.

“Wait! Miss MacDougal!” Druella called. “You won’t be able to leave. The doors will not open to your touch; they’re enchanted, you see. You must leave the way you came, or with the proper invitation.” She explained.

Hermione wanted to tear her hair out. Why were the Blacks so anal about their wards?!

“Then by Merlin, how am I supposed to go home?” Perhaps she could send a Patronus out. Would the wards allow her to do that, at least?

“Do not fret, Miss MacDougal. Give me one moment.” Druella said, suddenly walking off her frame and into the silver one next to it. Hermione would never understand how Wizarding paintings worked.

“Cygns! Get out of that blasted locket, there is a young girl here in need of assistance! Cygnus, come home at once!” Druella began screaming into the silver frame. After waiting a few moments,
she returned to her own, an impatient look in her eyes.

Hermione was about to ask, but was interrupted by the appearance of a man into the other frame.

She had seen Cygnus Black in pictures and engravings before. Like the rest of his family, he always looked rather serious and harsh; his lips were practically always sealed into a thin line – the exception being Narcissa’s wedding photo Hermione had seen. Either way, she could have never expected Cygnus Black to look like he did now.

The man before her now had a completely different demeanour. He looked much younger than Hermione thought him to be, though he had smile lines that crinkled around his eyes and cheeks with the grin he sported. His gait was light and unencumbered, his hair was fair, and his blue eyes held a glimmer of mischief.

“Now, what do we have here?” he asked, his voice as kind as an old grandpa’s. Hermione’s head was spinning in confusion.

“Miss Isobel MacDougal has been Portkeyed into our home somehow” Druella explained, her voice bordering on annoyed. “Do her a favour; go fetch our abominable daughter to come let her home. She cannot leave otherwise.”

“Miss MacDougal, is it? Are you by any chance Meredith and Arnold’s daughter?” He questioned genially; Hermione was so taken aback at the knowing look in his eyes she could only respond with a quick nod.

“Never fear, Miss MacDougal. I shall go and get Narcissa at once, she’ll be able to take you home.” He said with a kind smile, gingerly walking out of frame. Hermione was at a loss for words.

“That was Narcissa’s father?” she thought aloud.

“Indeed!” Druella interjected with a mean look. “He is why she was such a difficult, obstinate child, why she still is an ungrateful spawn. Left me barren, the little brat, did you know?”

Hermione didn’t know how to respond; was this how Pure-bloods made small-talk?

“You don’t say.” She replied dumbly. Druella didn’t need further encouragement.

“Always a recalcitrant child; but she could do no wrong in her father’s eyes. Married that presumptuous Lucius Malfoy, no matter how unhappy that made her mother. It was Cygnus’ idea to name her Narcissa; evidently that gave her a syndrome of self-importance and pompous nature befitting her aggravating husband.”

Hermione felt supremely awkward hearing Narcissa’s dead mother badmouthing her own daughter. She wondered how Druella felt about Andromeda, but wasn’t crazy enough to ask. She was rescued from further interaction by Cygnus’ appearance into his frame once again.

“Hello again, dear. Narcissa should be here any second; she’ll be waiting for you in the room you came through.” He said. Hermione was only too glad to leave.

“Can’t even have the decency to greet her own mother, the ingrate!” Druella cried.

“Uh, thank you, Sir. Madam Black.” Hermione said, ready to beat a scurried retreat. Druella addressed her one last time.
“Do come visit again if you find the time, Miss. MacDougal. I’ve enjoyed our little chat.”

Hermione was too baffled to respond. The last thing she saw as she left the room was the knowing twinkle of Lord Black’s eye.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The reason Hermione's parents weren't really mentioned before now was because I was still deciding whether I wanted to kill them off or nah. In the end, I decided our girl Hermione has been through enough!
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Whoops, another long chapter. Whelp!

Thanks for reading!

~Naralanis

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione scurried to the room she had literally fallen to in her hurry to get back. Her mind went a mile a minute in an effort to understand what in Merlin’s name had just happened. She had – unwittingly, completely and utterly unintentionally – met and spoken with Narcissa’s dead parents.

She was overcome with an intense feeling of guilt. It wasn’t the first time she had intruded upon something very private about Narcissa’s life. Hermione practically cringed with guilt remembering the blasted photographs she had found months ago. If she had kept to herself, she wouldn’t have seen Narcissa’s photograph. If she hadn’t seen it, perhaps she wouldn’t have approached the sodding window. If she hadn’t approached the window, perhaps she could have avoided her little tête-à-tête with Druella Black.

Maybe someone had cursed her. How could she keep invading Narcissa’s privacy like this? A rush of blood flooded her cheeks in her guilt. That certainly wasn’t the way to create a... a friendship?

Hermione thought of a thousand and one excuses, apologies, explanations and justifications. She couldn’t imagine how Narcissa would feel at yet another breach. She expected anger, perhaps disappointment. Hermione didn’t know which was worse.

To her surprise, Narcissa’s eyes betrayed nothing but concern and deep, deep shame. Hermione was so puzzled at seeing that look upon the blonde’s feature’s she froze at the doorstep of the room. Narcissa stood, still with perfect posture, but her presence was not commanding or poised as it was usually. No, this Narcissa looked timid and vulnerable.

Hermione would have gladly taken an angry Narcissa instead.

“Ms. Granger, I trust you’re alright?” Narcissa asked, her voice empty and tremulous.

Hermione hoped her eyes didn’t show her chagrin at hearing Narcissa avoid her first name. It had been months since the other woman had been so formal. She nodded, and was about to try and say something in return when the walls practically shook with the screams coming from the portrait room.

“Come and greet your mother properly, you impertinent child! Brazen, insupportable chit, come look at me when I am speaking to you!”

Hermione thought Narcissa would just melt where she stood, given the flush of utter embarrassment tinging her pallid cheeks. She gave her a look of understanding.
“How about we just get out of here?” She tried jovially. Narcissa only gave her a muted nod in response, reaching out a shaky hand in her direction for a Side-Along apparition.

Hermione gladly took it. They had barely touched when Narcissa whisked them away with a loud crack, drowning out her mother’s infuriated shrieks.

They landed none-too-gently in a room Hermione immediately recognized as Narcissa’s private study. It only served as a reminder of how much she had perturbed the older woman’s privacy. Hermione desperately wanted to say something, to spout one of those apologies she had spent so much energy thinking about, only to feel the keen loss of Narcissa’s contact once the blonde let go and stepped through a narrow door without a word.

Hermione stood there, feeling embarrassed and dumb, not knowing how to proceed. She debated calling or going after Narcissa, but that thought process was summarily interrupted.

“Please have a seat, Ms. Granger.” came Narcissa’s hesitating voice.

The young professor did as she was told, settling onto the chair a white fox slept on the last time she was in this room. She hated being there, sticking out like a sore thumb, being awkward and dumb, she hated hearing how timid Narcissa’s voice sounded through the door as she waited.

Thankfully, her wait was mercifully short. Narcissa reappeared carrying a small wooden box by a golden handle. Her countenance was determined, but her eyes were still clouded by shame. The Potions professor daintily sat on the ottoman by Hermione’s; a flick of her wand made the box levitate between them.

“Let me see your arm.” She said, then paused. “Please.”

Hermione obliged, turning slightly in her seat to give Narcissa better access.

Narcissa’s hands were cold as she rolled Hermione’s sleeve further back to inspect her splint more closely. She delicately held the brunette’s arm in her hands, tilting it slightly as she examined it.

“How Ferula charm is not half bad” she said, hands at the ligature that held the splints together. “May I?”

Hermione only nodded, briefly wondering why Narcissa wasn’t using magic.

Narcissa slowly and silently got to work on dismantling the splint. Her touch itself felt soothing, especially now that the numbing effects of the charm were beginning to fade and Hermione felt a sort of dull pain. Narcissa’s hands stilled as she uncovered Hermione’s scar.

Hermione didn’t know if Narcissa actually meant to do it, but suddenly she felt the witch’s fingers gracefully brushing against the jagged letters scarred upon her skin. The motion startled her, sending shivers down her spine, and Narcissa immediately stopped, as if she had just realized what she was doing.

“Forgive me.” she whispered, going back to removing the splints.

Narcissa took her wand and gently prodded at Hermione’s wrist, murmuring diagnostic charms Hermione wasn’t familiar with, her brows furrowed in concentration.
“You’ve broken it in two places, I’m afraid.” she said, turning to the floating box she had opened to reveal a number of phials. She selected one of a garish purple colour and applied some of it to Hermione’s arm. Any lingering pain the brunette felt vanished completely and the swelling of the break diminished to nothing before her very eyes.

“The good news is, the breaks are quite clean” Narcissa continued, tapping Hermione’s wrist ever so lightly with her wand. Hermione felt the pressure and heat of her bone snapping back into place, but none of the pain that usually came with bone-setting charms. “You won’t need another splint, but I will bandage it lightly to restrict your movement until tomorrow. Then, it should be good as new.”

Hermione shot Narcissa a smile and a grateful glance. She felt relieved she hadn’t attempted to fix it with an Episkey or some other simpler healing charm – those tended to make things worse if the breaks were beyond them.

Narcissa acknowledged Hermione’s gratitude with a shy smile of her own as she silently worked on bandaging the brunette’s arm. The only sound for long moments was the gentle swish of the bandages as Narcissa tied them securely and carefully without the use of magic.

Hermione loathed the silence.

“Narcissa...” she tried, not even sure where to start from. All those apologies she had so desperately thought of just seemed to vanish into thin air.

“Ms. Granger” Narcissa interrupted, with a pained look in her eyes. “I am truly, truly sorry.”

Hermione could only blink in confusion.

“Wait” she said before Narcissa could continue. “What are you apologizing for?”

Narcissa’s expression mirrored her own confusion.

“I’m sorry for the PortKey charm at the window – it’s been so many years since it has been used I neglected to correct it. I have no idea why the house let you in but not out. Also... I am especially sorry about your encounter with... with my mother. I’m afraid she’s not the easiest person – or portrait – to be around.”

Hermione tried to hold in her laugh, but was truly unable; the reaction clearly only served to further befuddle her companion.

“You’re joking, right?” She said, immediately seeing by Narcissa’s look that she was not. “Let me remind you – I spent months in a house with Walburga’s portrait. Druella is a jolly good sport in comparison.” Hermione said truthfully. Well, truthfully as far as she could tell; nothing guaranteed Druella wouldn’t have reacted just as her sister-in-law had she known of Hermione’s true blood status. “I mean, she did invite me – or rather, Isobel MacDougal, back for a chat.” She joked.

Finally, Narcissa smiled – a weak, timid one, but still a smile. Hermione counted it as a small victory.

“That was remarkably quick thinking of your part. Imagine my surprise when my father came to me, saying a ‘young Miss MacDougal’ had been unwittingly transported to Charles House.”

Hermione latched onto that little tid-bit.
“How did he warn you?” she asked. She hadn’t noticed any portraits in Narcissa’s study.

Narcissa response was to reach into her robes, taking out a small silver locket decorated with a polished shard of obsidian, which was held in place by intricate silver filigree. She clicked it open to reveal a diminutive portrait with a black background.

A grinning Cygnus Black waved his fingers to Hermione in a humorous greeting.

“Miss MacDougal, what a coincidence seeing you again.” He quipped. The knowing glint to his eye had returned; he looked at Hermione as if he could see right through her.

“Yes, um, hello.” Hermione said. So that’s where Cygnus went when his frame at the house was empty.

“Thank you, Father, for calling me.” Narcissa said. Cygnus winked jovially.

“No trouble, poppet. I’ll go back and tend to your mother now, you two enjoy yourselves.” And with that, he disappeared through the side of the locket.

“Well.” Hermione breathed. “He seems... nice?”

Narcissa had a knowing smile tugging at her lips. “Not what you expected of the great Cygnus Black?”

Hermione shook her head. “I’ll be honest... No. I’ve never expected him to look so... Fun?”

Narcissa laughed. “Your surprise is evident, but not unexpected. It’s true, my family is known for its... serious countenance, but my father was never truly a harsh disciplinarian.” she explained. Hermione’s head practically spun.

“He’s so different from what I hear about Orion... and what I’ve seen of Walburga.” Hermione muttered. From the little she had heard from Sirius and Andromeda, Orion Black was a bitter, punitive disciplinarian she had always imagined Pure-Blooded patriarchs to be, and Walburga wasn’t far off. After her little conversation with Druella, she expected Narcissa’s mother was very much the same. It only served to surprise her further with Cygnus.

“My father was never much like his sister Walburga, or his cousin Orion.” Narcissa said with a grimace that Hermione almost subconsciously replicated. One needn’t look too deep into Pure-Blood family trees to see how strangely incestual they were.

“I’m guessing your mother was more up their alley, no?” Hermione said. She had meant it as a joke, but Narcissa scoffed in what could only be described as irritation.

“Druella always thought she had something to prove. She was born Druella Rosier, you know? After her match with Abraxas Malfoy was dissolved, she wanted to prove she was deserving of marrying into the Black Family. I suppose her parenting style as a way to convince Pollux, my grandfather, that she had the steady hand Cygnus supposedly lacked.”

Narcissa suddenly stood and walked over the side table Hermione had knocked over during her first – unauthorized – visit of the study. There were still some photo albums neatly stacked on top. Narcissa grabbed a relatively thin one, decorated in red fabric with worn leather spine. She opened it and gave it to Hermione.

“That’s me there” she said, pointing to a family picture. Druella sat on a high-backed chair, looking sick and frail with deep, dark circles under her eyes. Surrounding her were Bellatrix and
Andromeda, looking about five and four respectively. Bellatrix smiled widely, looking at their father, who stood proudly with a small bundle wrapped in white embroidered cloths.

“Merlin! You had black hair??” Hermione exclaimed, looking at the wriggling bundle, barely visible in Cygnus’ arms.

“Yes” Narcissa laughed. “I know some babies are usually born with lighter hair and it darkens with age; with me it was precisely the opposite somehow.” She looked tenderly at the picture, but her expression soured as she looked at Druella. “My mother never liked me.”

Hermione looked to Narcissa, then back to the picture. She had assumed as much, with the poison Druella’s portrait had continuously spouted about her daughter. Something in the back of her head said it was insurmountably odd to have Narcissa sharing so much about her family like this. But a bigger part of her enjoyed it, feeling honoured to be able to have such a conversation with the woman.

“Yeah... she wasn’t very kind to you back there.” Hermione commented. Narcissa only chuckled.

“Not back there or ever. She had always been quite frail, and childbirth was always a risk. But mine was especially difficult – she very nearly died. In the end, she was left barren, without the opportunity to gift my father a son to carry the family name.” Narcissa said in clear distaste.

“Cygnus was always disappointed Druella never gave him any sons?” Hermione questioned. She could have sworn Narcissa herself had said something to that effect.

“Oh yes, and deeply so. The difference was, he placed the blame entirely on my mother as opposed to his daughters. It truly wasn’t fair to her, but my father loved us dearly; he called me his little angel. My mother found it in herself to love Bellatrix and Andromeda, but she could never bring herself to love me.” Narcissa finished with a little sadness.

Hermione looked at the photograph a little closer. Druella barely moved in the picture, save to spare Cygnus and the new-born Narcissa a look of intense disdain. Young Bellatrix alternated where she directed her beaming smile; to the baby in her father’s arms or the photographer. Little Andromeda, for her part, stood the closest to her mother, sparing the baby a curious glance every now and then.

Narcissa leaned to look at the picture more closely as well. “My mother could never love me, for she saw me as the last chance to give my father a son. I not only robbed her of that, I robbed her of any other potential subsequent chance she might have had.”

Hermione could understand the logic, in a twisted sort of way. Considering how important the survival of the family name was to all of the staunchly Pure-Blooded families, she supposed Druella’s disappointment made some sort of sense. It didn’t make it right.

Narcissa flipped the page; Hermione wondered if she had forgotten she was there. There, she recognized another family – Orion and Walburga, proudly holding their firstborn, wide but stiff smiles on their faces.

“Godric! I didn’t know Walburga could smile!” Hermione exclaimed; Narcissa practically chortled.

“Especially when it came to Sirius” she quipped, pointing at the hysterical infant in Walburga’s arms. “He and I were born on the same year, only a few months apart, though I was much closer to Regulus in my childhood.” Narcissa explained. “Sirius always had a lot more in
common with Drommie... In more ways than we had originally thought, as we came to find out later.”

Narcissa flipped the page once again, and Hermione had happily resigned herself to a little family exploration. The blonde stopped at picture Hermione had already seen; Bellatrix with her Hogwarts robes, carrying a giggling Narcissa on her back, Andromeda laughing next to them.

“Bella’s first year at Hogwarts.” She said. “I was inconsolable after she got on the train. It only got worse the next year, when Drommie had to go and I was left alone.”

Hermione couldn’t quite relate, at least not to the same level. She missed her friends dearly when term ended, and of course she missed her parents a lot whenever she returned to the castle, but she didn’t think she’d ever understand how close one could be with their siblings.

“I’ve always wondered, what having sisters would be like.” She commented. Narcissa turned to her as if she had forgotten the brunette was even there for a moment.

“You were an only child? No Muggle siblings?”

“No, not really. I didn’t even have cousins, really, or anything like that – my parents were also only children. As far as I can remember, it was always just my parents and me. Until I went to school, that is.” She looked intently at Narcissa. “You were quite close with Andromeda and... and Bellatrix.” It wasn’t really a question.

“Yes” Narcissa said. If she had noticed any trepidation in Hermione’s voice, the blonde gave no indication of it. “I’m fully aware you only know of Bellatrix as the monster she went on to become... But she was the kindest, most caring sister one could have ever asked for.”

Hermione didn’t have to voice her disbelief; she could tell Narcissa could clearly see it in her eyes. While she knew that no one was born a monster – not even Bellatrix Lestrange – she had years upon years of trauma and dreams that told her precisely the opposite.

“How... how did it happen?” Hermione found herself asking, certain Narcissa understood quite well what ‘it’ meant. Why she held such a bitterly morbid curiosity about her late torturer, she didn’t know. Narcissa’s eyes seemed set in stone. “I’m sorry, it’s alright if you don’t want to tell me.” She backtracked.

The Potions professor sighed deeply. “I’m sure you of all people would like to know. In truth, Bellatrix’s madness was largely out of her control. Her nature had always been impulsive and explosive, but after she joined the Death Eaters – before they even called themselves that, after she married Rodolphus... Her life was a tragedy after another.”

“Before... She was a Death Eater before she even married?” Hermione asked. As far as she knew, Bellatrix had been married before even finishing her education; it meant she had pledged her allegiance to Voldemort earlier than Hermione had previously thought.

“She and Rodolphus married before Christmas on her seventh year. I was in my second, and had acquired special permission from Headmaster Dumbledore to be able to attend the ceremony at the Lestrange Family Estate in France.” Narcissa said. A deft movement of her hand sent another
album flying from the stack in her direction; she grasped it delicately, flipping it open.

Another grand manor, no doubt, and another marriage composed the picture Hermione found herself looking at. Bellatrix looked absolutely radiant, and so did Rodolphus. Cygnus looked right chuffed, and even Druella looked over the moon with happiness. Rodolphus held a young Bellatrix princess-style and spun in circles as guests threw rice at the pair. Andromeda was present, but looked demure next to a pimply-faced young man, and a twelve-year-old Narcissa smiled dreamily at her older sister and her husband.

“Was their union not arranged?” Hermione questioned. The pair in the picture looked to be in love, or at least desperately happy; however, she had known them to be anything but.

“Yes” Narcissa said. “But Bellatrix and Rodolphus had always been quite fond of each other. They shared many similar ideals, you see. Rod was the one who introduced her to Lord Voldemort on her fifth year.”

Hermione choked. “Her fifth?!” she gasped out.

“Yes.” Narcissa’s tone was sad. “Quite young. Young, foolish despite her precociousness, and so terribly impressionable. Bellatrix had always wanted to be somebody, you see? Tom Riddle gave her ample opportunity.” she finished bitterly.

Hermione ran her fingers over the dancing couple. In a matter of years, the happy bride would go on become an unhinged madwoman in the service of Lord Voldemort. She pointed out Andromeda in the picture.

“Andy’s there. So this was before...”

“Yes. She eloped with Ted Tonks that summer.” Narcissa explained. Her hand joined Hermione’s onto the photograph, and she indicated the acne-ridden young man standing next to the middle Black sister. “I’m sure the wedding helped her make up her mind more quickly – my father announced her engagement to Rabastan right after the ceremony.”

Hermione’s jaw literally slacked open. “That’s Rabastan?! Merlin... He was a, uh... late bloomer, wasn’t he?”

Narcissa let out a peal of laughter. “Indeed” she chuckled “he was two or three years younger than Andromeda, I believe. They had no interaction at Hogwarts whatsoever.”

“Good Godric” Hermione said, looking at the young man who at one point was supposed to marry Andromeda. She had only seen him in person after his breakout from Azkaban, along with his brother and sister-in-law. In the picture, he looked blissfully oblivious to practically everything.

“Everyone looks so happy...” Hermione thought aloud. “Well, Andromeda maybe not too much.” She added as an afterthought.

Narcissa chuckled. “We were;” she said, flipping the pages absentmindedly. “That is, until Andromeda ran off. I thought my mother would die of heartbreak then and there; Drommie had always been her favourite.”

Hermione furrowed her brows. “I can’t imagine a parent having a favourite child.” She said. Narcissa’s eyeroll in response was surprising.

“Said the only child.” She joked.
Hermione matched Narcissa’s eyeroll. “Come off it. You’d have a favourite child?” Narcissa merely shrugged her shoulders.

“I do have a favourite son.” She said with a knowing smirk. Hermione sighed in defeat.

“Alright, that was a bad example” Hermione sighed. “But do you think someone like Molly would have a favourite son?”

“Of course not” Narcissa quipped with a smirk. “She has a favourite daughter,” she added with a knowing look which made Hermione laugh. “Perhaps Molly Weasley isn’t capable of picking favourites; the ability was not beyond my mother, however.” Narcissa’s tone turned more serious.

“My father died shortly after Draco was born – a blood malediction; there was nothing the Healers could do for him except make him comfortable in the last years of his life. My mother lived through Andromeda’s elopement and Bellatrix’s imprisonment. If it weren’t for Draco’s birth, I doubt very much she would have deigned to speak to me. She passed away in her sleep shortly before he began his second year at Hogwarts.”

Hermione looked at the Druella in the pictures, reconciling the image with the one she had interacted with at Charles House.

“I can’t imagine having my mother not speak to me.” she murmured softly, because she truly couldn’t. Hermione counted herself lucky enough to have two loving, supporting parents, who encouraged her every Endeavour as a child. They had never truly disapproved of anything she did – with a few exceptions here or there. The only time her mother had ever been upset with her – memory-related incidents excluded – was when she returned from her second year, after she finagled a magical fix for her buck teeth.


“Not much differently than most wizarding families, I would say... Pure-Blooded etiquette excluded, of course.” An idea struck.

“Come with me?”

Any awkwardness that lingered after the misadventure at Charles House had dissipated with the two witches’ impromptu family exploration. It was strange to look at Narcissa’s family through her lens; every time it came up, Hermione felt a little shock when her every expectation about them was shattered. Bellatrix wasn’t born a mad, Cygnus was a kind man to his daughters, Walburga could smile, Druella hated her youngest.

Nevertheless, she found it enjoyable to learn so much about Narcissa’s family and, by proxy, about the woman as well. She figured it would be nice to return the favour.

The two reached Hermione’s private study in no time at all, despite the long distance from the Dungeons. The castle was dark and blessedly empty, draped in an eerie silence that made their footsteps echo through the halls. Narcissa followed Hermione without a word, only the spark of curiosity glimmering in her blue eyes.

Once they reached the study, Hermione at once summoned a castle elf for some tea and biscuits, urging Narcissa to take a seat and get comfortable while she rummaged through a decorative trunk to find what she wanted. She had knelt by the trunk for a good five minutes of frustration before Narcissa questioned why she didn’t just summon whatever it was she wanted.

“Whoops. I guess that’s the Muggle in me.” Hermione said, blushing from her neck to the roots of
her hair, but with an inward sense of pride. Maybe she wasn’t completely losing her identity, after all.

She summoned her childhood album, and out it came, flying and ready to her palm. The tea and biscuits materialized at the side table just as she took a seat herself.

“Let’s see how Muggle families operate, shall we?” She said with a timid smile, wondering why she’d think Narcissa would be interested at all. Perhaps this had been a terrible idea.

She needn’t have worried; Narcissa responded to her smile in kind. The blonde even seemed eager to open the album.

“Oh!” Narcissa exclaimed at the first page. “I had forgotten that Muggle pictures do not move. How incredibly odd.” She mentioned, dusting her fingertips over a shot that merely showed Hermione’s parents – Katherine round with pregnancy – posing by the building where Hermione had been born, the Royal London Hospital.

“Your parents?” Narcissa asked, pointing out the couple in the photo. Hermione herself hadn’t looked at those pictures in forever; she’d forgotten how wild her mother’s hair was.

“Yeah. Katherine and William Granger, August 1979.”

“August?”

“I was born in September.” Hermione said.

“Draco was born in October, that same year.” Narcissa pondered.

Hermione suddenly thought this was a terrible idea. Narcissa had been married with a child of her own on the way when she had been born. If the blonde had any indication of Hermione’s... fondness for her, she had no idea, but if Narcissa ever came to find out, surely this would be a supremely difficult thing to get over.

“Are you alright?” Narcissa asked. Hermione realized she had been gripping the edges of the album a little too tightly.

“Fine!” She squeaked, letting go. Narcissa turned the page.

“And I suppose that’s you?” she said kindly, pointing out a bundle on Katherine Granger’s chest in the hospital room. “Is that the Muggle equivalent to a midwitch?” she asked, pointing out the doctor, who was covered from head to toe, with gloves and a mask. Hermione chuckled.

“Sort of. She’s the doctor who delivered me.”

“Ah.” Narcissa squinted, taking a closer look. “What an odd bed.” Hermione immediately knew what the witch meant.

“Those are wires and tubes. They monitor the baby and the mum’s heartbeat through that machine there” she pointed it out “and I believe this here is the IV drip – it’s for medication and hydration.”

She immediately saw that she’d need to be a little more specific; Narcissa looked at her as she had spoken Mermish.

“Intra-venous drip. There’s a needle attached to a tube that goes to that bag there. It deposits medication straight into the bloodstream.” She didn’t know if she could get simpler than that.
“Merlin.” Narcissa said, looking a little green at the edges but otherwise impressed. “That’s... ingenious.”

Hermione appreciated the comment, even if it was clear Narcissa didn’t quite understand. It helped Hermione feel a little more at ease.

Soon they had flipped through Hermione’s infancy and early childhood: her first tooth, first steps, first word.

“Ah!” Hermione exclaimed when they came upon a particular picture. Little Hermione was in her high chair, looking quite angrily to the camera. “My dad still talks about this day: it was the first time they saw me perform some accidental magic!” She looked longingly to the picture; it was one of her favourite stories.

“I hated broccoli, you see. Absolutely hated it – Mum had an awful time trying to get me to eat it. Then, one night, I threw this royal tantrum over it. I just wasn’t having it. The more mum tried, the more I resisted, until suddenly poof! All the broccoli in my plate shot up to the ceiling!”

Narcissa laughed heartily at that. “I wonder what Muggles would make of such a thing. Even with Wizards, accidental magic often catches us unaware. Draco made all my books fly from my bookshelves when I wasn’t giving him enough attention to his liking.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “That sounds like Draco,” she quipped. “James turned Harry’s hair red – just like Ginny’s.”

Narcissa chuckled. Hermione wished she had seen a red-haired Harry in person; it was way funnier than anyone could even imagine.

“I believe I was with Bella the first time I produced accidental magic” Narcissa said. “She was with me in the garden at Charles House. My mother had just ripped out the white roses and replaced them with geraniums – which I for some reason disliked intensely. According to Bella, I took one look at those geraniums and they immediately wilted.”

“Merlin. You really didn’t like geraniums, did you?”

Narcissa shot her a knowing look.

“Almost as much as you didn’t broccoli, Hermione.”

A chime of the grandfather clock Hermione kept in her study interrupted them. Somehow, they had talked for hours since their return from Charles House – it was nearing midnight. Hermione had no clue how the time had passed them by so fast.

“Oh, Salazar.” Narcissa huffed in annoyance. “I forgot, I was supposed to floo Drommie ages ago!”

“Oh no! I’m sorry. I completely lost track of time.” Hermione gasped apologetically. Narcissa waved her off.

“It’s no matter; I’ll floo her in the morning, though I should probably send her a short note explaining,” she said, standing. “I greatly enjoyed our talk.”

Hermione beamed; she could tell Narcissa’s smile was genuine. “As have I. Sorry again about... well, about the portrait thing.” She said sincerely as she walked Narcissa out.
“Don’t trouble yourself with it. I’ve told you before, I greatly enjoy your company.” Narcissa said. She paused uncertain at the door. “In the meantime... Perhaps we could do this again? Over proper tea, perhaps?”

Hermione managed to contain her surprise and content. She smiled back. “I’d love to.”

Chapter End Notes

Some of you will notice I messed a bit with some timelines (Draco's birth, for example). I made all the Black sisters a little bit younger, but I wanted Narcissa to have a bigger gap between Bellatrix and Andromeda (I kind of wanted her to be the baby of the family). Quite by accident, I made her nearly exactly 20 years older than Hermione, so I guess that's a nice round number, because math really isn't my forte haha! I have a timeline I wrote for this story in particular, where I moved some things around. I'll digitize and share it on my Tumblr at some point!

~Naralanis
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

OMG this turned massive... again. Couldn't find a good place to split this chapter into two. I can't really help it, I get kind of carried away writing these two, but I suppose that should be a good thing.

Thank you so much for your readership and reviews -- reading them makes my day!

~Naralanis

15th May, 1974

Dearest Cissy,

I hope you have done well in your exams! I know you worry about your OWLs next year, but I am sure you will exceed even your own ludicrously high expectations. Word of advice – not that I imagine you'll heed it – stay clear of Divination; it is a complete waste of time, though I suspect you'll want to try it for yourself. Don't say I didn't warn you!

I'm sorry if I took too long to respond to your last letter. Ted and I have been running around like chickens with our heads cut off with Nymphadora. I never expected life with a baby to be easy, but she truly has made things remarkably more difficult. I told you about all the strange things happening to her in my last letter; I am happy to report all's well! She's a metamorphmagus! You probably know what it is already, since you are practically a living library, but I must say I was quite relieved when the Healers told us there's nothing wrong with her. She's just a little special.

I miss you, and Bella too – though I very much doubt she'd believe me. Which reminds me, burn these letters once you're done with them – I can never caution you enough. Ted has been lovely, but he's off to work most of the day and I just feel terribly alone. The Muggles in the neighbourhood are quite generous and kind, but I am still not quite brave enough to leave the house without Ted. Maybe someday. And don't roll your eyes at me – these Muggles are all perfectly pleasant.

Do write me during summer. I can't believe you'll soon be off in your fifth year! You've grown so much, and I am so proud of you, you little bookworm. Tell me about everything, tell me about mum, about Bella, and about Sirius as well, you know I worry about him. Don't forget to dish out on all the boys that are surely knocking down our doors as well!

I miss you terribly. I hope to hear from you soon.

All my love,

Drommie

August 8th, 1975
Dear Cissy,

How you managed to finagle an Exceeding Expectations in Divination is well and truly beyond me! However, I must say I am happy to hear you won't waste your time with it next year.

Regarding your last letter... Merlin! You can't just drop two lines with that sort of news! The least you could have done was tell me to sit down. You nearly gave me a heart attack!

That being said, I am so, so happy for Bella and Rodolphus, I truly am. I'll be an aunt! I think taking some time for family is exactly what Bella needs; perhaps it will slow her down a bit. I am sure having the light and love of a child in her life will do her a world of good, and I wish her all the best in this amazing journey that is motherhood.

I am a little sad Nymphadora has never met any of her aunts, and will now have a little cousin she is unlikely to ever meet, if things keep on going the way they are. Be careful, Cissy. One hears things, and Ted has been hearing quite a lot of worrying murmurs at his work. I do so hope Bella won't take any part in any of it given this wonderful new development – dare I say it fills me with hope?

Please keep me posted with how Bella's doing. Shall we wager on whether it'll be a boy or a girl? I say it'll be a boy – then again, that's what I thought with Nymphadora. I'll try my luck this time!

With love,

Drommie

23rd September, 1975

Cissy,

Thank you for your letter. I was somewhat aware of the situation – Sirius wrote me a while ago, but he never gave me any indication he planned to run off. He just said he was sick of Uncle Orion and Aunt Walburga, but really, when is he not sick of them? In the end, I heard about it from Uncle Alphard first.

As far as I know, he's staying with his friend James Potter and all is well. I'm sure you don't really care for his well-being, but you should; he's still your cousin, no matter what Aunt Walburga does to his name on the tapestry. My name was blasted off and I'm still your sister, am I not?

Now he's not under Aunt Walburga's roof, perhaps he'll be able to visit! Uncle Alphard has come – Nymphadora loved him.

Keep me posted!

Best,

Drommie

10th March, 1976
Cissy,

I do not even know how to respond to the news; I am truly heartbroken. I had to sit so I wouldn't faint once I read your letter, that is how shaken I felt. Even now, I can barely contain my tears.

I cannot bear the thought of ever losing Nymphadora, so I cannot even begin to imagine what sort of wretched pain Bella and Rod must be going through. I wish I could be there with you and Bella, I really, really do. I wish I could send my condolences or even extend my sympathies, but I think we both know that would do more harm than good.

Be there for her when I cannot, Cissy. Be good to her, support her in her time of pain – Bella needs it more than she will ever let on. She needs love and comfort; do not let her go down the Dark Lord's path. She needs time to heal, she needs guidance. Help her, Cissy. I know it is too much to ask of you; you are so young still. But please, please help her.

Love,

Drommie

January 1st, 1977

Cissy,

Very nice to hear about your engagement to Lucius Malfoy in the Daily Prophet. I wish you had the guts to tell me yourself.

I'm hurt. I know you are fond of him, but please remember what I told you. He doesn't deserve you, Cissy. Forget the arrangement, I urge you to reconsider – nothing good will come of this marriage.

Happy New Year.

Andromeda

26th May, 1977

Dear Cissy,

Happy graduation! I can't believe you're finished. Thank you for the save-the-date; it brought tears to my eyes. I am so, so happy and proud, I hope you know.

I've waited years to ask you this, but now I feel I finally can since you're of age and not a student anymore: come visit?

I know, I know, it's mad of me to ask. I know it is risky, but I think we can meet somewhere safe. There's so much I need to tell you, Cissy, and I don't dare put the words to paper. I also miss you terribly; the last I've seen of you was your engagement photo announcement on the Prophet. I've framed it – you've grown so much!

I'll understand if you cannot, but I beg of you to really consider it. There are some people I'd like you to meet. I miss you.
All my love,

Drommie

P.S.: please think about it!

A.

February 27th, 1978

Cissy,

You looked beautiful in your wedding gown. The Daily Prophet published some sublime pictures; I'm afraid I'll have to frame them all, even if I hate looking at your husband's face.

I'm sorry, I shouldn't say such things. I am glad you're happy, and you did look radiant. I'm happy for you, truly. I'm sure your life will be quite busy as the Lady of the House at Malfoy Manor, but don't forget to write me, alright?

Love,

Drommie

March 30th, 1979

CISSY! SHUT UP! You're expecting!? What! How long? Oh, my goodness! Merlin! I'm so happy! WRITE ME!

All my love,

Drommie

November 2nd, 1979

Dearest Cissy,

I'm happy to hear you and your baby boy are doing well. Congratulations! Do not let Lucius name him something ridiculous like Ignatius! I like your idea better; Draco keeps in nicely with a Black tradition, does it not?

In other news, I won't be able to write you for a little while. Don't trouble yourself responding for the time being: Ted and I are moving elsewhere. We don't feel safe anymore after the attacks a few towns over. I'll send you a letter when we're settled.

Drommie
May 2nd, 1980

Narcissa,

We need to talk, in person. I am so afraid. I don't care what you say about Lucius and Bella. You cannot be this blind to what they're doing with Riddle. This is getting too dangerous. How can you sleep at night? I lie awake whenever I think my own sister may have been responsible for murdering those innocent people.

Please, let's talk. I know you have Draco to worry about now, but that is precisely why we must act immediately! I have friends who will protect you. We mustn't lose faith; Dumbledore will help. Please respond quickly.

Andromeda

P.S.: do not make me go there. You know I would.

A.

______________

December 1st, 1981

Narcissa,

I didn't know whether writing would be a good idea. I just saw Bellatrix's mugshot on The Daily Prophet and I think something inside me snapped. That was my sister once. I cannot recognize the woman who did that to Frank and Alice. I know you knew them; they were only a little older than you.

Sirius was taken in as well. I don't understand anything anymore. I don't believe it. I can't believe it. He came to see me shortly before, and I don't know how I didn't see it. Am I the blind one?

James and Lily Potter too, oh. You remember darling Lily, you must – I remember you wrote about having to do a Potions assignment with her at some point. So much death. I'm sure you've heard about their son Harry – The Boy Who Lived, they're calling him. The night it happened, people were setting fireworks and celebrating; I heard it on the streets. I found nothing to celebrate. There was just another young family, destroyed by the man you chose to put your own family behind.

I hope you're happy. I'm sure dear old Lucius is overjoyed – I just read about that sham of a trial he had. I read your testimony as well. The Imperius? That's what you two are going with?

I should send in your letters to the Ministry. I have every proof they need right there. But I won't.

This is your chance, Cissy. Voldemort is gone. Purge that shadow from your life – Merlin knows your Lucius has enough galleons to buy anybody's favour; use it to your advantage. Give Draco a good life; don't let him fall to the same hatred your husband and sister fell to.

I know you won't come visit. I am below your station, after all, aren't I? No matter. Bellatrix is gone; she'll rot in Azkaban for the rest of her life. The least you could do is write me. Please write. I'm still your sister – if I'm not filth to you after all this.

Andromeda
May 3rd, 1998

Narcissa,

I don't even know how to write this to you. Please come to the funeral. Ted's gone. Nymphadora is gone. I'm all alone. You're all I have left.

Services will be this Monday at noon, at Grey's Kirkyard in Berwick.

Please.

Andromeda

October 10th, 2002

Dear Cissy,

It has taken me a long time to work up the nerve to write. I ran past Draco at the Ministry today – he's grown into a fine young man.

I don't know what to say. I read about your divorce when it happened, and I was very happy for you. Still, I found I lack the courage those Gryffindors are always so proud of. Harry comes by every now and then – he's Teddy's godfather, you see? He has been a godsend, I don't know what I would have done without him and Ginny.

Speaking of Harry, he told me a long time ago about what you did that night. I knew you would do the right thing in the end, I just knew you would. I am very glad he told me; it made a lot more sense out of your Order of Merlin.

I don't know what I expect to accomplish with this letter, if I'm honest. I've gotten up and paced after every other line. I don't know. I suppose I would just like to hear from you. It's been lonely, and I have missed you terribly. Besides Harry and Ginny, I don't see much of people. Well, Hermione comes by fairly often as well – she sometimes stays over. That girl needs to find herself a flat, but she travels so much with the DMLE she hardly has time to settle.

She has nightmares, though she pretends she's fine. I know they're all about Bellatrix and what she did to her in your house.

I'm sorry, I don't mean to sound so accusatory. The war has scarred us all. Do you know that, to this day, the girl flinches when she looks at me? I can tell she thinks I'm Bella for a split second. It's hurtful, but I cannot blame her.

Please write me. I miss you, Cissy. I want to get to know you again. I find I barely remember your voice. I do remember the eucalyptus.

Write me.

Drommie
April 6th, 2003

Cissy,

Teddy turns five today. He turned his hair platinum blonde – the resemblance to you at that age was a little spooky. I don’t know if you remember Bella telling you about it, but you were born with black hair, did you know? It only lightened up when you were about two, I think.

Please write. I miss you.

Drommie

December 5th, 2003

Cissy,

I saw you holiday shopping today at Diagon Alley. I don’t know if you saw me.

You look good. I hope you’re well. I’m not.

Please write.

Drommie

March 17th, 2004

Cissy,

I heard through the grapevine that you became a grandma. Indescribable feeling, isn’t it? Congratulations. Welcome to the old-ladies’ club.

Best,

Drommie

March 24th, 2006

Narcissa,

I don’t know why I woke up thinking about it. Ophelia would have turned 30 this month. Bellatrix would possibly be a grandma as well.

It was an odd thought. I don’t know what made me share it.

Drommie
February 5th, 2008

I cannot believe you. I've begged you to write me for years. I've asked and pleaded for you to meet me, to a cup of tea, or to drop me one miserable line, but no. The great Narcissa Malfoy is too good for that.

I don't want your sodding money. I don't want a bloody knut that has been in Lucius' disgusting vaults, I want nothing to do with it.

What in Merlin's name were you thinking? Are you trying to buy my forgiveness? No money in the world can pay for it.

Write me properly Narcissa, or Salazar help me, I'll... I don't know what I'll do. But do not dare try to send me more money.

Andromeda

April 6th, 2008

Teddy doesn't know you're the one who sent him the broom. A Firebolt Supreme? He's ten! He'll be supremely disappointed when he learns he shan't take it with him to Hogwarts his first year.

I didn't have the heart to take it away from him, but I am still furious with you. It may as well have been money. I don't want it. Stop trying. Talk to me.

Andromeda

May 2nd, 2008

Ten years, and you still won't talk to me. I went to talk to Bella at the family estate, and her tomb was quite a bit more talkative than you are, though I suppose the Firewhiskey had something to do with it.

I was surprised the wards let me in. What have you done to the main grounds? I can't see them anymore.

Stop the Gringotts missives. At once. Talk to me.

Andy

"They what?" Narcissa asked for the third or so time, scandalized.

Hermione sighed. She had no idea how they had gotten into this discussion.

"They drill a hole in your tooth."

"With what?"
"A kind of drill. It's a machine with a very fast rotating piece of metal that bores down into the bone, creating a hole removing all the decay. Then, the dentist will cover it with filling. That's how they fix cavities."

"Merlin" Narcissa hissed, an odd look on her face. She looked at the custard tart on the table before her as if it would jump to bite her at any moment. "The idea of metal drilling into one's mouth alone is reason enough to avoid sugars, then."

Hermione laughed heartily. Narcissa's reaction to practically anything from the Muggle world usually did that.

They had found themselves in Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop in Hogsmeade after a particularly cold day. Narcissa had royally turned up her nose at the tacky decorations and endless frills – that reaction had been funny on its own. Hermione, for her part, thought the tackiness just made it hilarious. It was a good thing it was the holidays as well: no sign of snogging couples.

It was their fourth or so outing since Hermione's literal tumble into Charles House. They had found time to work on the Black Manor wards, and Hermione was starting to get used to the idea of having Narcissa Black as a friend, as weird as it seemed. It was astonishing how much they had in common.

"I've heard – " Narcissa said at some point, after she had gathered enough courage to take a bite of her tart "and this is merely Pure-Blood gossip..."

Hermione leaned in. She loved Pure-Blood gossip – it was always ludicrous to the point of insanity. It was great fun. "Yeah?"

"I heard that Paola Zabini killed her husband at this very teashop." The blonde said gravelly.

"You're joking!" Hermione exclaimed in disbelief. Narcissa quirked an eyebrow. "You're not? What!"

"Of course, it was never proven" Narcissa rebuked with a dainty sip of her tea. "But he did drop dead over jam sandwiches."

Hermione had to contain a rather inelegant guffaw. "Merlin... And here I thought atrocious, inexperienced snogging was the worst this place had seen."

Narcissa gave the place a once-over, her expression reminiscent to that 'dung has been smelled' she sported years before. "Surely you're not including the decorations in your observations" she quipped. "I must say, I think nothing at all has changed since I was here last..."

"You deigned to step in here of your own volition?" Hermoine chuckled.

"Yes and no. Lucius took me on a date; I suppose he thought this was the sort of thing I'd like." Narcissa explained with a roll of her blue eyes. "It took him very little time to realize his mistake. Our next date was far more enjoyable."

"Oh? What was it?" Hermione asked, curious. What did Narcissa Black think counted as an enjoyable date?

"He snuck up to see me at the Astronomy Tower on his broomstick" Narcissa said with a smile. "It was the middle of the night, you see; we flew to patch of ice on the Black Lake and lay there watching the stars for hours."
Hermione let out a low whistle. She had to admit, as much as it pained her, that Lucius Malfoy had some game.

"That is a good date. Probably better than any I've ever been on!" She commented, realizing with a grimace that it was actually true.

"Oh, I'm sure a young man has done his best to dazzle you at some point or another." Narcissa reasoned kindly.

"Not nearly. Ron once took me to see a Chudley Cannons match. I don't like Quidditch to begin with, but that match was particularly bad. We were right behind the Keeper at these low seats that are allegedly really good, but well... The Keeper, he missed one save and I got a Quaffle to the face."

Narcissa chortled quite inelegantly; her cheeks flushed with embarrassment at her own reaction.

"I'm... Godric, I don't even know what to say." She gasped, pausing to take one hard look at Hermione. "I'm so sorry!" she laughed.

"Don't be, that wasn't even the worst date I've ever been on!" Hermione quipped. "On my sixth year, I made the mistake of going to a Slug Club party with Cormac McLaggen."

Narcissa's eyes went wide. "McLaggen? He isn't the son of Theophilus McLaggen, is he? Nephew to Tiberius?"

"The very same." The brunette confirmed, cringing. Narcissa let out an actual giggle.

"Merlin, what a small world. I went on a date with Theophilus before I was engaged to Lucius."

Hermione's eyes went wide. "What?!"

"Oh, it was quite formal – his family had bid on an arrangement with my father, you see. He talked so much, when I finally returned to speak to my father about it, I told him, 'Father, if you make me marry him I shall jump from the Astronomy Tower the minute he says 'I do'. Luckily, marrying a Gryffindor was never really a suggestion, and the Malfoys had a much better offer. Plus, Lucius and I had already been seeing each other socially for some time."

"Huh." Hermione muttered. "Out of curiosity, how many uh... families bid on you?" she asked, damning her morbid curiosity. She had heard that Narcissa had been quite popular in Hogwarts, so it was only natural to wonder.

"I'm not sure, I didn't meet them all. The Lestranges made a bid, the McLaggens... Geoffrey Flint made an offer that I know tempted my father. Edmund Rosier made one as well; my mother pushed for that one the most. And... I think there was one by the McNairs, but my father never liked them, so it was not taken seriously. A few others were made by other families not traditionally in Slytherin, but those were not considered."

"What an... odd concept." Hermione said. "I suppose you got lucky, marrying a bloke you already fancied."

"I certainly did." Narcissa confirmed, but turned pensive for a moment. "I had some reservations about Lucius; Andromeda certainly warned me about them. But at the time, I believed he wanted the betterment of our society." She said thoughtfully.

"Was... was he a Death Eater when you married?" Hermione found it in herself to ask.
"Yes. He was a couple of years ahead of me in Hogwarts; he was branded to the Dark Lord's Service on the day of his graduation." She said sadly. "I never knew how volatile he truly was until after we were married. I thought it was mostly political for longer than I should have; I was wilfully ignorant."

Hermione paused to sip her tea. That was always an uncomfortable subject. Talking to Narcissa as she was right then and there, it became harder and harder to reconcile this woman to the one who grew up hating Muggleborns and Muggles.

"You didn't know Voldemort wanted to... 'cleanse' Wizarding society?" She asked. She hadn't meant for it to sound accusatory; it just came out like that.

Narcissa was taken aback. "I... I was aware of the idea; though I didn't initially think it meant killing Muggleborns and Muggles. I thought there would be stricter separation, a clearer division." She looked into her teacup guiltily. "Muggles paralyzed me with fear. Voldemort's argument made sense to me at the time – why should we cower, live in the shadows in hiding, if our magic makes us superior?"

Hermione had no answer. She couldn't even say she understood the logic. She couldn't; not when she came where she came from, not when she was who she was.

"All my life, my family made me fear Muggleborns. They told tales of persecution, of fires and killings to eradicate magic. The only way to overcome that fear was by embracing our natural superiority." She said with a scoff. "Mr. Potter's mother, Lily Evans, terrified me at Hogwarts." Narcissa suddenly said.

"What? Why?"

"She was a Muggleborn. An incredibly talented one; I feared her overshadowing me in Potions. It's silly, but at that time it made sense to me. We got paired up for a project on my fifth year, I think, and I begged Slughorn to pair me up with anybody else. He refused. We ended up working together for the rest of the year. I think her talent scared me most of all."

Hermione examined the stain on the pink gingham tablecloth, deep in thought. She had come to understand during and after the war just how powerful fear could be as a means to fuelling hatred. Bigotry was the simple explanation, an easy illustration of prejudice that was bred into generations of witches and wizards, but fear was far more complicated. It took a little seed, watered daily with fearmongering, sensationalism, lies to give it legs and make it run like true hatred would.

It was something she had tried to dissect after the war, after realizing how afraid so many Pure-Bloods were. At first she thought they were cowards trying to rationalize their bigotry. Then came her own fear, her own hatred. It came in dreams and lodged itself deep into her chest, brooding and growing into hatred until she caught herself.

It didn't have to make logical sense, that was the beauty of it for people like Voldemort. Fear was a lot more about a visceral reaction, a flight-or-fight response that such people capitalized on. Voldemort was only one man in a history of several that came before him, and several more surely to come. Fear would always be in plentiful supply.

"Hermione?"

The brunette was startled by Narcissa's tone, realizing he pondering had left her in silence for a little longer than was appropriate in conversation.
"Sorry" she apologized. "I was just thinking about how powerful fear can be."

Narcissa nodded solemnly. "I understand that a little too well. That is one point in which I envy you Gryffindors." she commented. Hermione raised an eyebrow in question.

"Gryffindors are not exactly immune to fear."

"Perhaps not." Narcissa conceded. "But bravery – that is a good thing to envy, I suppose. Lily Evans showed me exactly how courageous you lions are."

"How so?"

"Oh, I did everything to terrify her. Called her unspeakable things. My Housemates would intimidate her. I'm not proud of it, but I must say she handled everything I threw at her with courage and grace. It was a lesson I should have learned then, not so many years later."

Hermione allowed herself a smile in memory of Harry's mother. By all accounts she had heard, Lily Evans had been a formidable woman.

"She was pretty brave." Hermione agreed.

"The bravest" Narcissa said. "It takes a special kind of bravery to face the Dark Lord, wandless."

Hermione at once knew what Narcissa talked about. The night Harry's parents had died, when Lily's defence of her son had forever changed the course of history. But Narcissa seemed to be forgetting something crucial.

"Not that special, considering a Slytherin did the same, seventeen years later." She said kindly. Narcissa only looked at her in question.

"I fail to see what you mean."

"Narcissa," Hermione began, being bold enough to take Narcissa's hand in hers. She was momentarily distracted by the silvery scar on the witch's palm, mirroring her own, but quickly continued, "You did the very same thing for Harry. You lied to the Dark Lord."

Narcissa scoffed, annoyed, but did not remove her hand from Hermione's gentle grasp.

"You noble Gryffindors. So foolish." She straightened in some attempt to look every bit the Ice Queen her mother had taught her to be. "I did what I had to do for Draco and no one else."


"Hermione, please don't..."

"I mean it" Hermione said a little more forcefully than she intended. But she needed Narcissa to understand it – Merlin knew she had had so much trouble understanding it herself after the War trials. The magnitude of the gesture had not been lost on Harry, but it had been to Hermione back then. She thought he was insane when he pushed for an Order of Merlin to the former Lady Malfoy. Now, she understood it clearly.

"Think for just one second if you hadn't done what you did. I wouldn't be here. I'd be lying dead and tortured somewhere." Hermione felt her hand being squeezed, almost as if Narcissa couldn't quite control the reflex. "Think if anyone – anyone else – had been asked to check if he was alive.
We wouldn't be sitting here. Don't diminish what you did. It saved a lot of people."

Narcissa shook her head. "I will never see it as you do. That is the main difference between you Gryffindors and us Slytherins. You do what is right. We do what is necessary."

"And sometimes, those two overlap." Hermione countered. She smiled. "You will never convince me otherwise, so I suggest you stop trying."

"That's exactly what Andromeda said." Narcissa quipped, annoyed. "She was always a Slytherin, but sometimes I swear she's got some blasted Gryffindor airs about her." she joked.

Hermione could tell Narcissa wanted out of that previous line of conversation. She was inclined to think that they would never agree, so she decided to let the matter drop.

"I don't know, I think Andromeda is a Slytherin through and through. You have to see how she works her magic with Molly – how do you think she scored some of those Warbeck tickets off her?"

Narcissa laughed. "She deemed it necessary to see her." She took another sip of her tea. "Actually, you're right; Andromeda was always quite... sneaky. I pulled out some of her letters from the years we kept correspondence – she told me to burn them all, but I kept some of them."

Hermione startled. "You mean... after she eloped?"

"Yes" Narcissa confirmed it. "I was the first person she told about Nymphadora's birth."

Hermione's eyes widened. Narcissa and Andromeda had written one another after Andromeda's infamous elopement? That changed several things; for once, it at least planted a seed of doubt in Narcissa's mind much earlier than anyone had thought. Hermione suspected the blonde herself had little idea of the significance of such a thing.

"Merlin... for how long?"

"Oh" Narcissa gestured vaguely. "A few years. Bellatrix eventually found out" she said darkly, and her gaze turned cold. "It was a terrible night." she finished solemnly, her shoulders stiffening as if preparing for a blow.

Hermione looked intently at Narcissa and recognized that ghosted look upon her face at once. There was only one kind of memory that would elicit such an expression and reaction; she saw it in the mirror every night after a particularly bad nightmare. The realization made her release a gasp of breath she was unaware she had been holding.

"She Crucioed you."

Narcissa's utter surprise at the pronouncement was all the confirmation Hermione needed.

Anything Narcissa had previously told her about Bellatrix being a kind sister evaporated from Hermione's mind in a split second. She knew Bellatrix was mad, but Narcissa was her sister. Her only sister after Andromeda had been blasted off the family tree.

"How could she?" the brunette breathed out through gritted teeth.

Narcissa rubbed soothing circles onto Hermione's palm – the young witch hadn't realized how badly her hands shook with anger.
"Bellatrix was a troubled woman. Those troubles drove her insane." Narcissa explained gently.

"But she was your sister!"

"And Draco was her nephew, yet she still saw it as an honour to embark in a foolhardy mission that would get him killed." Narcissa said. "Don't try to find sense nor fairness in her actions; you're bound to find insanity alone."

Hermione took a few calming breaths; Narcissa's soothing pressure on her palm helped her a great deal. She looked once more at their matching scars, then looked at where her Mudblood wound was beneath the sleeve of her winter robe. They had both been scarred by Bellatrix and her madness.

The two witches sat in deep silence for long moments. Narcissa never stopped her motion, and Hermione eventually evened out her breaths until they came in long, calm pulls and pushes in and out of her chest.

"I'm sorry." Narcissa eventually said, so softly Hermione wasn't sure she had meant to say it out loud. She sensed this wasn't the time to argue that Narcissa had run out of things to apologize for – she had been forgiven already; it was no use.

"I know." She said instead, thinking that all the proof she needed was in those thin silver lines on their palms.
Chapter 21

Summer was always stifling and humid at her grandparents’ house. Every year, the family would gather in the large estate for at least a few weeks, spending time together when the oldest children were not at school. It was a time for togetherness and events; balls and entertaining of guests, for playing in the garden mazes and perusing the massive library.

On one particularly hot day, Narcissa Black sat on a rock, gazing at the murky waters of a pond surrounded by enchanted magnolias – the flowers glittered on the branches like pieces of glass. She had sat there prim and proper, like her Mother had taught her a Lady should, for the better part of an hour, enveloped by the scent of the trees and a blanket of boredom.

“Hiya, Cissa!”

She turned, startled by the voice, only to see her cousin and his beaming grin.

“Hiya, Reggie” she greeted back, turning back to gaze at the pond. Regulus approached, taking a seat by another rock nearby. He was nearly a full inch taller than Narcissa, besides being two years younger, thanks to his thick, unruly hair.

“What are you doing here, all by yourself?” He asked as he stretched onto his rock. Narcissa pulled a face.

“Bella and Drommie are entertaining Hogwarts guests. Grandma said I’m not allowed; I’m still too young.” She explained, turning her nose up in distaste. “And Mother said I’m not allowed at the library.”

Regulus looked confused. “But why?” He asked. “Mum’s always telling me and Sirius to be more like you, so we become learned men or something” he joked.

Narcissa spared a smirk to the amusing thought. But her mother was Druella, not Walburga, and Druella did not care for how bookish her youngest daughter had turned out to be. In fact, Narcissa had the distinct impression her mother did not care for her at all, and she told Reggie as much.

“Ah! Nonsense!” He dismissed her with a laugh. “She’s your mum; she’s just being what all adults are, y’know?”

“No,” Narcissa said with a frown. “I don’t.”

“Boring!” Regulus laughed. “You know what else sounds boring? Sitting here looking at this nasty water. There aren’t even any ducks to feed here.”

Narcissa merely shrugged. Her mother had forbidden her only pleasure; what else was there to do without Bella and Andy?

“Come to the creek with me and Sirius!” Her cousin suggested happily. “We might even find some Flickering Pixies! They’re much more fun than sitting here all day.”

Narcissa hugged her knees tight against her chest. “How far into the woods are you going?” she asked uncertain. Regulus’ older brother was a bit of troublemaker – she didn’t want to do anything that might displease her parents, her mother especially.
“Not far” Regulus promised. “Just up to the old ruins by the creek; remember those?”

Narcissa nodded.

“Alright.” She said, daintily stepping off her rock and delicately dusting off her blue skirt. “But I’m leaving if you two go any farther.”

“Sounds good to me!”

The two cousins made their way through the manicured pathways that wound through the impeccable gardens of the Black Estate, until they reached the mouth of one of the many trails their ancestors had used for hunting, generations and generations ago. Hunting what, exactly, Narcissa didn’t know, but her grandfather Pollux recounted how he himself had played in those very trails as a child.

They were almost to the creek – Narcissa could hear the water running – when they finally spotted Sirius, who sat by the side of the trail upon a great big exposed root.

“Hiya, Sirius!” Called Regulus with a cheerful wave.

“T ook you long enough! I was nearly growing a beard from waiting.” The older brother called back before spotting Narcisa and sparing her a look of disdain. “What’s the Prissy Princess doing here?”

Narcissa furrowed her brow. “Reggie invited me.” She sniped. Sirius groaned.

“Reggie! This was supposed to be a manly expedition; the dangers we may face will be ‘unsurmountable’ and many!” He complained. “It is not for the faint of heart, and certainly not for a girl!”

“We’re just going to the ruins, Sirius.” Regulus reasoned.

“And the word you’re looking for is insurmountable.” Narcissa quipped. Sirius rolled his eyes in deep annoyance.

“Whatever, All-Knowing-Majesty-of-Buzzkills. You can come, but I better not hear Madam Prissy-Pants complaining about mud on her shoes or twigs in her hair, or I’m leaving you to the werewolves!”

“Mud and twigs shall be lovely; certainly, better than dealing with you.” she retorted.

Sirius didn’t deign to respond, instead turning and pushing onwards through the trail. Narcissa and Regulus shared a look, then followed quietly.

The trio progressed slowly through the uneven terrain of the old hunting trail. The path was rough with mossy rocks and branches sticking into their way; the vegetation was thick, and the woods smelled heavily of eucalyptus. At some point, Narcissa noticed Sirius began to lead them away from the main trail, sending a defiant look her way as if daring her to complain. Narcissa just matched his look with an icy glare of her own.

As they sloshed through mud and slipped on rocks and roots slick with moss, Narcissa desperately wanted to say something. Her pristine white shoes were no more, utterly ruined by mud and scuffed by rocks. She could feel her socks dampen with every step. Her favourite blue skirt was stuck on an errant branch and torn, and her hair, frizzy with the thick humidity, stuck out of her ponytail every which way, sticking itself to her sweaty forehead for good measure. But at every
step she missed, every gasp of surprise, Sirius would turn back to look at her, his gaze a silent
dare.

Narcissa resolutely refused to give him the satisfaction.

The three cousins finally made it to the bend of the creek where the old ruins were located. They
were old indeed, barely a shell of the former edifice that once stood there, centuries ago. As far as
Narcissa remembered, it had been one of the first buildings erected in the estate, and later became
the servants’ quarters before turning to ruin during the Middle Ages.

Regulus happily splashed his way into the small stream, not a care in the world over the state of
his leather shoes or neatly pressed trousers. Narcissa, for her part, bent down far more elegantly,
extactly like a proper Lady should, and gathered some of the fresh, cool water to wash the sweat
from her face.

“Cissa, look! Flickering Pixies!” Regulus exclaimed.

The young girl smiled. The woods of the Black Estate were filled with all sorts of wonderful little
creatures, magical and otherwise. Flickering Pixies were a much friendlier type of Pixie or Doxie,
with wings of gold that glowed and flickered in the dark when in flight – hence their name.

“Please, Regulus, control yourself. They’re just pests, anyway.” Sirius scoffed.

Regulus visibly deflated; Narcissa turned a look of disapproval to her older cousin.

“Don’t listen to him, Reggie. He’s the only pest for miles around.” She said pointedly. Sirius made
a rude gesture.

“You wound me, cousin. But fine, if you two want to bore yourselves with some dumb faeries, be
my guest. That’s really too bad, though, I had grand plans for this little outing.” He bemoaned
dramatically.

“What plans?” Regulus asked, his interest immediately piqued. Sirius waggled his brows.

“I’ve got something here; I think we’re going to have loads of fun with it.”

Regulus was on board already, giddy with anticipation. “What is it, Sirius, what is it?”

“It’s nothing, Reggie. He’s just having a laugh at your expense.” Narcissa declared emphatically,
crossing her arms.

“Oh, ye of little faith.” Sirius retorted. “I’ve got something, alright. But, before I show it to you
two, you both must solemnly swear that you shall never, ever, ever tell anyone about what you’re
about to see.”

“I will never tell!” Regulus cried with childish enthusiasm.

“Do you swear to take this secret with you to your very grave?” Sirius demanded.

“On my honour!”

Sirius smiled at his brother, then turned to Narcissa with a raised brow. “How about you, Princess
‘I’ve-got-a-stick-up-my-bum-and-can’t-have-any-fun’?”

She glared at him viciously. “In your dreams, prat.”
Sirius shrugged his shoulders, turning to Regulus. “Sorry, mate. Can’t do this if one of you isn’t bound to secrecy.”

Regulus’ face fell. “Come on, Cissa!” He turned to Sirius. “Can’t she just turn around or something?” he tried.

Sirius shook his head. “No can do. This is top-secret stuff.”

Narcissa rolled her eyes, both at Sirius’ antics and Regulus’ eager, pleading look. Boys could be so stupid.

“Fine, git! I won’t tell anyone. Happy?”

“Do I have your word?”

“Oh my honour, you have my word – and a Lady never breaks her word.” She said seriously.

“We’ll see about that, won’t we?” Sirius quipped cheerfully. He ran and jumped atop one of the big stone blocks surrounding the main construction of the ruins, pacing the flat surface in a mock-pensive state.

“Gather ‘round, boys and girls!” He exclaimed with a flourish. “Never before has someone attempted what you’re about to see today. Be very still, ladies and gentlemen, for this can be quite... Dangerous!”

In one swift motion, Sirius reached inside his sleeve, producing a wand that he then twirled in his hand with unadulterated glee. Regulus gasped; Narcissa felt the blood drain from her cheeks as she recognized their Grandfather’s birch wand with its engraved handle.

They were dead.

“Where did you get that ?!” She screeched.

Sirius only laughed, clearly delighted with her terror. “Let’s just say dear ol’ Grandpa’s naps are a little too heavy after some Firewhisky.” He said smugly. Narcissa was unable to formulate a response; her hands shook severely, and Sirius noticed.

“Come on, Narcissa. It doesn’t bite.” He laughed, twirling it in her direction. She cowered. “I’ll have it back before he notices it’s gone.” He grinned. “Let’s have some fun with it!”

“Are you insane? We’re too young for wands! It could be dangerous!” Narcissa exclaimed. Regulus looked a mixture of petrified with terror and consumed with intrigue, but Sirius scowled.

“Merlin, what difference does it make? We’ll get our own in a couple of years anyway. Besides, it’s not like I bloody know any actual spells, do I? If I did, the first thing I’d do would be to make you shut your stupid face!”

Narcissa huffed angrily. “That’s exactly why it’s so dangerous! We don’t know what it can do!”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Nothing, that’s what it can do! I don’t have anything to say to make it do anything!” He barked. To prove his point, he waved Pollux’s wand toward the trees above, yelling with all his might. “Abracadabra!”

Narcissa instinctively cowered in fear. However, Sirius and Regulus released peals of laughter at the green sparks the wand produced.
“You should have seen your face!” Sirius mocked her, his chest heaving with laughter.

“Another one, another one!” Clamoured Regulus, clapping his hands.

“It’s not funny! Sirius, stop it, please! Stop!” Narcissa cried.

“Or what? Are you afraid I’ll magically give you a personality?” Sirius retorted. “Hocus-Pocus!”

A shower of purple sparks burst from the tip of the wand, making loud popping sounds that had Narcissa covering her ears.

“Stop! Sirius!” She cried, holding back tears.

“Walla-walla, gabba-gabba, picklety-prick!” Sirius laughed, generating sparks and sounds as he waved Pollux’s wand erratically in the air. Narcissa trembled at every crackle and pop, at every burst of light or twig that moved with the errant magic Sirius released.

“Sirius!”

“Alakazam!”

Narcissa had been ready to yell at her cousin one more time, but her yell was cut short before it could leave her lips as she felt a searing, slicing hot pain across her tummy.

“Oh!” She cried, falling to the ground on her knees as she clutched her abdomen tightly, wrapping her arms around herself.

“Ah!” She cried, falling to the ground on her knees as she clutched her abdomen tightly, wrapping her arms around herself.

“Oh, come off it” Sirius scoffed, turning to face her. “You don’t have to be so drama...”

The boy’s words evaporated once he saw the crimson of blood spreading through the fabric of Narcissa’s immaculate white blouse. Regulus noticed it as well; he ran to his cousin in a frenzy of whimpers.

“Cissa! Cissa! Oh, Godric, Cissa!”

Sirius seemed to have knocked himself out of his initial stupor. He ran towards the fallen Narcissa in panic, his eyes shining with fear and his face white as a ghost.

“Cissa! I’m so sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it! Help!” He shouted to the emptiness of the trees. “Help! Somebody, help us!” he cried into the darkness of the woods surrounding, hearing nothing in response but the echo of his own shouts.

Narcissa cried in agonizing pain. She held her hands tightly against her abdomen, feeling the heat and moisture of the blood gushing through her tremulous fingers, oozing into the forest floor and the stream.

“It hurts! It hurts!” She sobbed as Regulus put his hands over hers in despair as she tumbled limply onto her back. She felt her hair grow damp with the water from the creek, and saw Regulus’ eyes widen in despair as the movement prompted a stronger gush of blood.

“Somebody!” Sirius yelled helplessly at her side. “Wait! Tubby! Tubby, come! TUBBY!”

A squalid House-Elf appeared with a resounding crack; the creature had no time to even greet his young masters. Tubby had scarcely regained his footing when Sirius grasped his thin shoulders and shook them vigorously.
“Tubby! Narcissa’s hurt! Go get somebody! Send help!”

“Would young Master Sirius prefer his uncle, master Cygnus, or would he rather prefer to call...”

“Just get help! NOW!” Sirius roared. Tubby seemed to just then notice Narcissa – his leathery skin blanched to an odd shade of grey, and without another word, he disappeared with another loud crack.

“Sirius!” Regulus called frightfully, kneeling by Narcissa’s side and holding her head in his hands; her eyes were heavy and she looked unnaturally pale; even her lips were beginning to whiten.

“Bollocks, bollocks, bollocks!” Sirius muttered in fear, tossing his grandfather’s wand aside as if it had just burned him. “Cissa! Stay awake! Please, stay awake, don’t close your eyes no matter what!”

“It hurts” Narcissa sobbed, her voice weak. She felt frail; her vision was beginning to blur at the sides. “Papa, I want Papa...”

“He’s coming! I promise, Cissa, I promise he’s coming!” Sirius tried to reassure her, though his tone carried too much fear to be of any comfort. He angrily wiped at the tears streaming down his own face. “Where’s that bloody elf? HELP! SOMEBODY!”

The response this time came in the form of multiple cracks of Apparitions echoing through the little clearing. Cygnus appeared first, his face white with fear. He was almost immediately followed by Orion, whose expression was a mixture of worry and wrath. Then came Druella with Tubby the elf, accompanied by none other than Bellatrix. Narcissa’s sister went completely pale at the sight of her bloodied sister, lying limply on the mud, her head tremulously cradled in Regulus’ hands.

“Cissy!” She cried in sheer panic, running towards her fallen sister. In a heartbeat, her features went from fear to fury as she turned to face Sirius with the most accusing glare he had ever received.

“What have you done to her, you filthy little beast?! I’ll kill you!” She snarled, filled with anger and despair.

“It was an accident! I swear! I’m sorry, I’m so sorry!”

“Narcissa!” Druella exclaimed, rushing to her daughter’s side, unceremoniously dropping knee-deep into the mud with little care for her expensive robes. Bellatrix’ attention was diverted at the uncharacteristic gesture coming from a generally aloof mother, enough to momentarily distract her from the murderous thoughts she harboured toward her cousin. Cygnus followed suit, also dropping to his knees to cradle Narcissa in his strong arms.

“Cissy! My angel, it’s Papa. Can you hear me?” he murmured in a desperate, hushed tone.

There was no answer, only the sound of the bubbling creek running red with Narcissa’s blood. Sirius felt his father’s hand on his shoulder, grasping it with bruising strength, yet he could not even flinch.

“Narcissa?” Cygnus practically whimpered. “Angel?”

“Oh, Cygnus, Cygnus, her stomach! Cygnus!” Druella cried, pallid and afraid.
“Papa...” came a weak breath. Bellatrix held her sister’s bloodied hands in her own. “Bella...”

“We’re here, Pet, we’ll take care of you. Please, don’t close your eyes, please...” Bellatrix whimpered, feeling Narcissa’s strength slowly drain away with the blood that tainted the little creek where the family knelt. “Please...”

“We must get her out of here, immediately. She’s frail.” Orion said severely. “Tubby, prepare Narcissa’s chambers at once. Have someone call for Healer Fairweather at St Mungo’s, now!”

He turned to Cygnus and Druella. “Take her and Bellatrix.” His wrathful gaze fell upon Sirius, turning into a menacing glare that made the boy audibly gulp in fear. “I’ll take care of these two.”

* * * * * * * * * * * * *

Narcissa woke with the pounding of a headache the likes of which she had never experienced in her short life. She made an attempt of opening her eyes, but the room she found herself in was much too bright – she barely managed a blink before groaning in pain.

“She’s waking up! Bella, move! Give her some room to breathe, for Merlin’s sakes!” called a familiar voice.

“Cissy? Cissy, are you alright?” called another, much closer than the first.

Narcissa tried to sit up, only to be impeded by a sharp jolt of pain emanating from her abdomen. A firm hand on her shoulder pushed her back gently onto her fluffy pillows.

“Easy now. Don’t try to move just yet, you’ll make a right mess of your stitches.” Came the second voice in gentle admonishment.

“Bella?” Narcissa tried with a rough voice, attempting to open her eyes once again. The room was far too bright still, but she could make out the forms of Bellatrix and Andromeda surrounding her. Bellatrix sat on her bed by her side, while Andromeda observed quietly at the foot of the bed. They both exchanged worried glances.

“Hiya there, Sunshine!” Andromeda quipped with a tentative grin. “How are you feeling?”

Narcissa blinked a few more times, trying to get used to the brightness of the room and the ache around her abdomen. She registered what Bellatrix had said rather belatedly.

“I’m... wait. Stiches?” She asked, trying to move her hands to her stomach to see, only to find that they were too weak and couldn’t go far. Even if they did, Bellatrix gentle grip stopped her trying.

“Trust me, Cissy, it’s best you don’t see it.”

Narcissa’s eyes welled with tears. Would she be scared forever? How bad was it, exactly? Her mind was a blur. All she could remember was Sirius waving a wand... their grandfather’s... then searing pain.

“Oh, Bella, look! You’ve made the poor girl cry!” Andromeda chastised, taking a seat at Narcissa’s opposite side and running a soothing hand through her blonde locks. “Hush now, Cissy. It’s not that bad” she cooed. “It just looks bad because of the stitching.” She reassured.
Bellatrix huffed. “Don’t lie to her, Drommie. She isn’t stupid” she hissed in clear annoyance. She turned to Narcissa, holding her cheeks in her hands to make sure her sister looked directly at her.

“Listen, Cissy. It’s bad, pretty bad, and it will probably scar. But it could have been much, much worse.” Her eyes turned sad. “You lost a lot of blood. We could have lost you.”

Narcissa sobbed, but even that hurt her stomach, which only made her cry harder. Bella hugged her tightly around her shoulders, taking care not to disturb the intricate stitching Healer Fairweather had used to close her sister’s wounds.

“Oh, Pet, don’t cry.” She whispered gently. “It’s just a few scars. You’re here with us and now you have a wicked story to tell at Hogwarts one day. ‘Oh, so how’s your family like? Well, I once survived an assassination attempt by my own cousin, so we’re a chummy bunch.’”

Narcissa let out a weak chuckle. At her side, Andromeda smiled.

“The stitches come out tomorrow, Cissy. They’re just there to help you heal faster.”

“Think on the bright side, Cissy. Mother will never keep you out of the library again!” Bellatrix pointed out with a grin.

The youngest Black smiled widely at the thought, but then remembered.

“Wait. What about Sirius and Regulus?”

Bellatrix eyes turned cold.

“Regulus got a stern talking to. Sirius, or whatever’s left of him, is grounded for the rest of the summer. I only wish Father and Uncle had let me have a go at him – he’d be blown to bits!”

Andromeda pulled a face.

“Now, Bella, settle down. He’s been punished enough.” she said with a glare. Bellatrix gave her a monumental eye-roll in response.

“Has he? Has he really? I don’t think he has; not until I see his guts spilling out of him like he did to Narcissa!” She clamoured angrily.

“My...” Narcissa gulped, feeling her stomach turn under the stitching in an unbearably odd sensation. “My guts were spilling out of me?”

“Of course not, sweetie. Bella is just being dramatic.” Andromeda whispered, shooting Bellatrix a look of warning. The latter’s silence was enough for Narcissa to question Andromeda’s reassurance. “In any case, Sirius has been duly punished. He’s very, very sorry for what he did. It was a terrible accident.”

“Ha!” Bellatrix scoffed in a laugh that dripped with sarcasm. “Accident! Stealing an elder’s wand – that’s an accident. Very funny, Andy; you should go into comedy.”

Andromeda rolled her eyes. “Of course, stealing Grandfather’s wand was an idiotic idea, but Sirius obviously didn’t mean any harm.”

“Well said. Stealing a wand is an idiotic idea, and Sirius is bloody full of them. Case closed.” Bellatrix retorted with an air of finality. “Sometimes I wonder how we can possibly be related to someone that stupid.”
“I shouldn’t have gone” Narcissa said morosely. “I should have found something else to do.”

“Nonsense!” Bellatrix dismissed her concerns with a smile. “But in any case, rejoice! Mum will never banish you from the library again after this.”

Narcissa smiled shyly. “Speaking of the library, could I have...”

“Something to read?” Bellatrix interrupted, bending to the floor just by the bed. She re-emerged with a moderate stack of books. “I’ve got your favourite, Merlin knows why, Hogwarts: A History. Shall we tuck in?”

Narcissa beamed, Andromeda laughed. Bellatrix rolled her eyes, but smirked smugly as she flipped the tome open.

“Narcissa? Are you alright?”

Narcissa practically whirled on her feet to face Hermione, who stood a few paces ahead of her with a puzzled look. Clearly she had stopped walking while Hermione went on, talking to herself.

“My apologies.” She said, embarrassed. “I caught up in a memory.”

The two witches were making use of the last day of the Winter Holiday to do a bit of field work at the grounds of the Black Estate. Hermione had been attempting to develop a ward-tracking charm, and they were testing it in the perimeter of the main house, without much success. They had gone down a few of the old hunting trails, and Narcissa remembered taking the exact same path as a child, so many years ago. The little creek was still there, running peacefully under a thin layer of ice.

“A good one?” Hermione asked.

“Not particularly.” Narcissa replied, looking in the direction she knew the old ruins would be, further down the creek they followed. She saw no reason not to share the memory with the brunette – they had been doing quite a lot of that of late. “I was injured as a child, further down this trail.”

“Oh, no. What happened?” Hermione asked tentatively. “Did you fall or something?”

Narcissa could only laugh. “If only... No, no, it was a much worse ordeal. I was walking the trail with Sirius and Regulus. I must have been... eight or nine, I believe.” She motioned to where the trail continued. “Sirius had stolen my grandfather’s wand, you see. He just wanted to play with it, I was terrified something would happen.” Her gaze darkened, her blue orbs turning a stormy grey.

“Something did happen.” Hermione said. It wasn’t a question. Narcissa gave one of her elegant shoulder shrugs that Hermione was coming to learn usually carried much deeper meaning.

“Indeed. He unwittingly recreated a movement to an obscure slicing curse.” She gestured toward her abdomen. “Cut me straight across the navel; I had to get several stitches so the wounds would stay closed long enough for the potions to reattach my skin. I still have the scars.”

“Merlin.” Hermione hissed with a shiver. The Sirius of Narcissa’s account seemed so much like
Harry, in her opinion. Impetuous, perhaps with the best of intentions, but without thinking things through. It seemed to be a Gryffindor trait in varying degrees. “That must have been awful.”

“Quite” Narcissa said. “I nearly died; Bella was furious. I believe he got the beating of a lifetime as punishment, but Bella wanted to disembowel him herself.”

Hermione shuddered. Perhaps a young Bellatrix didn’t truly mean to physically maim her cousin – though she had her sincere doubts – but the Bellatrix she had known would not have hesitated.

“We never got along, Sirius and I.” Narcissa’s look soured. “He had a nickname for me: Madam Prissy-Pants, or Prissy Princess.”

Hermione scoffed in solidarity. She was no stranger to mean nicknames from boys her age. “I dare say your relationship didn’t really improve after that incident, huh?”

Narcissa laughed. “Indeed, it did not.”

“I had my fair share of nicknames in school.” Hermione mused. “Ron certainly gave me a few before we were friends. Know-It-All was the main one. Granger-Danger and bookmite also made the rounds.”

Narcissa furrowed her brows. “Know-It-All was also one of my nicknames. It took off for about a month in school, until Bella threatened everyone who bullied with bodily harm.” She smiled wickedly. “In those moments, I was glad to have sisters.”

“Why are kids so averse to learning?” Hermione had meant the question as a joke, but she did wonder. Why was it so bad to be knowledgeable?

“Not just kids, I’m afraid.” Narcissa said sagely. “I remember the only reason I went out with Regulus was because I had nothing to do. My mother had banished me from the library.”

“The horror!” Hermione quipped. “In all seriousness... why would she do such a thing? I’d think a Pure-Blood mother would like her daughters to be educated, no?”

“Educated yes. Bookish and withdrawn, absolutely not. You see, we were trained to be sociable women, with the capacity and finesse to entertain important guests and impress potential husbands. It wouldn’t do for me to be socially inept because I spent all of my time reading.”

Hermione practically snorted. She’d never imagined Narcissa being socially inept anywhere; the woman was the picture definition of poise, grace, and tact.

“I find it hard to believe you’d be socially inept anywhere.” She commented. Narcissa smiled, gracefully taking the compliment in a way that perfectly illustrated Hermione’s point. The brunette laughed, looking around the wooded area.

“I was going to suggest we go a bit further to test this thing, but I think by now it’s pretty clear it doesn’t work.” She said, looking at her wand with defeat. The charm still needed to be perfected and fine-tuned; it was going crazy with the sheer number of wards that enclosed the estate. “So, how about we just head to that gorgeous library and just settle down with a nice cuppa?”

Narcissa spared the trail a long, pensive look, as if something called her to the old ruins she hadn’t visited since that fateful day. Her memory was quite strong, with a rather odd pull to the place. Shaking it off, she addressed Hermione.

“It doesn’t work yet. It will. I know it will.” She said with a smile. “The library sounds like a grand
idea. Which reminds me, I’ve got something for you there.”

Hermione looked puzzled, but Narcissa had already begun to walk back to the main house. With a shrug, she hastened to follow.

The two women were warmly ensconced in the massive Black Library, with invigorating cups of tea prepared by Bigsby, the House-Elf that headed the kitchens of the estate – Hermione had been pleasantly surprised when Narcissa offhandedly reassured her they were all adequately compensated for their work, in money or however else they preferred.

“Please take a seat. I won’t be long.” Narcissa said, leaving Hermione momentarily. The brunette took a moment to enjoy the library once more. Despite all the times she had been there, it always looked a bit different. It could look grand, cosy, eerie or comfy, all at once. The roaring fires cast dark, flickering shadows upon the built-in shelves, but enveloped her in comfortable warmth.

Narcissa returned shortly after she left, taking a seat on a plush chair facing Hermione on the other side of a coffee table by the enormous windows. She handed Hermione a black box.

“Consider it a belated Christmas gift.” She said. “It was a dear favourite of mine as a child, but I believe it will be in better hands if I pass on to you.

“Narcissa, you shouldn’t have.” She admonished, meaning every word.

“Nonsense. You gave me a wonderful gift” Narcissa rebuked. “It was only fair for me to try to return the favour.”

“You shouldn’t have.” Hermione repeated, running her fingers over the heavy box. “Thank you.” She said gracefully.

She made quick work of the red bow that held the box closed. An object, unmistakable a book of some kind, was wrapped in thick black velvet. She carefully unfurled the velvet to reveal a title she had loved for years.

_Hogwarts: A History._

She squinted to see the publication date. Her eyes widened.

“Is this... Is this...” She stuttered dumbly.

“A first edition, of sorts.” Narcissa said with a grin.

“Of sorts?”

Narcissa stood, walking over Hermione’s chair and kneeling daintily by her side to point out a few things on the tome. Hermione flushed with the proximity, hoping Narcissa wouldn’t notice.

“You see, Bathilda Bagshot and her publisher were on a tight deadline. Because of a mix up, her publisher sent an incomplete manuscript to be printed. Only a few runs were made before they realized their mistake, but Bathilda was adamant about correcting them. So, she took a mission upon herself and added in several handwritten chapters – with the help of a few charmed quills, I imagine.”

Hermione quickly flipped through the pages of the book with unbridled enthusiasm. Indeed, there were random pages and a few full chapters that were written entirely by hand. She held back a laugh of utter disbelief.
“Merlin!” She turned to look at Narcissa. “This... I can’t take this, Narcissa.” She said, meaning every word, as much as it pained her to admit it. This was a collector’s edition, doubtlessly ludicrously expensive, not to mention exceedingly rare. The Time-Turner had been essentially a broken trinket; this was something else entirely.

Narcissa waved her off. “I’ve had it for a lifetime. It’s in good hands. Not to mention, it would be incredibly rude to refuse a gift, Ms. Granger.” She added playfully. Hermione could only laugh.

“Then I shall take it, in the name of etiquette!” She quipped. “Thank you” she said more seriously.

“You’re more than welcome” Narcissa breathed, holding the brunette’s hazel gaze in a way that sent an unfamiliar shiver down her spine.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

I've never really had to do this for anything I've written, but I don't want to catch anyone off-guard here. This is a WARNING for some things mentioned in this chapter -- in this case, physical abuse/assault/violence. There are some descriptions of injuries, but not in great detail, and that's about it. I'm not sure how to best display these warnings, so let me know if you have some ideas (or if they're even needed, but I figured better safe than sorry).

Also, funny story -- I ALMOST submitted this chapter without realizing my word-processor had auto-corrected every single Poppy to 'Poopy.' That was a close one!

As always, thanks for reading and reviewing!

~Naralanis

Narcissa had barely slept a wink the night before the first day of the new semester. Something, an odd feeling, had gnawed at her very core for most of the night, taking her mind into twists and turns she would much rather no go through.

She had to be imagining the way Hermione looked at her. It had to be – there was no other possible explanation. She was a Black, and a Malfoy at one point – she would have never survived without an impeccable skill for seeing through the gaze. Druella’s lessons were quite hard to forget; there was practically no need to read one’s mind when most displayed their intentions so clearly in their gaze.

She had always used it to her advantage. Narcissa knew others found her beautiful and desirable; she used that desire, so evident in their eyes, to her advantage many a time. It was just like any good Slytherin would, particularly one relentlessly trained by Druella Black.

Given all her experience, not noticing Hermione’s gaze would be a grievous error, a fatal miscalculation in judgement. She had seen through the gazes of many, and the brunette should not be any different.

Therefore, she thought it safe to assume it had been a fluke, a trick played by a tired, cruel mind. There was no earthly reason for the brunette to direct that kind of gaze toward her – Hermione had no reason to even be friendly with someone like Narcissa. Anything more was categorically out of the question, she thought as the memory of Hermione’s screams echoing through the darkened halls of Malfoy Manor resounded in her mind.

Like any good Slytherin would, Narcissa had to bide her time. Like any good Slytherin, she would wait and analyse before acting. It was probably nothing; nothing more than admiration from someone who was naturally curious – and Narcissa was very much aware she was quite an enigma to Hermione. She was a puzzle, and if sating Hermione’s natural curiosity was all it took for that admiration to fade into normalcy, then she would gladly do it.

Because the alternative, truly, was too preposterous to consider; even if merely considering it kept
The castle was once again bustling with the energy of students. They returned from the holiday in excited throngs, eager to recount their time away from the castle to friends, and not so eager to return to their rigid study schedule. The four Heads of Houses stood at the great entrance of the castle, directing the flow of students to the Great Hall, giving the eye to whoever seemed to be thinking about playing hooky this early into the new semester.

It was chaotic, but Hermione loved it. No matter whether it was for the start of term or in return from a holiday, it always filled her with joy to see the castle begin to fill again with the excited chatter of students. It was something she would never get tired of.

The two spotted William White, walking alongside his friend Spencer with a heavy cast that went from shoulder to wrist on his left arm and a big smile on his face. He waved to the professors as he walked in.

“Bit of a holiday accident, Mr. White?” Narcissa inquired; Hermione could tell she was incredibly curious about the white cast that William rested on a sling. Wizarding medicine had never had much need for fully immobilizing casts – there were all kinds of spells for that sort of thing.

“Yeah” he said, cheeks reddening. “Had a little fall. It should come off in three weeks; I suppose I’ll have to ask Madam Pomfrey to remove it for me. I’ll just have to get used to writing with my right hand in the meantime.”

Hermione almost laughed at Narcissa’s look of surprise. While magically-induced breaks could be tricky to heal, the Pure-Blooded witch obviously had never waited that long to mend a naturally occurring fracture.

“Three weeks? No, that won’t do at all. Go to the Infirmary after dinner; Madam Pomfrey shall fix it much quicker.” She had declared, and William smiled widely.

Dinner went smoothly. Narcissa seemed to be more talkative than normal, but that was something Hermione greatly appreciated. It seemed whatever layer of awkwardness they usually waded through in their conversations had melted away; in fact, the blonde seemed almost chipper.

“I am certainly not looking forward to all the tests I’ll have to administer” she had said at one point with an exasperated look.

“Oh? How so?” Hermione asked, after properly chewing her chicken pot pie so as to not make an unintentional impression of Ron Weasley. Narcissa had often aired her grievances over some students she believed should not have been accepted into NEWT-Level Potions; apparently there were many such students, doubtlessly recruited by Horace due to their prestigious names.

“I’ve received several letters from concerned parents. They were mostly poorly disguised attempts to bribe me – financially – for passing grades. I suppose I’m derailing the career plans of several of my students, but passing them as they are is simply unacceptable.”

Hermione had to say she appreciated the blonde’s unwavering position on the matter. She also wanted to laugh a bit at anyone trying to bribe Narcissa Black. The woman probably had more money than she knew what to do with.

“Maybe take it up with Minerva? Bribery is heavily frowned upon generally, but the School
Council of Governors would certainly like to hear of it. Parents must be discouraged from pursuing that course of action” she said. Having parents trying to influence their children’s grades by bribing school officials was never a good sign – though she chose to refrain to comment on how Lucius did it quite often for Draco. Not that he had needed it – once they began to work together, Hermione came to realize Draco had been quite a talented student.

Narcissa had waved her off gently. “It’s no matter. I can handle some spoiled students and their equally spoiled parents,” she said with a beaming grin. “It is, after all, my area of expertise!”

“But enough about my exasperating students. Have you got anything interesting planned for the semester?”

Hermione merely shrugged. “Oh, not quite. We’ll have a lot more practical lessons, especially with my first years – they spend quite a lot of time learning the theories behind Transfiguration. It’s time to raise the stakes a bit” she joked. “Otherwise... Oh, Professor Krum and I will finally begin planning the return of the duelling club!” She said. They had put the idea on the backburner for a while, but Victor wanted to have it up and running by the next year. He thought of holding try-outs before the year was out, perhaps creating a few workshops during the summer.

“Oh, that is a wonderful idea!” Narcissa commented. “I hear you were quite the duellist yourself – Draco told me all about your multiple awards.”

Hermione couldn’t help but preen a little at the praise. “Well... I’m not half bad.” She said modestly. Narcissa laughed.

“I can think of a few international titles that would say you’re much more than ‘not half bad’. I was never too good at duelling myself.” She commented.

“Oh?” Hermione could not help but question it. Weren’t Pure-Bloods proud of the entire... etiquette and ritual of duelling?

“Oh, not at all. Neither was Andy. Bellatrix, however, won the Hogwarts Duelling Championship four years in a row – a school record.”

Hermione suppressed a shiver – not the good kind – but her curiosity was simply too strong. “Four years? But that means she was in the club at least since her third?” She said, doing the math in her head. The mere idea of a thirteen-year-old Bellatrix besting much older, more experienced students made her stomach turn rather unpleasantly. What could the Order have done with such talent?

Narcissa nodded. “She joined in her second year, despite our mother’s protestations. Druella found duelling to be unladylike, but Bellatrix simply responded she’d never be a lady.”

Hermione could spare a chuckle to that. No lady indeed. More like a murderous machine, though she tactfully chose not to say that.

“Bella and Lucius did try to teach me the basics, but I’m afraid I never had much talent for it.”

“Was Lucius in the duelling club as well?”

Narcissa nodded. “Only for a while. He eventually was made Quidditch Captain and decided to focus on that.”

Hermione’s brows raised. She knew Draco had been a Quidditch fanatic, but she had never known Lucius was on the team. Perhaps she ought to take a closer look at the Trophy Room – she had to say Harry and Ron were a lot more familiar with it than she was, due to so many detentions served
polishing trophies sans magic. Plus, she had never been one for Quidditch.

“How about you? Were you a Quidditch fan?”

Narcissa let out a rather inelegant snort of laughter, which made her mortified. “Heavens, no!” She said, composing herself. “I enjoy flying, but the game is far too violent for me. However...” She continued, looking embarrassed, almost like a child admitting to some wrongdoing “I studied the game quite comprehensively... I wanted to impress Lucius.”

Hermione smiled. “We’ll, you’re dedicated, at least! I never made that effort when Ron and I dated. I just find it so... boring.” She admitted.

Narcissa nodded her agreement. “It can be. But you don’t fly at all, then?”

Hermione shook her head a little more emphatically than she intended, her curls whipping wildly in the air around her. “No! I’d much rather ride a Thestral – brooms terrify me. I’ve even ridden a Hippogriff, and that was preferable to a broom.”

Narcissa looked exactly like Hermione expected – completely baffled by her preference of Thestrals and Hippogriffs over brooms, but it was something the brunette would forever and always stand by. She waited for Narcissa to school her features again.

“Merlin.” She turned a curious look toward Hermione. “How in Merlin’s name did you find an opportunity to ride a Hippogriff??”

Hermione had to laugh. “Funny story,” she said, her eyes glimmering with mirth. “Part of it actually involves Draco being a prat.”

It had been a busy return to the school schedule – the Welcome feast had progressed normally, but the student buzz over the holidays would take some time to die down. Narcissa had already twice intervened when overly-eager students decided to release Dung Bombs in one of the corridors – unfortunately she had already seen the need to dole out detentions. Additionally, Slytherin and Hufflepuff were beginning the semester with points taken off.

She had been preparing her lectures for the following day, elbows-deep in piles of parchment, when she was interrupted by a decisive set of knocks to her door. She glanced at the clock she kept in her office – it was much too late for a student to come seeking assistance.

“Come in” she beckoned, willing the door to open with a simple motion of her wrist. She was surprised to see Madam Pomfrey standing before her, still dressed for work.

“Madam Pomfrey? How may I help you?” She said, confused as to why the Matron needed to speak to her personally this late.

“Oh, please call me Poppy, Narcissa. I feel much too old when you call me ‘Madam,’ it’s like you’re still a student.” Poppy said, waving away the pleasantries; Narcissa blushed.

“My apologies, Poppy. Please, take a seat.” Narcissa said, wandlessly beckoning one of her chairs.

“Thank you.” The nurse said kindly, seating herself with a tired grunt. She didn’t speak for several moments, seemingly distracted while looking at Narcissa’s private office.
“How may I be of assistance?” Narcissa prompted after waiting in vain for Poppy to speak.

“You’ve come very far, Narcissa.” The matron said suddenly, startling the blonde. She was sure Poppy hadn’t come to her to talk about her accomplishments. “We’re all very proud of you.”

Narcissa’s cheeks reddened a bit, though she did not want to ask precisely who ‘we’ were. She took it as the compliment she knew Poppy had meant it as.

“Thank you, Poppy.” she said kindly. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Not exactly” Poppy finally said, wringing her hands uncomfortably. “This is a sensitive matter, I think. I thought it best to bring it up with you since you’re Slytherin’s Head of House, but I will go to Minerva after this, just in case.”

Pomfrey’s hesitant tone worried Narcissa at once. “Has something happened?” She asked, discarding the quill she had been writing it, her eyes wide in alert. Poppy looked at her with strong uneasiness in her eyes.


Narcissa was on high alert at once. “What about him?”

Poppy’s shoulders stiffened. “You sent him to me to remove that... that Muggle contraption on his arm, right?”

“Yes; he told him he’d have to keep it on for three weeks. I just thought the thing to be too cumbersome, so I sent him to you so he could get it fixed a little sooner.” Narcissa recounted. “Is something the matter with his arm?”

The matron nodded rapidly. “Yes. But not just his arm... Narcissa, I... I don’t even quite know how to say it.” Poppy took several deep breaths. “I suppose I’ll start from the beginning. He came to me, and I used a mild slicing charm to cut that blasted thing off – it was hard as rock. I don’t know how Muggles manage” she said, going off on a tangent before catching herself. “In any case... He had to remove his shirt for me to get it all – the blasted thing went all the way up to his shoulder.”

Another breath, and then Pomfrey directed her gaze to meet Narcissa’s head on. “Narcissa, the boy is covered in bruises.”

Narcissa’s hands stiffened over her table-top; the colour drained from her face. She hoped, she very dearly hoped Poppy was wrong in her assumption.

“He told me he had a fall.” She said weakly before shaking her head. “I don’t suppose he’d openly advertise the alternative.”

“Narcissa, that’s not all.” Poppy interrupted. “He had bruised ribs. And when I ran a simple diagnostic charm, it showed bruising of the bone on his shins. And” Poppy swallowed. “His arm? It was like it had been pulled from its socket.”

Narcissa drew a sharp breath. The weight of the reality of William’s situation came crashing down upon her shoulders – what could she do? She was no stranger to heavy-handed parents. While Cygnus had never raised a hand to any of his daughters, Druella hadn’t been as kind, particularly to her. Additionally, she remembered the marks upon her cousin’s body, courtesy of her Uncle Orion, clear as crystal.
As a child, she had assumed all families operated similarly. After all, physical punishment was doled out in the name of discipline. What were a few slaps from her mother, if they made her a well-adjusted young witch with flawless manners?

And then, when she got to Hogwarts, she realized that wasn’t truly the case. Lucius had been baffled when she recounted her family’s disciplinary measures – his parents had always adored him and had never dare raise a hand towards him. With that in mind, she chose to adopt the same approach in their upbringing of Draco. She remembered looking at that lovely child she and Lucius had brought into the world, and could not even bear the thought of bringing him any harm – not even in the name of discipline.

“Narcissa?” Poppy said shyly, interrupting Narcissa’s thoughts. The blonde brought herself back to the present, where the ominous truth of William White’s situation hung heavy in the air. Something had to be done.

“Go to Minerva. I will speak to her myself; but first, I must speak to William.” She said, standing up in a moment of decisiveness.

“Do you think that’s wise?” Poppy asked, sceptical and uncertain.

“I don’t know.” Narcissa said, walking out the door and leaving Poppy to dwell in her uncertainty.

She had resolutely stalked to the dungeons, making her way to the Slytherin Common Room in a bout of decisiveness.

Narcissa’s breath was heavy as she reached the bare stretch of stone wall in the Dungeons, the entrance to her childhood Common Room. The password – “evergreen” – was on the tip of her tongue, but the rush of a memory stopped her from uttering it at the last possible second.

“How bad is it?”

“None of your business. Get out.”

She frowned deeply. “Idiot, I just want to know so I can help you. Merlin knows you’ve got no one at Grimmauld.”

“I don’t need your sodding help, Narcissa. Get away from me!” Sirius hissed, his eyes teary and his jaw rigid. He had balled his hands into fists at his sides, but Narcissa had cornered him in an empty classroom.

Her gaze softened. “At least go to Madam Pomfrey.” She didn’t very much like her cousin – the feeling was entirely mutual on his part – but she had recognized his stiff steps and constricted movements the moment they had descended the train. Orion’s beatings were legendary, and Sirius, his father’s eternal disappointment, took the heavy brunt of his wrath.

“No.” He said angrily. “This is family business, I’m not bringing a stranger into it.” He scoffed adamantly.

“I’m family. Let. Me. Help. You.” She bit back, exasperated as he continuously tested her patience.

Sirius sat upon a desk, his look defeated and suspicious at the same time.
“Why?” He asked after long moments of silent, angry contemplation. “You hate my guts.”

“You’re not terribly fond of me either” She quipped, drawing nearer. “But Bella’s graduated. Drommie is gone.” Her look turned sad. “You and Regulus are all I have here. Despite everything, we’re still family.”

At any other point in time, Narcissa would take the opportunity to make fun of the tears running down Sirius’ face, or the quiet sobs he tried so desperately hard to suppress in his chest. She’d call him weak, a coward, or worse – such were their usual exchanges. But now, she knew not to; not when the physically imposing, strong young man her cousin had become was reduced to a mere lost child before her very eyes.

She took another step in his direction, taking a round tin from within her robes. Sirius glanced at her suspiciously; she opened it to show him the contents: a brownish-purple, thick paste.

“Bruise Removal Paste, which I have adapted to include a rather powerful Numbing Ointment.” She explained. “It won’t fix it, not really, but it’ll make it stop hurting.” She said, almost in question. Sirius took a moment to further examine the paste, then nodded in defeat, or perhaps resignation.

“Fine.” He muttered.

Narcissa stepped to face him directly, taking a healthy amount of the purplish paste in her fingers. “Open your shirt?” she asked politely.

Sirius did so reluctantly, and Narcissa tried to be as tactful as possible considering the situation. She was even mindful enough to suppress a strong, sudden gasp of surprise at the varying shades of black and blue that mottled his pale skin.

Her cousin hissed in pain as she slowly applied the ointment to a particularly bad bruise. “Sorry” she whispered, because what else could she possibly say? She kept at her task, methodically covering his chest in the paste. Some of the lighter bruises had already begun to yellow, and she could tell the Numbing solution was also working as Sirius stiffness slowly melted away.

“Merlin, that’s better.” He finally conceded with a groan. “What’s that smell?” he asked with a curious sniff. Narcissa smiled.

“Eucalyptus” she said. Looking at her handiwork, she asked “Are there any on your back?”

Sirius nodded, removing his school shirt completely and turning around. Narcissa dutifully set to applying her solution.

“I’ll give you a tin of this – very useful for Quidditch injuries as well.” She said, uncomfortable with their silence and proximity, yet trying to keep conversation as light as possible.

“Powerful stuff” Sirius muttered, slightly bent over the desk so as to give his cousin better access to the ugly bruising on his back. “It’s actually great. Did you make it yourself?”

Narcissa nodded, then realized Sirius couldn’t see her, so she hummed her confirmation instead. He nodded back in impressed acknowledgement.

They fell into silence again, despite the awkwardness. It was a long time – Narcissa was almost done with his back – until Sirius spoke again.

“I hate them. I hate them both, but I hate him most of all.” He said to the dark nothingness of the
empty classroom, evidently uncaring that Narcissa could hear him. She felt no need to ask him to elaborate.

Narcissa sighed, wanting to project sympathy, not pity. “Two more years” she said soothingly. “Two summers – then you’ll be of age and you’ll do what you want.”

Sirius’ shoulders drooped. “I don’t think I can wait that long.” He whispered grimly. Narcissa couldn’t think of anything to say to that.

“There” she said instead, “all done. Though I suppose it’s better if you wait for it to dry before putting your shirt back on, or it’ll be ruined.”

Sirius nodded, turning to stare blankly at his cousin. “Thank you” he said finally. Narcissa acknowledged him with a stiff smile. “I know you hate me, but truly, Narcissa, thank you.”

“I don’t hate you” she said. “I just don’t like you very much. We’re still family.” She said. Sirius laughed darkly.

“I wonder for how long.” He muttered ominously.

Narcissa’s mind whirled back to the present, drowning out the password to the Slytherin Common Room. She had never understood what her cousin had meant, not until the next summer, when Sirius ran off to live with the Potters, earning himself a blackened spot on the Black Family Tapestry.

She remembered clearly how his pride – and his shame – prevented him from speaking about how Orion disciplined him. In truth, she very much doubted his closest friends even knew.

She wondered how she could possibly approach the subject with William White. While with Sirius she had just seen it as discipline, now she knew better – it was abuse. What she was at a loss for was how to proceed – were Muggle families harsher in their discipline?

She then remembered Hermione’s photo album, and her tales of childhood. No, that was not the case.

An enormous amount of frustration settled deep in her chest. William would not want to speak about it – that much was certain, if her experiences with Sirius were any indication. How could she possibly intervene, when as far as she knew, the school had absolutely no jurisdiction in the matter?

Narcissa could think of only one person who could help her.

“Coming!” Hermione yelled, clumsily spelling her hair dry as she stepped out of the shower to answer the incessant knocks to her chambers’ doors. Her pyjamas clung to her body uncomfortably, as she had scarcely been able to dry herself. Her brown locks stuck out in all directions – an unfortunate side effect of the Drying Charm – as she hurriedly scurried to the door.
She was surprised to find a breathless Narcissa waiting outside, her cheeks rosy, but her eyes wide. Had she run there??

“Good evening” Narcissa gasped out, sounding as breathless as she looked. “I was wondering if I could trouble you with a few questions.”

Hermione opened her door, motioning for Narcissa to come in while eyeing the blonde quizzically.

“Uh, of course. Please take a seat. Would you like some tea?”

Narcissa waved her off, taking a few seconds to catch her breath and regain her composure as she gingerly lowered herself onto one of Hermione’s plush chairs.

“You look frazzled, Narcissa – is everything alright?” Hermione questioned, worried to see the normally composed Potions Professor so agitated. Narcissa sighed heavily, as if looking for the right words – that worried Hermione even more.

“I... It concerns William White. I need your help.” She said simply. Hermione was more puzzled than ever.

“William White? What about him? Has something happened?”

Narcissa shook her head in the affirmative. “I sent him to Poppy to remove that dreadful thing on his arm. When she examined him... She found bruises – several of them. Bruised bones in his shins, bruised ribs. She also said that the injury to his arm was... was inconsistent with a fall as he described it; it was as if it had been pulled out from its socket.”

Hermione’s face immediately blanched. She took a seat herself; Narcissa could already tell the wheels in her head were turning madly in search of a solution.

“Have you spoken to Minerva about this?”

“Poppy has.” Narcissa said. “I was going to speak to William about it but... but something stopped me. I came here as soon as I could.”

Hermione nodded. “Not speaking to him was probably a good call.” She took a moment to ponder. “This is very serious. We need to speak to Minerva immediately.”

Narcissa had barely any time to nod – Hermione jumped to her feet and took her by the hand, sending an electrifying shock up her arm and into her chest as she pulled Narcissa with her, taking off into the corridors.

Hermione only released her hand once they had practically sprinted over the Headmistress’ Office – the rotating gargoyle had not even requested a password for their admittance – it was quite clear Minerva was expecting them.

Narcissa’s heart beat wildly in her chest – she had never had to run in her life – and Hermione huffed and puffed next to her, though the glimmer in the brunette’s eyes was one of sheer determination. They stepped off the rotating staircase to be greeted by Minerva, who sat in her desk in her nightly tartan.

“Ms. Black, Ms. Granger. Thank you for coming.” She called. Poppy sat at one of the chairs facing
the Headmistress.

“Poppy has filled me in on her findings” Minerva continued, motioning for the newest arrivals to take a seat.

“Minerva, we must do something and we must do it now” Hermione said, not wasting any time with pleasantries. “I don’t need to remind you of Harry.” She said severely.

“What does Mr. Potter have to do with this?” Narcissa couldn’t help but ask, utterly confused. Minerva sighed, buckling under the pressure of Hermione’s gaze.

“Mr. Potter was in less-than-ideal living arrangements for much of his schooling years.” Minerva said, looking guilty.

“Not just his schooling years. He lived with the Dursleys for eleven years before he even came to Hogwarts.”

Narcissa looked more confused than ever. “I’m sorry, I don’t follow. Who are the Dursleys?”

Hermione straightened stiffly in her seat. “They were his only living relatives – his Aunt Petunia Dursley was Lily Evans’ sister” she clarified, her eyes angry. “They treated him horribly – stuck him in a broom closet for a bedroom, didn’t feed him. They were monsters, and The Boy Who Lived should not have had to live in such conditions – no child should have to, for that matter.” She finished emphatically, sending a glare Minerva’s way.

The Headmistress looked like she was about to interject, when suddenly a voice interrupted from the other side of the room.

“In Professor McGonagall's defence, Ms. Granger, Minerva was staunchly against Harry’s placement at the Dursley’s. It was on my insistence.” Came the soft tones of Albus Dumbledore’s portrait.

Narcissa was surprised to see him speak – every time she had been in the office, he had been fast asleep like the rest of the Headmasters immortalized in portraits. Hermione turned to the late Headmaster, looking both sheepish and bitter somehow.

“It was inexcusable, Professor, with all due respect.” She said.

“It was not the best of conditions – they were truly terrible” Dumbledore agreed with a solemn nod, peering at the witches over the rims of his half-moon spectacles. “But it was the safest he could have been.”

Narcissa could tell Hermione was very nearly fuming, and was preparing a strong retort – she grounded the brunette with a dainty hand to her shoulder, which immediately calmed her down. Dumbledore smiled brightly, as if just noticing her there.

“Ah, Ms. Black. How lovely to see you. How are you finding your post?” he asked. Narcissa raised a quizzical brow.

“It... It is good, Professor” she said shamefully, without any strength to face the man her son had been tasked to kill, even if he was merely a portrait.

“Shall we remain focused?” Minerva called out mercifully. “I’m aware we have a problem at hand. However, we must be careful not to go about this the wrong way.”
“Well-put, Minerva.” Dumbledore called from his portrait. Narcissa caught a glimpse of Hermione rolling her eyes.

“First things first: is William in any immediate danger, Poppy? How are his injuries?”

Poppy sighed. “None of them were magically inflicted. He’ll be good as new tomorrow.”

Minerva nodded. “That’s very good. Now” she looked intently at Narcissa and Hermione. “Assuming William was hurt in his home, we can perhaps assume he is in no such danger while he is in the castle. However, Narcissa, I suggest you keep a close eye on him – see if there is anything in his behaviours that warrants our attention.”

Narcissa nodded, though she looked unsure.

“I’m sorry, but are we ignoring the fact that this kid had bruised bones and his arm was pulled out from its socket?!” Hermione hissed, exasperated. “We must send the authorities to his parents’ home – we need a full investigation!”

Minerva looked at Hermione, her eyes sad. “All we have at the moment is conjecture, Ms. Granger. The school has no real jurisdiction in this matter. Additionally, Mr. White’s parents being both Muggles further complicates things. Without him there, Magical Law Enforcement – or even Magical Social Services – cannot be there.

“How is such a thing possible?” Narcissa asked, because she had never truly considered how Magical Laws would apply to Muggle parents. She had naively assumed they would be considered a magical family unit due to any magical children.

Minerva seemed to inwardly cringe. “As long as there isn’t a witch or wizard in a dwelling, it cannot be considered a magical one. The Statute of Secrecy, as well as several other laws, prohibit us from intervening in such a home unless there is an immediate magical threat to its occupants.”

Narcissa felt Hermione’s shoulder stiffen angrily. “So we do nothing? Is that it?”

“I did not say that, Ms. Granger. We cannot send Wizarding Law Enforcement to directly investigate Mr. White’s home or to interrogate his parents. What we can do – and that would be my suggestion – is set up surveillance there for a while. We should also petition Wizarding Social Services –WiSer – to set up such surveillance when Mr. White returns home for summer.”

Hermione gripped the arms of her chair. “So we’ll send him back at the end of term? Like Harry was sent back to the Dursleys, year after year?”

Minerva looked ashamed. “It’s the best we can do, Ms. Granger. This school has no jurisdiction over Mr. White outside of the school year. We can’t simply remove him from his family.”

Narcissa felt the ripple of frustration coursing through Hermione’s body; she subconsciously tightened her hold onto the brunette’s shoulder.

“Can we not arrange alternative accommodation for him during the summers?” Narcissa asked. There had to be a way to remove William from the care of abusive parents.

“Again, Ms. Black, we have no jurisdiction. Additionally, Mr. White is still underage – we would need a guardian’s approval to change his living arrangements.”

Hermione scoffed. “How about Wizarding Social Services? Can they remove him from the house?”
“With enough proof, we could certainly petition for it. However, it would be highly unlikely. WiSer do not remove children from their parents’ care lightly – especially if they are Muggles. They might have them go through a re-education program; however, since they are not Magical folk, it is within their rights to refuse.”

“So, in short, we can do nothing.” Hermione declared, supremely unhappy.

Minerva sighed, defeated. “We can bide our time, Ms. Granger.”

Narcissa walked a truly unhappy Hermione back to her private quarters – she sensed the brunette needed someone to vent her frustrations to. And vent she did, airing her multiple grievances of the exasperating, old-fashioned bureaucracy that ruled the Wizarding World and its interactions with Muggles.

Sadly, Narcissa felt she had nothing to contribute. She hadn’t realized how ignorant she was in such things until now; the idea of not being able to intervene for William until it was potentially too late filled her with sorrow.

“I’m writing to Harry at once; maybe he can pull some strings in the Ministry and at least have someone competent from the DMLE do the surveillance at the house as opposed to some pencil-pusher at WiSer.” Hermione declared at a certain point, filled with righteous anger at the situation.

“I wish there was more we could do.” Narcissa said truthfully. Hermione turned to look at her.

“We must keep an eye on him. I can’t imagine how long he has lived like that – something tells me this is not new” The brunette said sadly. “We have to make sure William is well-cared for. Harry had horrible issues.”

Narcissa looked at Hermione intently. “I had no idea Mr. Potter’s relatives were so...” she struggled to find words.

“They were horrible, horrible people. I mean, his cousin eventually came around, but his uncle and aunt were... They wanted nothing to do with magic, and punished Harry terribly for it. I can’t help but fear William’s situation is similar.”

Narcissa could not suppress a shiver. The magic-hating Muggle was much too close to her family’s warped rhetoric for comfort, and she could tell Hermione understood it immediately.

Hermione returned Narcissa’s intense gaze. “We need to keep an eye on him.” She left a silent question to hang in the air, hoping that Narcissa would be able to capture it without the need for words to explain it.

She was not disappointed. “I would truly appreciate your help in this matter, Hermione.”

Hermione smiled, albeit a little sadly.

“You have it.”
“Thank you so much for doing this, Harry.” Hermione said gratefully as she and The-Boy-Who-Lived nursed healthy doses of Ogden’s Finest at the Hog’s Head. Harry merely waved her off with a sad smile, his unkempt hair swaying with the shake of his head.

“No worries” he slurred a bit. Perhaps they had overindulged; thankfully the Ministry’s Star Auror would not be needing to drunkenly Apparate back to his home – Abeforth had been kind enough to keep his Floo open. “Susan’s one of my bessst. She’s certainly better than any of those daft bureaucrat bastards at WiSer”.

Hermione raised her drink to that, and Harry mirrored her; they downed them simultaneously after a short moment of inebriated contemplation. She had spent the better part of an hour detailing the newest developments concerning William White, and her reasons for wanting someone better than the usual WiSer fare on the case. To her dismay, Harry had told her the same as McGonagall, but the silver lining was that he was not above pulling some Chosen One strings to do a little more.

Hence why Auror Susan Bones had a new assignment. Part of Hermione felt a fraction of guilt – surely there were better assignments for such a talented member of Magical Law Enforcement. Harry, however, had dismissed her concerns; Bones had just returned from a rather rough stint tracking a network of traders dealing with the Dark Arts, so he guaranteed she would like the relative peace of watching a Muggle household for a little while.

“Really, can’t thank you enough” she babbled. Harry rolled his eyes.

“It’s the least I can do” He said, eyeing his empty glass with unnatural interest. “Part of me wants to march up there and give those people a piece of my mind... Or at least come hang with this William kid and give him a fair bit of advice. I felt what he felt on my own skin.”

Hermione sighed, running a comforting hand down Harry’s back. The Wizarding world at large had no idea how badly their Golden Boy had been treated as a child, and Harry preferred it that way. If anyone questioned his incredibly charitable donations to wizarding and Muggle orphanages, they probably chalked it up to his memory of James and Lilly, or his desire to honour his godson’s parents somehow. Which was just as well.

“I know” she agreed. “I don’t want him to go back to that when the term is over.”

Harry perked up. “Maybe we can do something about that. I could talk to him, make sure there is a wish to get out... He could come stay with me, at Grimmauld.”

Hermione’s heart swelled. Harry was the kindest, most caring person she had ever known, with a
heart of gold. He probably wouldn’t have forgotten how unfeasible that was so soon after they discussed it if they hadn’t imbibed.

“That’d be great... but we can’t” she quipped morosely. “Stupid laws”.

“Coming from the DMLE’s star, that’s saying something.”

That made her laugh. “Come off it. I haven’t been in the DMLE for years.”

He shrugged. “Aw, hell, Hermione. You’re still sorely missed.”

Despite not ever wanting to return to the chaos that was the DMLE, there was a little part of Hermione could not help but preen a little at the observation. Despite her obvious intelligence, passionate activism, and essential role in the war, there were still those who didn’t expect much from Gryffindor’s Golden Girl as she was swept into the daily grime and grit of Magical Law Enforcement.

Hermione loved learning, reading, and thinking. But she also loved to prove wrong those who underestimated her.

“Well, no use crying over spilled butterbeer – I am gone from the DMLE forever” she declared, emphatically raising her empty glass.

“Hear, hear!” Harry chimed. “May generations at Hogwarts tremble before Professor Granger’s commanding glare!”

Hermione categorically denied her ability to glare while glaring at him.

It had taken Narcissa hours and hours to get to bed, and sleep itself could only come much later. When it did, it was weakened and tentative, hesitant to take her and gift her with peace. The little she did achieve was restless and interrupted by unwanted dreams.

It was terror, however, that woke her up late into the night – sheer and absolute panic as she felt a rush of cold air envelop her body in a sudden chill that made her teeth clatter. Her body tensed, blood turning to ice in her veins at the mere memory of the haunting creatures that had contributed so much in pushing her sister off the edge of a cliff called insanity. The fear only worsened as her hand blindly clutched at her wand – always easily accessible – chilling her to the bone as the taunting reminder of her inability to cast a Patronus charm invaded her mind.

Narcissa turned rapidly, tangling herself in her own covers, sweat beading onto her forehead. The relief she felt as The Bloody Baron materialised into his usual form from a fine cold mist was simply immeasurable. He was deep into a bow before looking even remotely solid.

“Madam Black” his melodious voice echoed in her small chambers “do forgive me, if it be true I has’t frightened thee.”

She waved off his apology, body awash with relief it was the Slytherin House ghost, not a dementor. “Think nothing of it, Lord Albert” she said, getting her voice under control so it wouldn’t sound too shrill with whatever remained of her initial fear. “What brings you here?”

“Peeves hath proven useful to thy cause” he said solemnly, never breaking his bow. “The spectre spake of a sullen young gent making his way to the Owelry.”
Narcissa’s brows furrowed. “William White?”

The Baron’s translucent form nodded. “Indeed, Madam. There is another who followeth Master White, hidden in the shadows.”

The Potions Professor was alert at once, tossing her tangled covers onto the stone floor without a care. “Thank you, my friend,” she said eagerly, waving her wand and summoning her robes from her chest of drawers. “Where are they now?”

“Make haste, Madam, and with thy luck may surprise them by the West Staircase.”

She did not need to be told twice. Lord Albert sunk to the floor, disappearing as quickly as he had come, and Narcissa wasted no time, simply putting her robes over nightgown. She practically ran out of the Dungeons, going the opposite direction most people would take if going to the West side of the castle – for once somewhat glad Bellatrix had thought it fitting to teach her baby sister some tricks to getting around the grand castle. As she ducked into a wall that suddenly enveloped her and let her out right by the West Corridor at the Main Floor, she wordlessly cast another charm to quickly catch up, concealing her person – who knew she’d thank Bellatrix twice in one night?

As she glided through the dark, empty corridors, she saw that William White had just turned the corner after climbing the stairs – Narcissa clearly saw the glimmer of his blonde hair just before it disappeared. The other figure, the one just reaching the bottom of the staircase, she could not immediately recognize. It was clearly a student – small, perhaps a first or second year, but he was definitively not in her House.

The student in question turned to see if he was being followed, and in doing so, his face was illuminated by enough moonlight for Narcissa to recognize him: Stuart Davies, a Gryffindor, which frankly puzzled her. Stuart’s eyes widened in horror at the black mist that hovered stealthily in his direction.

Narcissa immediately terminated the charm, and the mixture of horror and relief on Stuart’s face as he recognized his Potions Professor materializing from dark smoke before him was nearly comical.

“P-p-professor Black!” He gasped, eyes still bugging out of his head in surprise and alarm.

“Good evening, Mr. Davies.” She greeted naturally, with only a hint of a smile. A million questions went through her mind – Stuart was very clearly following William, and the latter did not seem to be aware of it. Would Stuart say he was following another student? Would he attempt to incriminate others beside himself? “A bit late for a walk in the corridors, is it not?”

The boy looked terrified, and Narcissa recognized the amateurish scrambling for a lie in the whites of his eyes. No wonder he went to Gryffindor – he had impetuousness coded into his body language.

“Ah! Well, uh, I’m sorry, Professor” he squeaked. “I was just... I was just... I seem to have forgotten my, uh, my notebook in the Astronomy Tower after lessons – I just wanted to see if it was still there.”

Narcissa smiled, seeking to reassure him – just enough. “Ah! Astronomy has forever been a favourite of mine... I love looking at the stars – not too surprising, considering my family. I have always been fascinated by my father’s namesake constellation... Tell me, Mr. Davies, how was Cygnus tonight? Was it bright?”
Stuart visibly relaxed, entirely unaware he had fallen into a trap. He nodded vigorously. “Yes, Ma’am! Quite bright and beautiful; very easy to see!”

Narcissa’s smile widened by a fraction. “It must have been bright indeed,” she said, taking a few steps closer to Stuart and going for the kill, “considering Cygnus is a seasonal constellation, and will not be visible until summer. Perhaps you ought to pay a little more mind to your Astronomy studies.”

The young Gryffindor’s face fell; the blood rushed away from his cheeks as his features paled in fear. Narcissa kept her grin, cocking an eyebrow.

“Lying to a Professor is seldom a bright idea, Mr. Davies. But, if you are going to attempt it, at least make it good.” She stopped when she was only a few paces from him, looking down at his remorseful form. “Now, can you give me any good reason for you to be out of bed after curfew?”

Stuart looked forlorn, shaking his head as his shoulders drooped in defeat. “No, Ma’am. I guess not.”

Narcissa half-expected him to say something – anything – about another student being out of bed, even if just to not go down alone. When he didn’t, she sensed there was something there; she just didn’t know what, exactly. Her features hardened in seriousness.

“I suppose I needn’t remind you of the severity of your infraction. Twenty points from Gryffindor, and you shall serve a day’s detention with me, in my office, this coming Tuesday after supper. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” He responded meekly.

“Now, go on back to your dormitory” She smiled to soften the blow. “We wouldn’t want a certain caretaker catching you again tonight, would we?”

Stuart nodded, then scurried away without another word. Narcissa waited patiently for the echo of his hurried steps to fade into nothingness before going up the stairs in a quickened pace.

There was no sign of William in the winding staircase, but she hadn’t expected any – given the duration of her interaction with Stuart, he had probably already made it to the Owlery. She briefly considered a Disillusionment Charm to approach more secretly, but decided against it as she got closer. William’s blonde head was visible as soon as she approached the door; his small stature looked even smaller and frailer with the way he hunched over.

A few owls fluttered their wings and hooted in alarm at her approach; William turned rapidly, wand in hand, ready to face the intruder. Narcissa’s wand arm went up in pure reflex, no matter that it was a child in front of her.

“Professor!” He exclaimed, lowering his wand at once. Narcissa mirrored, dismayed at her impulsive reaction. She didn’t like being on edge.

“Good evening, Mr. White.” She said. There was nothing in his countenance that indicated he was aware of Stuart’s presence before. “I think you know it is a bit late to be out of bed.”

William nodded – there was fear in his eyes, but not the kind of fear borne out of the shock of being caught – this was much deeper than that. Narcissa had seen that kind of fear a few too many times in her own son’s eyes. There was also the unmistakable glimmer of guilt in his gaze, and it was only made clearer by the way his shoulders sagged upon her scrutiny.
“Is there a reason why you are up here so late?” she asked kindly.

“Yes, Professor. I wanted to send a letter.” He said.

“I assumed as much – delivering the post is an owl’s primary function.”

That garnered a smile from the young boy. “But I fail to see why you couldn’t have done it during the day. Is it an urgent matter?”

William’s jaw set strongly. “No... yes... No, not really. It’s...” He paused and ran a hand through his shaggy blond hair, and Narcissa could see how much he struggled to find the words. The arm that had nearly been pulled out of its socket hung by his side, his hand clutched an envelope with such force it crumpled the parchment. “It’s for my Mum, professor.”

Narcissa waited, and the young man seemed to understand her cue. “I don’t want to send letters during the day. I don’t want to deal with... with my Housemates’ questions. And...” his cheeks pinked in embarrassment “I don’t even really know how to send it. Or rather, how’d she get it without... without attracting attention.” His eyes widened as if he had caught himself; the hand clutching the letter trembled at his side. “There are no wizards or witches in my neighbourhood.”

“I suppose I can help you with that” Narcissa offered. “You may make a letter strictly to your Mother – the owl would know not to deliver it when anyone else was around.” It was very clear William was fighting some inner battle – his eyes darted around the Owlery madly, and his shoulders began to shake. The condensation of his breath came in increasingly shorter, rapid bursts in the cold air of the exposed Owlery, and Narcissa could immediately see – once again reminiscing of the dark times through which Draco suffered – that he was on the verge of a panic attack of some sort.

“William...” she began in her smoothest tone, taking one cautious step to approach him -- it didn’t look like he had heard her.

“I just don’t know what to do!” He snapped, suddenly, eyes brimming with tears. Before his Head of House could react, there was a burst of red light, and the envelope he held exploded into a million burning pieces. Hundreds of small sparks burst all around the Owlery, several of them hitting dried straw and feathers and discarded pieces of parchment, setting them alight. The birds hooted and screeched in fright, flapping their wings and flying madly around the small space.

“William!” Narcissa called as she heard his yelp of pain as he waved his smouldering sleeves. His breaths were even more ragged, and, to her shock, the flames that grew around them – sending the owls into a frightened flutter of wings – drew and recoiled in time with his breathing.

Her observation delayed her reaction for only half a second – her wand zipped through the air as she attempted to banish the flames in one swift movement. It was highly unusual for older children to exhibit such powerful accidental magic – it usually happened when they were quite young and inexperienced in dealing with their own feelings.

To her dismay, the flames didn’t go out completely – cinders remained and ignited once more, stubbornly. William had removed his robe, and now looked at the fire surrounding them in frightened enthrallment, the ‘pain in his arm completely forgotten.

“Well, that won’t do” Narcissa muttered angrily. “Perimo Maximo!”

Whatever remained of the flames was extinguished at once. William turned to her sharply, eyes wide, as if his trance had been terminated by the same spell. His mouth moved, but he was unable
“Are you alright, Mr. White? How’s your arm?”

He nodded before looking down at his arm. Thankfully the flames had not done much more than singe his arm-hairs; his hand, however, needed more attention. Narcissa stepped to him, unhappy with how his first instinct as she reached for his arm was to flinch away before letting her cast a healing charm on the burns.

“How does that feel?” She asked after she was satisfied.

“Better. Thank you, Professor. I... I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened.” He said, that shame working its way back into his features with great strength.

“Accidental magic, Mr. White. This can happen under duress” she said calmly, her tone returning to one she used fairly frequently with Draco when he was young and in need of reassurance. She eyed him carefully. “Are you under duress, Mr. White?”

He let out a little laugh. “No. I think I’m just stressed.” He said, bending down to pick up his robe from the dirty floor of the Owlery. The birds were just beginning to settle down, sending some angry hoots their way for the disturbance.

“And what seems to be the source of your stress?” Narcissa asked kindly, sending a knowing look his way. “Anything from your Housemates, or other students?”

She was surprised to see him straighten up, his posture the picture of confidence, even if his face betrayed some level of uncertainty. “I can handle my classmates” he said solemnly, way too solemnly for a boy of eleven. His demeanour and resolute air surprised Narcissa, but not necessarily in a bad way – the more she interacted with the young boy, the more Slytherin she saw in him.

“Very well. What stresses you then, Mr. White, if not your classmates?”

He gave her a little rueful smile, looking more like the fearful child she and Hermione had first seen at the Great Hall.

“My f... My family isn’t taking all this wizarding business too well. It’ll be alright, it... I suppose it will just take some time to adjust.”

Narcissa nodded, though something in her gut told her William was not being entirely truthful, though he did worlds better in concealing the truth than his classmate had done just a few minutes before. Whereas Stuart scrambled to make up a lie, William told her something that undoubtedly had some truth in it – he was just very careful not to say everything.

“I suppose having a Wizard in the family would come as quite a shock.” She said in contemplation. There was a small, quiet voice in her head, one that sounded suspiciously like Bellatrix, that kept telling her to take a peek, just one little harmless peek into the boy’s mind to see what he was truly hiding. One little peek and she’d get all the proof she needed, everything necessary to remove William from a potentially threatening environment.

Narcissa silenced the voice with some internal ferocity she did not know she possessed – it was a great violation of trust, a great breach of not only privacy but legality.

“I’m afraid that Professor Granger might be more helpful in dealing with that sort of thing” Narcissa said, and William chuckled sadly. “I know you do not think it wise seeing her about these
things, but I believe talking to someone who has been through a similar situation will be helpful to you.” She could see his hesitation so clearly in his features; oh, the Slytherin-like independence. How she wished for a little Gryffindor bravery for him. “Of course, that is merely a suggestion. Follow it, if you wish.”

That earned her a smile. “I might, Professor. I’m sorry for being out past curfew I... I didn’t know when else to go.”

“Oh, yes, we must do something about that. I trust this won’t happen again, but I am afraid I must deduct House Points. Twenty points from Slytherin, plus one night’s detention this Tuesday, after supper.”

William nodded; his eyes did not look terribly happy, but his smile was sincere. “That sounds fair to me. It’ll be good to not be known as such a square. I’ve heard we can’t have a full saint in Slytherin.” He mumbled.

“You catch on fast, Mr. White.” Narcissa said, returning the smile. “Now, go on to the Common Room, and into bed with you. I hope you find another time to send your letter – do not hesitate to come to me or Ms. Granger should you need anything.”

“Thank you, Professor. I will.” he replied airily, and Narcissa knew he would do no such thing. He gathered his singed, feather-covered school robe in his arms and made his way out, sparing her an apologetic glance as he neared the door.

He was about to pass the threshold when Narcissa turned back towards him.

“William?” she asked, and he practically stumbled in surprise with the way she said his name.

“Yes, Professor?”

“I feel I must ask you... Is there anything you’d like to tell me? Anything at all?”

He paused, holding onto the door jamb before looking at her intently. There was no build-up to this lie, and the posture of this boy standing before her was once again so different from the one stumbling about the Great Hall at the start of term it threw Narcissa off-balance.

“No, Professor. Nothing.”

Hermione had just reached the castle courtyard after walking from Hogsmeade – the cold of her walk did wonders in restoring some of her sobriety after her rendezvous with Harry – when her wand began vibrating in her robes.

It made her freeze in a way that had nothing to do with the cold – she and Minerva had reworked some of the castle wards so that the staff would be warned when any Dark Magic was performed in its halls. Hermione had helped Minerva create the charm shortly after the war, when the threat of rogue Death Eaters had been much higher. In the end, they decided to keep it – with an unspoken agreement that it would come in handy should any students be tempted by the Dark Arts.

The charm had been activated only once, a few months after the war, when Augustus Rookwood and a few other remaining Death Eaters made a clumsy attempt to infiltrate the castle. The ‘invasion’ had been over before it ever truly began, and Harry and Ron got their first official arrest on file for the DMLE.
Now, the thought of someone using Dark Magic in the castle shook Hermione to her core. She began running before even becoming aware she was doing it; she only got as far as the foyer before bumping into Neville.

“Hermione!” He called, panting in his night robe and slippers. “Did your...?”

“Yes” the brunette breathed out, whipping her wand and making several of the torches in the corridor light up. “Do we know where?”

Neville shook his head. “No. It was very short, a small burst maybe. We don’t know where it came from.”

Hermione was about to ask more, but a tabby cat came running towards them. Minerva’s form materialized seamlessly. “Your wands?” The two nodded.

“The other professors are now awake, and doing a headcount.” Her tone turned severe. “We cannot find Narcissa.”

The name hung in the air; Neville was the first to come to the witch’s defence, surprising all of them. “What! You don’t think she did it?”

“I am not accusing anybody, Mr. Longbottom,” Minerva said kindly “but we must understand that she has the capability.”

Hermione wanted to say something, but she felt divided. In her head, through logic, she agreed with Minerva – Narcissa certainly had the ability and had dabbled in the Dark Arts, and she was the one Professor who could not be found.

Her heart, however brought to her memory images of a witch brewing Wideye Potion to escape nightmares. It brought forth pictures of Narcissa showing the changes to Black Manor, of her feeling embarrassed and guilty after the portrait incident, of her worrying about being a good grandmother. The scar on her palm pulsed softly.

“I’m sure there is an explanation.” Hermione whispered. Minerva looked at her with a little surprise in her eyes, but she smiled. Neville nodded emphatically.

“Shall we look for her?” he asked, but Hermione shook her head.

“Keep the student head count. I’ll find her; we’ll reconvene at Minerva’s office?”

The two nodded in agreement, leaving to their tasks at once. The idea of searching for someone in the immense castle should have been discouraging in the very least, but something told Hermione Narcissa wasn’t hiding – she just happened to be out of her chambers for some reason. She had no reason to believe Narcissa would not come to her if called.

“Expecto Patronum”

Her little otter happily swam through the air, gliding around her and cocooning her in a blanket of warmth, welcoming the added movements of her wand. “Narcissa, come meet me by Minerva’s office. Something’s happened.”

The otter reduced itself to one condensed ball of bright light before zooming through the corridors. Hermione had no doubt it would find the blonde, so she started to slowly make her way to the Headmistress’ door.
She met Narcissa one floor before the destination – the Potions Professor was coming down the West Staircase as Hermione went up; the two met effectively in the middle. Hermione tried her hardest to ignore the little extra beats her heart seemed to produce when her eyes met Narcissa’s and the blonde greeted her with a smile.

“I must say, your Patronus makes for quite an ingenious calling card.” She said silkily, and Hermione just couldn’t help returning the smile as they walked down the corridor to Minerva’s office.

“It comes in handy,” she said brightly. Then she remembered why she had called the other witch. “There was a breach of security, but we couldn’t find you.”

The look in Narcissa’s eyes told Hermione the other witch was just as surprised as she had been.

“A breach? Of what kind?”

“A burst of unauthorized magic – we were alerted when our wands vibrated thanks to a modification of the castle wards. We must have forgotten to add yours; frankly, we haven’t thought about it in years.”

Narcissa stopped in her tracks. “A burst? Maybe...” She looked at Hermione solemnly. “I am just coming down from the Owlery – William White was out of bed. He produced some accidental magic which was quite strong. Would that trigger your wards?”

“What?” Hermione let out in shock. It was not unheard of for an eleven-year-old to produce accidental magic, particularly strong accidental magic. It was just exceedingly rare, and it never meant anything good. She shook it off, for the time being. “Hold on, I’ll have to ask you about that later. But to answer your question, no, accidental magic wouldn’t necessarily trigger the wards.” She took a breath and looked at Narcissa intently. “The wards are only triggered by Dark Magic.”

Hermione did not like how Narcissa’s eyes widened slightly, nor how the witch’s gait seemed to stutter for a moment.

“Oh, Salazar’s snakes!” The blonde hissed.

Hermione felt like someone had knocked the air out of her lungs. What sort of Dark Magic had Narcissa been performing, on school grounds no less?

“It was you!” She yelped before she could stop herself. “I thought... I wanted to believe...”

Hermione’s mouth was silenced by Narcissa’s finger coming to rest gently upon her lips, startling her into silence. The blonde pulled away as if she had been burned, but Hermione still felt the ghosting of Narcissa’s skin on her lips.

“Allow me to explain” she said, taking a deep breath. “The spell I used was a concealment jinx – I certainly didn’t think of it as Dark Magic.”

Hermione’s brow went up in an expression of disbelief. “Why would one use the Dark Arts for concealment? Why not just cast a Disillusionment Charm?”

Narcissa’s expression was pained. “It is not merely a jinx to conceal... it also allows me to move quite fast, mostly without notice.” Her eyes were pleading. “I promise you, I only used it because it is unfortunately second-nature to me; it simply was the first spell I could think of to move undetected. I may not delve into the Unforgivables, necessarily, but my upbringing always
involved a few Dark spells... as simple as they may be.”

The brunette furrowed her brows and her lips quirked into a frown. It was getting harder and harder to reconcile the friendly Potions Professor to the woman who had grown up among so many Dark witches and wizards. Despite their delving into each other’s memories, it now struck Hermione that there was precious little she knew about Narcissa, the Ice Queen, the dark witch – how many dark spells did she know, how many had she used in her lifetime? Now, she wasn’t so sure she cared to know; not if it would feel so conflicting to the Narcissa she knew now.

“Did... did this moving about stealthily and quickly have anything to do with William White’s accidental magic?”

Narcissa nodded. “Lord Albert came to my chambers to tell me William was up to something. There was also a student following him – Stuart Davies, but as far as I can tell William was unaware of Stuart’s presence.”

“Stuart? A Gryffindor?” Hermione shook her head. “And who in Merlin’s name is Lord Albert??”

“Oh, my apologies. Lord Albert Bruce Gregory is the Bloody Baron’s name.”

Hermione had to make a Herculean effort to not be diverted by that little bit of information. How long had she been at Hogwarts without knowing the ghost’s real name? She’d have to grill Narcissa on where to find that information – it certainly wasn’t mentioned anywhere in *Hogwarts, a History*; the Baron had been nothing but a small footnote in the tome.

“Why was Stuart following William? And why was William at the Owlery in the first place? He’s never...” it occurred to the young witch right then that she had never seen William receive any post whatsoever. His parents clearly couldn’t -- or did not want to, but that was the alternative she chose to ignore for the time being – send him letters.

“I was unable to determine the former... as for the latter... We will have to discuss it later.” Narcissa said as they reached Minerva’s office gargoyle, which revealed the rotating staircase immediately upon their arrival.

“Alright” Hermione said, dissatisfied. A thread of her curiosity begged to be pulled. “Out of curiosity, what was the spell you used?”

Narcissa looked guilty.

“*Nebula Nox*. Death Eaters used it to turn to smoke and travel. It is Unplottable, unlike apparition.”

“I see.” Hermione said, unsure she saw anything at all. What she did see, however, was how Narcissa noticed her shudder as she remembered how terrifying those Death Eaters looked, materializing from dark smoke into even darker cloaked figures, in their nightmarish silver masks. One look at Narcissa, and she decided she’d rather never see her like that, if she could help it.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Y’all, writing this one was like pulling teeth for some reason. It became an 8,000-word behemoth of a chapter - which was lost and then eventually recovered, to my despair and subsequent relief. In the end, I had to pare it down. At least Chapter 25 is already partly done thanks to some pruning of Chapter 24 XD

Hope you enjoy!

~Naralanis

“Try again.”

Narcissa blew rogue strands of hair from her face in frustration. It had been hours since she and Bellatrix had locked themselves away in the Lestrange Manor’s Duelling Room. She was hungry, she was tired, and most of all, she was thoroughly irritated. Bella had drilled her on far too many jinxes, hexes, and curses she never cared to perform again.

“Why?” Narcissa dared ask, her eyes narrowing towards her sister, who casually leaned against a wide column with a disinterested look. “We’ve been here for hours, Bella!”

Bellatrix scoffed, shaking her head in the negative. “You know, Cissy, you ought to be a little more grateful. I’m taking valuable time away from the Dark Lord’s service to teach you these things – the least you could do is go back to being the insufferable good student you always are in school."

Narcissa huffed, not wanting to seem ungrateful, but wishing she had the will to tell Bellatrix she did not care to learn to do what she did. Not that she was any stranger to the Dark Arts – her family had always been embroiled in them, for generations before her. No, the issue was just how... intense Bellatrix’s uses for those spells were.

“Can’t we pick this back up tomorrow, at least? I’m exhausted.” She pleaded, hoping for some middle ground. With any luck, Bellatrix would let the matter drop and just be too busy to return to these lessons any time soon.

Bellatrix’s eyes were stone, and her expression belied incredible annoyance. “I can’t tomorrow, Cissy. I’ll be out on an important mission with Rod.” She straightened and walked towards Narcissa, her gait a little more menacing than Narcissa liked. “Get your act together” she said through gritted teeth. “You’re a powerful, Pure-blooded witch who will grace our world with strong, Pure-blooded children. Start acting like one!”

Narcissa saw Bellatrix’s wordless curse coming, but was too tired to react in time; her Protego missed its target by a mile, and she found herself glued to the floor, arms paralyzed above her head.

“Come on!” Bellatrix shouted, ending the curse. Narcissa struggled to her feet, her anger simmering, nearly boiling over her exhaustion.
“Bella, I am tired!” Narcissa said bitingly. Bellatrix looked angry and dismayed at her tone.

“Then learn to keep up! How are you ever going to survive this otherwise?! How will your children? You must be willing to push beyond your limits!” The oldest Black sister snarled.

“I won’t fight you again. I’m done with this.” Narcissa said with finality, turning away.

“Fine!” Bellatrix barked, throwing her hands in the air. “Then there’s something else we can try.”

Narcissa knew she was hit with an Imperius Curse immediately. She had been practicing her resistance to it for years, but still, with Bella, all that came was a vague awareness of someone infiltrating her defences before everything became a blur. She was somewhat aware that her body was turning and walking back towards her sister. Bellatrix only ended the curse when they were inches apart. Narcissa was too tired to feel furious now; instead, she only felt sadness.

“No matter how many times you do it” she said coldly, stifling the urge to cry before it overtook her, “I still can’t believe you’ll do this to your own sister.”

Bellatrix eye’s widened in surprise, but then dismay became the predominant emotion reflected in them. She backtracked a few steps.

“Cissy,” she said, and her voice was almost pleading. “Please. It’s for your own good! You need to build up your resistance to it!”

“I don’t care!” Narcissa hissed. “It’s exhausting, it’s humiliating, it’s wrong! It makes me feel like I can’t trust you anymore, Bella!”

A wide range of emotions stormed Bellatrix’s eyes; Narcissa could identify anger, confusion, and sadness, to name a few. It was unsettling; she never knew which emotion would win out in the end, as Bella’s moods and feelings were entirely unpredictable, often dangerous.

“You have to let me help you!” She finally said through gritted teeth – it looked like anger would be it for tonight. “How can you be so neglectful?! When the Dark Lord decides you deserve his Mark, you won’t be...”

“Stop right there. When the Dark Lord what?” Narcissa suddenly hissed, unable to believe what she heard coming from her sister’s lips. Her interruption only served to confuse Bellatrix further – she looked at Narcissa like she couldn’t recognize her own sister.

“When he...”

“I will never take his mark, Bella. Never! You can’t make me!” Narcissa snarled, her own anger now boiling to the surface. What made it worse was Bellatrix’s look of utter befuddlement.

“Cissy, I would never...” she began, but Narcissa did not give her the chance to continue.

“Don’t lie to me!” She shouted. The fury boiling in her blood was a new feeling; it was foreign and intoxicating, all at once. The sheer force of it made her wand release white sparks as she held it in a painful white-knuckled grip. “Is this why you have been so adamant we practice?! So I could come join your little band of Death Eaters?” A terrifying thought occurred to her, since Bellatrix was aware Narcissa could not resist her Imperius. “Am I going to wake up branded with His Mark one day, after you Imperio me to do it?!”

All colour drained from Bellatrix’s face at that. “Cissy, that’s not... No! I would never! I thought
you’d want to!”

The proclamation took the wind right out of Narcissa’s sails. For the first time, she looked at Bellatrix as if she were a stranger. Did Bella even know her, at all?

“What in Merlin’s name... would make you think I want that?”

Bellatrix gestured vaguely around them. “I thought you wanted something better for our world! A new order, where we occupy our rightful place, without Mudbloods and half-breeds and Squibs driving us out, taking our fortunes, our influence, our very magic!”

“I do!” Narcissa shouted. “But I’m not strong like you!”

Bellatrix frowned. “What do you mean? You’re a powerful witch; you’ve got top marks on all of your...”

“I mean I can’t do what you do, Bella!” Narcissa cried. “I couldn’t do it. Not even to filth.” She said, feeling deep shame consume her from within. It had always been Bellatrix who had been the strong one, the decisive one, the one to do what was needed. Narcissa? She was the brains. The bookish little girl with her head in the clouds. The quiet one, reading in the corners.

“I’ve always stood by you, and I always will. But I can’t do what you and Lucius do; I can’t... I will support you both, but I cannot do what the Dark Lord expects of a Death Eater. Please don’t ask that of me.”

Bellatrix seemed frozen in space; her mouth was agape, and her eyes were like stone, without even blinking. For a moment Narcissa wondered if her sister had been petrified somehow; it was like Bellatrix, forever dynamic and moving, had ceased to even breathe.

“Bella?”

Her sister’s trance seemed to have ended at her call; Bellatrix’s dark eyes met her in confusion and... determination.

“Fine.” She said coolly, pupils darting about the room as if she scanned a battle territory. Narcissa shuddered when she met her sister’s gaze.

“Fine?” She pushed, uncertain.

“Fine. I understand.” Bellatrix breathed out. Narcissa could practically hear the wheels turning in her head. It wasn’t Bella’s usual frantic, maddening line of thought – no, she seemed almost... worried for her.

“In that case, I just want – I just need you to learn three things.” She started walking determinedly to the other end of the Duelling Room, the heels of her boots echoing through the mostly empty space and reverberating off the magically cushioned walls and columns.

Narcissa’s stomach turned with unease. “What things?”

“One: evasion, with Nebula Nox.” Bellatrix said clearly, raising her wand.

“What do you mean by...”

Her words were silenced by shock as her sister whipped her wand through the air and disappeared into a puff of dark mist that suddenly swept in a hurtling frenzy towards her with astonishing
speed. Before Narcissa could blink, Bellatrix had materialized again, mere inches away from her. She backed away from her sister with a surprised yelp.

“Unplottable and incredibly fast.” Bellatrix continued in the same breath she had before she became smoke. “Two,” she kept going, walking back away from Narcissa and turning an intense look at her sister, “and this will be useful whether you want to find me or if you want to be found, without needing the Mark on your arm” She pointed her wand to the enchanted ceiling that was made unnaturally high by magic. “Morsmordre!”

Narcissa shivered as Bellatrix conjured the Death Eater’s calling card into the room; the eerie glow of the serpentine figure floating before them cloaked the two sisters in its gloomy light. It enveloped Narcissa in a blanket of cold air.

“Do I have to?” She asked. Bellatrix seemed to ignore her completely.

“Focus your intention on the person; that should be enough for you to narrow down its effect and not call our entire ‘little band of Death Eaters’ to your bloody doorstep.”

Narcissa winced.

“Bella...”

“Third,” Bellatrix interrupted her, vanishing the Dark Mark from the air with a flourish. “And this will be the most important thing I ever teach you.” She said, her resolute steps bringing her closer to Narcissa once more. “Keeping secrets.”

Narcissa trembled in fear when she felt the tip of her sister’s wand on her temple. She opened her mouth to speak, but it was too late.

“Legilimens!”

Explaining the security breach turned out to be not overly complicated. To Hermione’s surprise, Narcissa not only looked mildly guilty but also... enormously embarrassed for causing unnecessary alarm. Minerva, for her part, had dismissed the apology with a gentle but firm warning. In another show of trust in the blonde, she pointedly asked Hermione to allow the specific charm *Nebula Nox* to be performed without triggering the wards, even after Narcissa’s repetitious reassurances that she would not perform it again.

By the end of it, Narcissa and Hermione had left the Headmistress’ office barely fifteen minutes after they had arrived. Hermione felt relieved the ward trigger matter had been so easily resolved. But now, walking side-by-side with Narcissa and without a destination in mind, her mind thrummed with unanswered questions – some about all the Dark spells Narcissa said were all but ‘second-nature’ to her, but others, which were much more urgent, about William White and Stuart Davies.

She sent one discreet look Narcissa’s way to gauge the blonde’s mood. Narcissa had not said a word since they left Minerva’s office, and her pensive expression made Hermione uneasy. It wasn’t the normal thoughtful look she had in her eyes when she thought about a warding problem,
or when she created increasingly complicated tests for her advanced Potions students. Her brow was not furrowed in studious contemplation as it usually was in such matters but her eyes were simply... vacant, in a way. She looked straight ahead as if she didn’t see the world around her, and her lips were pressed into a thin line.

Hermione decided to ignore how she got to such a level of acute observation to be able to read Narcissa in such a way. She looked more pointedly at the other witch.

“Knut for your thoughts?”

Narcissa turned to her as if she had forgotten Hermione was there. Her lips quirked into a timid smile – it had a hint of embarrassment.

“I don’t think my thoughts at the moment are worth even a knut” she joked. “I was thinking about how stupid it was to set off security wards with something so trivial as Nebula Nox” she said, running an exasperated hang through her long hair.

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but was momentarily transfixed by the glimmering movement of Narcissa’s long blonde locks in the light of the torches in the corridor. She had to take a moment to clear her throat, and Narcissa looked at her quizzically.

“Yeah, hm.” She thanked Merlin the corridor was still quite dark despite the torches “well, at least it wasn’t anything serious. And hey, now we know the wards work wonders! All in all, good training exercise.” Hermione breathed out, trying to stop her rambling before it got out of control.

It didn’t quite work; Narcissa was still regarding her oddly.

“Are you alright, Hermione?”

The brunette cursed the other woman inwardly for using her first name. It had made her happy before, but now that she was aware of just how... attractive she found Narcissa, hearing it in her voice was like some sort of torture.

“Yup!” Hermione squeaked, looking for an out and not finding any.

Narcissa still sported a puzzled look; she stopped walking and Hermione began to panic for a moment, thinking that perhaps... perhaps Narcissa noticed something amiss about her behaviour. Which was a ludicrous thought, she told herself repeatedly.

“I don’t want to impose,” Narcissa began, speaking very softly, “but... you could come to my chambers for a little talk, if you wish. I can tell you more about the incident with William White.”

Hermione hoped she had been able to school her expression of surprise in time, but it was in vain – Narcissa suddenly looked embarrassed.

“Actually, it is quite late – never mind; I’m sure you need your rest. In any case, I can always tell you more about it tomo...”

The young Transfiguration Professor had no idea how or why she did it, but she found herself stopping Narcissa’s inevitable rambling much the same way Narcissa had done to her earlier – with a finger to her lips.

Narcissa let out a little gasp of surprise at the action that shot a jolt of electricity right down Hermione’s spine; she would have lowered her hand, but Hermione was momentarily enthralled by
the feel of Narcissa’s breaths as they passed through her soft – her incredulously soft – lips. Her blue eyes were wide, and her breaths came out a little quicker. Hermione didn’t lower her hand as she spoke.

“Narcissa” she practically choked out. “Stop rambling. I’d love a nightcap.”

Hermione finally removed her hand once she felt Narcissa’s lips quirk into a shy smile under her fingers.

“I believe it’s closer to morning now.”

They settled for tea in Narcissa’s chamber – some floral brew that smelled faintly of lavender. Hermione waited patiently for Narcissa to put away their robes, gazing at all the books she had in the private sitting room of her quarters. Hermione had never met anyone who owned more books than she did. Even if she discounted Black Library – which was to become a public academic resource soon – Narcissa still owned an impressive collection that she kept at Hogwarts. While most, unsurprisingly, were Potions-related, Hermione was impressed to find a small nook, relegated to the side of the room, where several fiction tomes were organized alphabetically.

Many were from well-known wizarding authors, and more than a few were undoubtedly expensive collectors’ editions, embroidered with gold and silver and encrusted with gemstones. They were works of art, but that was not what caught Hermione’s eye.

She was so intrigued by the little worn paperback, shoved haphazardly atop much more extravagant tomes. Hermione had to stifle a laugh when she saw the title.

“Yes actually,” she said, making a big show of leafing through Pride and Prejudice. “I didn’t peg you for an Austen fan. Or of any Muggle literature, for that matter.”

Narcissa smiled and blushed, more heavily than Hermione had ever seen her blush. She tried very hard to regain her composure, but the way she failed at it was very endearing.

“Well,” she whispered, as if she had been the one caught snooping. “One needn’t be a Muggle to appreciate Ms. Austen’s wit.”

Hermione could feel her own grin stretching ear to ear. “I suppose not. Any other Muggle treasures hidden away in the lair of the great Pure-Blood Queen Narcissa Black?”

Narcissa crossed her arms in front of her in amusement. “Perhaps, but you shall never find my copy of Beowulf.”

Hermione was delighted. “I am pleasantly surprised.”

Narcissa rolled her eyes. “So was I, when I read them.” She walked over to where Hermione stood, taking the book from her hands and flipping over to the very last page. There was an inscription on the back; the handwriting was so messy Hermione had difficulty reading it, but when she did, she barely suppressed her gasp of surprise. It read:

Dearest Cissy,
I don’t think you have this one yet. Happy reading. Don’t forget I’ll always love you.

Drommie

March, 1972

“1972?” Hermione asked, brows furrowed in question. “Isn’t that before...” She did the math in her head.

“Shortly before she eloped. She and Ted were gone by that summer.” Narcissa said. Now Hermione had difficulty reading her expression. “I thought it was a great big joke, her sending me a Muggle book. I didn’t know she was planning to leave.” Her tone was now sad with the memory.

“That’s... heart-breaking.” Hermione said honestly. Narcissa’s gaze snapped to Hermione’s, but she waved her off.

“It was... I was furious with her for doing it. Yet... I could never get rid of that book. I ended up reading it – in secret of course. I begrudgingly admitted Muggles could be quite... talented, when it came to writing.”

Hermione smiled at little. “Just writing?”

Narcissa rolled her eyes again. “Now I’m very much aware they are talented in several fields...” She narrowed her eyes. “Happy now?”

“Extremely.” Hermione retorted cheekily.

The two witches finally sat on the small sofa in Narcissa’s sitting room, ignoring the two armchairs. Hermione had almost forgotten why she was there, such was her surprise and amusement with Narcissa’s Muggle literature. But the blonde was quick to reroute them.

“About tonight...”

“Ah! Yes, William White? You said Stuart Davies was following him? But Stuart is a Gryffindor, and I don’t think he and William are friends; actually, I don’t recall if they even share classes... Also, what was that about the Baron? Is he...”

Hermione felt Narcissa’s hand stop her rambling for the second time that evening; she was startled enough to reach for the blonde’s wrist on impulse.

Neither witch seemed to know what to do next; Narcissa broke the oddly charged silence by discreetly clearing her throat. Hermione immediately let go, eager to dispel whatever electric charge was undoubtedly coursing through her arm.

“I was going to say,” Narcissa began, and Hermione could not stop herself from noticing the flush that crept upon the blonde’s neck “that I got Lord Albert to keep a discreet eye on William. To see how he’s doing. He told me Peeves had seen William on his way to the Owlery, being followed by another student.”

Hermione was immediately diverted.

“Godric’s girdles, I will forever be jealous of how you can just get the Baron to do your bidding.” Her brow’s furrowed. “Especially when it comes to Peeves.”

Narcissa smiled. “Lord Albert is kind enough to humour my requests. He’s always been quite
amenable to them.”

Hermione’s brows furrowed as she thought of what Narcissa had told her before. “So the other student was Stuart Davies? That’s so strange.”

Narcissa motioned for the other witch to sit, beckoning the tea set with a discrete flick of her wand. She noticed Hermione’s slight flush as she took a seat next to her on the small couch, but Narcissa chose to ignore it for the time being.

“Indeed,” she agreed. “William does not fraternize with many students to begin with; his few acquaintances are half-bloods from Slytherin, and perhaps one or two from Ravenclaw... I do not recall whether Stuart and William share any classes.”

“They are certainly not in my class together. Stuart is very... withdrawn from the rest of his Housemates. He does have some friends in Slytherin, but I don’t think William is one of them.” Hermione pondered. She remembered the game they played at the Sorting Ceremony, when Narcissa had guessed correctly for so many students sorted to Slytherin.

“Do you know the Davies’ family?”

Narcissa shook her head. “Not well. They’re from Wales, and were never very politically active – Lucius and I mostly associated with families that... ah...” she cleared her throat, and Hermione saw a bit of shame in her features, “that could prove beneficial in the future.”

Hermione nodded in understanding, disliking the thought. “I know Stuart was disappointed to be placed in Gryffindor. Did you know that they’ve been Slytherins for generations?”

The Potions Professor nodded. “Yes, though there is a bit of a generational gap – the Davies’ parents are older than I am, so we never interacted at Hogwarts. They were only capable of having children very late in life – Christine Davies gave birth to Stuart when she was 53.”

Hermione whistled softly in amazement. “Do you know if they ever supported Voldemort?”

The teacup Narcissa held clattered in its saucer as she trembled at the name. “Not that I know of,” she said, her voice hoarse. “It’s hard to say. The Dark Lord garnered a lot of silent, financial support. I know Gareth Davies – the Davies brothers’ father – made a fortune with Quidditch; one of his companies manufactures equipment for many Premier League teams. I’m not quite sure what the family did before that, nor where they invested their money during the war.”

Hermione frowned, deep in thought. She and Harry had always thought about how to track down families who had served as silent supporters of You-Know-Who in both wars. As it turned out, that proved to be harder than either of them had imagined – even with Draco’s invaluable help, they had found very little success in finding them. Wizarding financial and political networks were intricately woven webs of deceit.

It was part of the reason people had been so slow to adapt. While there were now laws in place against the discrimination of Muggle-Borns, there were still circles in which the word ‘Mudblood’ was still uttered with intense disdain. It was also part of the reason Hermione worried so much for William in Slytherin at the start of the year.

“Well, whatever the case, I know Stuart does not like being in Gryffindor” Hermione sighed after a pensive sip of her tea. It broke her heart, in a way – Gryffindor was her home, and she wanted her students to feel welcome there. Even Stuart, who managed to annoy her and astound her in equal parts.
“I wonder what his family thinks of the situation.” Narcissa mused aloud. “I don’t know what his brother Edgar thinks of the matter. But he was... connected to William White’s incident before Christmas. And the Vegetable Incident.”

“I wish we had more leads on whoever was responsible for it.” Hermione said, annoyed. Her head told her it was William, and in truth, so did her heart, but she didn’t want to believe it.

“Oh, it was Mr. White, without a shadow of a doubt.” Narcissa proclaimed, sounding convinced. “The only reason he was not punished for it was because we had no proof.”

Hermione turned to face Narcissa directly. “How can you be so sure?”

“Well, for starters, the students targeted. They were all present at the incident in November. Then, a Green-Fingered Draught as retaliation? I can think of few students who would think of such a harmless yet... appropriate potion. I can think of even fewer who have a good enough rapport with Mr. Longbottom to know where to find Sassafras Pulp for it.”

Hermione thought about it. William did seem to have a good relationship with the Herbology Professor. Neville had told her the young boy seemed to have a natural talent for Herbology. Plus, William was knowledgeable enough to research a harmless potion to fit his purposes.

“Alright, so let’s say William did take part in the Vegetable Incident. Would Stuart be following him out of revenge for his brother? That just seems unlikely.”

Narcissa nodded her agreement. “Indeed. There’s no indication Edgar and his crew know anything about the one responsible for the incident anyhow. But there is something about me that stumps me, if I am honest.”

“Oh? What is it?”

“Well,” the blonde said, setting down her teacup. “we know the potion was administered through the food. But how was it done? How did William manage to target those students specifically? He was not sitting anywhere near them on the Slytherin table, and there are very few ways of tainting a person’s food undetected in the Great Hall – all of them beyond the skill of a first-year.”

Hermione sighed in frustration. She had also thought of that, and not being able to come up with a satisfactory answer was one of the most vexing frustrations she encountered through life. One of the greatest downsides of being a know-it-all were the moments when she did not, in fact, know it all.

“And now all of this business with his home life, WiSer... And whatever the hell happened tonight.” Her gaze was now curious. “You said he had a burst of accidental magic?”

“Yes,” Narcissa confirmed it with a nod. “Quite a strong one as well.”

“How...” Hermione hesitated to ask, “how did it even come about?”

Narcissa shrugged daintily. “I am not sure. He is clearly very stressed about his home life – he was at the Owlery to send his mother a letter... when no one would be able to see him.”

Hermione was puzzled. “A letter? What’s so wrong about sending a letter to his parents? I sent my parents letters all the time as a first-year.”

“As did I” Narcissa acknowledged “but we must remember that William is doing his best to not seem weak before his classmates. I am no stranger to how vicious us Slytherins can be. The fact
that all he’s had to contend with was one small brawl in the corridor frankly surprises me.”

Hermione’s eyes widened, unable to believe what she was hearing. Talking with Narcissa the past few weeks had painted the other woman in such a kind, generous light – it was an ugly pivot into reality to hear her admit she expected more harm to befall William, coming from her own House.

“You knew” Hermione said venomously, setting her teacup down a little more strongly than she intended. “You knew from the beginning he would be vulnerable! And you refused to do more to help him!”

Narcissa seemed surprised at having Hermione’s anger directed at her. She straightened in her seat, looking imposing with her hard-set jaw and frigid eyes.

“I beg your pardon?” she said, her voice cold. “We all knew he would be vulnerable, Ms. Granger.”

“Yes!” Hermione said, standing and looking down at Narcissa, who just sat, ever-so-primly. “We all knew. But I wanted to help him, not leave him to the wolves!”

“Or the vipers, as I recall it.” Narcissa said icily. Hermione felt like a child being chastised, and likely looked it. It was an unhappy realization.

“All I’m saying” she said, gritting her teeth to get her emotions under control, “is that we could have done more.”

Narcissa gave her an odd look, and Hermione hated the way it made her feel. The blonde looked... disappointed.

“Tell me then, Ms. Granger, what could have we done? Coddled him with unwanted attention? Comforted him excessively in front of all his classmates? Perhaps we ought to have given him preferential treatment – a little more hand-holding on your part would surely have done wonders for his work in Transfiguration, would it not?”

Hermione felt even more like a scolded child. She struggled to get her temper under control; it was stupid to have it flare up so easily over a subject they had already resolved. A few deep breaths later, she found it in herself to sit back down. Narcissa regarded with one quizzical raised brow.

“I’m sorry.” Hermione said finally. Narcissa’s stern look eventually relented, and the blonde let out a long-suffering sigh.

“William is proving himself worthy of Slytherin. He’s won the House innumerable points, he has not made an embarrassment out of himself, he tackles his challenges head on. We cannot stifle him.”

Hermione turned to Narcissa, confused. “Stifle him?”

The Potions Professor looked off into the distance, seemingly annoyed. “Encouragement is a double-edged sword. A Muggle-born’s road in Slytherin will be long, and we cannot lead him through it, because we do not know the way.” She turned her intense gaze to Hermione, who could only return it in confusion. “I know all about being a Slytherin. You know all about being a Muggle-born. No one knows how to be both – William must learn on his own.”

Hermione sagged in her seat; she felt an odd mixture of utter defeat and resignation. There was very little they could do for William, and that did not sit well with her – it never would. Narcissa’s handling of the entire situation aggravated her immensely, but she had to admit that they would
need to at least work together to navigate these uncharted waters – for their sake as much as William’s.

“Well, so we know what William was doing at the Owlery. But what about Stuart? Why was he following William?” She asked aloud, pivoting back to the initial subject. Narcissa smirked in a way that made Hermione think of Draco – all that time she thought he had inherited that smug expression from his father, but no, it definitely came from Narcissa.

“You have a plan, I assume?” she quipped, narrowing her eyes. Narcissa’s smirk only widened.

“You can say that. They will both serve detention at the same time on Tuesday. You see, Stuart was careful not to incriminate another student – that tells me they are either working together or Stuart had an ulterior motive to be following William – I’m guessing the latter. I will put them together and see what I can gather.”

Hermione grinned right back. She wouldn’t have thought of that – she would have probably tried to interrogate Stuart, stacking the evidence against him. Perhaps catching him by surprise with the knowledge of why he was out of bed after curfew would rattle him.

Now that was a Slytherin trick she could learn appreciate.

“Sheaky,” she quipped, a knowing glint in her eye. “I like it.”
The little street was nearly empty, save a few stray cats lying lazily atop the decrepit remains of what used to be brick walls, basking in the sun despite the cold of the day. The gentle lull of the Humber’s waves made for a comforting sound, but it was interrupted by the blast of motor explosions every now and again. An odd scent hung heavy in the air, carrying the odours of fish and diesel and smoke through the town.

Highview Crescent was a street that, years ago, could have been considered quaint. At another time, perhaps it had been picturesque. If one went even further back in time, the short stretch of road would have been bustling with the nouveau-riche that toddled over its cobblestones, pockets laden with the profits turned by trading and seafaring.

Now, the once-beautiful terraced houses stood – some just barely – as faded, dilapidated reminders of more prosperous times, with their dirty bricks and rusted gates betraying very little of their long-lost extravagance.

Despite its poverty, or perhaps because of it, there was nearly nothing that set Hull’s End apart from any other small, once industrious other towns in England. In fact, there were dozens, perhaps hundreds of little dinky towns just like it. Just like those other towns, Hull’s End had the one pub, the one quick-mart; the one industry barely holding the town together, the one union that had once been powerful; the one cinema, the one bookmaker.

There were exactly three events that perhaps set Hull’s End apart from all those other towns, and they both happened right there on Highview Crescent, in a house that was as unkempt and threadbare as the others, save for a small pot of yellow flowers on the doorstep. Number Seven, Highview Crescent, had seen more wonder in the span of ten years than most of the town had in its four centuries of existence.

The first event, the birth of a boy, took place just over eleven years ago, and was nothing much to all who witnessed it, for no person in Hull’s End would recognize anything remotely extraordinary if it hit them upside the head with a shovel. And thus, it was forgotten before anyone quite realized its true importance.

The second event was much harder to miss, even to the simple-minded folks who overlooked the first. It happened just six years later, and started with a ratty teddy-bear that was thrown in the bin. And no matter how much it went back in the bin, or how much it was torn apart, battered, burnt, and otherwise destroyed, it would always be found back in a child’s bed, looking brand-new. In fact, it happened so much over so long that, eventually, the bear was left alone, and its escapades were never spoken of again in the house.

The third and final event was the one to truly, finally, shake things up – if not in the entire town, at the very least at Number Seven, Highview Crescent. It happened just last year: a striped tabby padded softly over the derelict street, stopped right in front of Number Seven and watched the off-centre number 7 on the door for hours on end. It sat and waited until dark, and no one was present to see the cat transform into a rather severe-looking, bespectacled woman with a pointy hat and tartan scarf. She, like the boy born in that house years before, was quite extraordinary, but nearly no one in Hull’s End would ever come to know it except three people. Their names were Robert, Martha, and William White.

It was the Whites’ house that had been observed for the better part of the afternoon on a cold day in February, unbeknownst to its remaining inhabitants and to most others in Highview Crescent.
Even for a witch, Auror Susan Bones was as discreet as they come.

The nearly-abandoned street made it incredibly to set up surveillance easy as well; all she had to do was break into one of the empty storefronts facing the row of houses. At the moment, she was watching quite comfortably from a disillusioned shop window – one with a direct view of Number Seven.

“Heya, Bones” called a voice from behind. Susan turned from her seat – a foldable lawn chair charmed to be exquisitely comfortable – to face her friend and boss, the one and only Harry Potter. “How are we looking?”

“Hullo. Same as yesterday – mom stays home all-day doing Merlin-knows-what besides, dad goes to work at around eight each morning to arrive at around eight every night.”

Harry nodded, looking through the dirty glass of the window pane before them. The lights in the kitchen of the White residence were on, but from where he stood, he could not see any movement. “Alright. Nothing new, then?”

“No.” Susan answered honestly. The truth was, she did not quite understand why her boss was so invested on some Muggle-watching. She knew there was something going on with the boy – news of the first Muggle-Born sorted into Slytherin had spread fast in September – but she couldn’t fathom why Harry Potter himself wanted an Auror on the case. Not that she was complaining – she was enjoying the relative quiet. “Husband seems to be the controlling type, but there have been no altercations.”

“The WiSer assignee should arrive in the next couple of days. Don’t let them know you’re here, but let me know if they aren’t, ah... discrete.” He said in a harrumph, brows furrowed. Susan chortled; for as much as Wizarding society depended on discretion to remain unnoticed by Muggles, people who actually worked in remaining undetected could be surprisingly obtuse. More than once had she caught wizards wearing absurdly out-of-date clothing thinking they were blending in perfectly. At one point, a witless Ministry employee had tried to attend a Muggle football match with omnioculars and a hat that spoke to people.

“Sure thing.” She said. She wasn’t exactly eager to share her turf with some bureaucrat. Harry flashed her a grin of understanding as he pulled an envelope out of his robes. “Narcissa sent this my way – could you make sure Mrs. White gets it – discreetly? William hasn’t been able to send her any post.” He explained, handing Susan the envelope.

“Allright. And should she want to reply? There’s no owl post in Hull’s End, and even if there were one, I doubt Mrs. White would know what to do.”

“I trust you to figure that one out.” Harry quipped with a laugh. “Maybe make sure she can at least get it back to you? Just remember to be...”

“Discreet.”

“Yeah. That.”

“Just sign the bloody thing, for Merlin’s sake!”
“I will not sign it! I refuse! I don’t want it – I will not take it!”

“Take it! Salazar’s snakes, why must you insist on being so difficult!”

“I’ve said it before, and I shall repeat it: I don’t want your money.”

Narcissa threw her hands up in the air, the very picture of extreme exasperation. Her continuing reunion with Andromeda had thus far proven to be... vexing. She narrowed her eyes, sending her iciest glare towards her sister.

“For the last fucking time...” she threatened.

“Cissy! Language!” Andromeda interjected, scandalized.

“... it is not my money, you aggravating, self-righteous, irksome fool!”

“I really don’t appreciate all this name-calling.” Andromeda said with an exaggerated roll of her eyes. She faked a serious, displeased expression, but not frequenting their old Pure-Blood circles had caused her to lose her edge – Narcissa could tell she was having a mighty good time out of their bickering by the smile tugging at her lips.

The blonde wanted desperately to thump her head onto Andromeda’s kitchen table in frustration, but that would be rather undignified. They had been at it for hours on end – or at least it felt like it, and Andromeda seemed no closer to giving in, despite Narcissa’s persistence.

“This is your money as well, Andy.” She tried to reason for the millionth time. Why Andromeda continually refused to accept money that was rightfully hers was simply unfathomable – it wasn’t like Ted’s Ministry pension gave her much to begin with.

Andromeda just waved her younger sister off. “Save your breath. It’s been a long time since I’ve been a Black – just look at the tapestry.”

“To hell with the sodding tapestry!” Narcissa muttered angrily. “You’re a Black by blood, that entitles you to this money. Please take it, Andy, if only for my peace of mind.”

Andromeda tutted good-naturedly. “We’re going around in circles, Cissy. Stop trying to buy my forgiveness, I’ve already given it to you.”

Narcissa could only shake her head, supremely annoyed. “This has nothing to do with forgiveness she reasoned. “This is about doing the right thing. You’re entitled to this money.”

“I don’t want it. End of discussion.”

“Argh!” Narcissa grunted. Trust Andromeda to still be able to push all of her buttons, even after all those years. She was just as aggravating now as she had been as a child.

Andromeda looked like she was about to say something further, but they were interrupted by the sound of excited feet stomping down the stairs. That would be Teddy – whom Narcissa had only recently been acquainted with – returning from the Potters’ via Floo.

“Grams! I’m home!” He yelled; Narcissa winced, and Andromeda smiled knowingly. Narcissa took a mental note to try and prevent her sister from ever teaching Scorpius to call her ‘Grams’. ‘Nana’ was bad enough.

The young boy emerged into the kitchen with a beaming smile and a full head of platinum blonde
hair. That had been a thing since the day before, after he had met Narcissa for the first time. Andromeda had looked scandalized, while Narcissa felt extremely – and inexplicably – smug. Teddy had taken to the new addition to his life in stride – he showed signs of his father’s intelligence, which made Narcissa look forward to having him as her student in the coming year. However – and this was proven as the boy tripped over his own shoelaces and nearly face-planted onto Andromeda’s linoleum kitchen floors – it seemed he had also inherited his mother’s clumsiness.

“Hiya, Teddy.” Andromeda greeted with a smile, entirely unfazed by his awkwardness. Narcissa, for her part, had nearly jumped out of her chair to keep the boy from falling, but Andromeda had looked at her with an expression that said ‘this happens all the bloody time.’ “How was it at the Potters?”

“Great! Ginny left us some stew! It’s nearly as good as Auntie Molly’s.”

Andromeda laughed. “Be sure to never tell that to Molly!”

Teddy laughed, seating himself on the vacant chair by Narcissa’s side. Narcissa thought she’d forever be amazed at how easily he had taken to her – despite her immense fear in introducing herself into the boy’s life like this, all Andromeda had done was say ‘Teddy, this is my sister, your Auntie Cissa’ and he accepted it without question.

“Hiya, Auntie Cissa” he greeted with his beaming smile. He looked at her hair intently, and she could see small shades of blonde in his own softly changing to match her own more accurately, practically strand by strand – it was almost as impressive as when he had turned his whole head blonde from the electric pink he had sported when she saw him for the first time.

“Hello, Teddy” Narcissa said, still feeling oddly smug at how he had perfected the tone of her hair, much to Andromeda’s begrudging amusement. “Did you have fun at the Potters?”

He nodded enthusiastically. “Loads! Harry and I played Quidditch!” Suddenly he looked sheepish. “I fell off my broom.”

“And Teddy! Are you alright?” Andromeda interjected, worry lacing her voice. Teddy waved her off, obviously just embarrassed by his fall.

“I’m fine, Grams – I only skinned my knee,” he reassured, bunching up the leg of his shorts above the injury, showcasing a clumsily applied plaster.

“What in Merlin’s name is that?” Narcissa asked, unable to help herself. Teddy looked at her oddly, but Andromeda was the one to respond.

“A band-aid,” she said with an exasperated shake of her head. “Harry is nearly useless with healing spells. I wish Ginny had been there; I’m not too good at them either.”

“Nonsense” Narcissa waved her off, turning to her grandnephew. “May I take a look at your wound, Teddy?” She asked nicely. Teddy nodded, removing the plaster with a sickening ripping sound from where it stuck – literally – to his skin. Narcissa would have to investigate band-aids further at a later time. Perhaps Hermione could help explain the odd things.

“Oh, it’s not bad at all” she said, inspecting a run-of-the-mill skinned knee that at least had been cleaned, albeit badly. She took out her wand after a cursory examination and lightly tapped Teddy’s knee. “Percuro”.

Teddy looked amazed at the shimmer of magic that coursed through his wound, raising new,
healthy skin without a trace of blood or pain.

“There.” Narcissa said, satisfied, sheathing her wand.

“Whoa!” Teddy exclaimed, smoothing his hands over his newly-healed knee repeatedly, in awe. “Grams, did you see that?”


“Oh! Thank you, Auntie Cissa!” He said happily, lunging in for a hug before Narcissa could prepare herself. She regained her composure just in time to return it, though now she had an uncomfortable lump in her throat. She would gladly heal this boy’s every wound for the rest of her life – nothing would bring back the parents he lost when she was on the other side of the war. It took quite a bit of her self-control to keep tears from surfacing.

Andromeda seemed to notice Narcissa’s predicament, but Teddy was blissfully oblivious. “You know, Teddy,” his grandmother began in a transparent effort to clear the air for Narcissa’s sake, “you should take advantage of your Auntie Cissa’s knowledge, since she’ll be your Potions professor next year.”

Teddy was immediately diverted, settling back onto his chair with eyes wide in interest. “Oh, that’s right! What Potions do we learn as first-years?” He looked giddy. “Will we make anything blow up!”

“If you are successful, I’m afraid there will be no explosions of any kind, Teddy” she said with a smile. He looked mildly disappointed. “But as the years progress, you’ll learn how to brew more interesting potions. I’m afraid you’ll have to settle for the basics during first year.”

His disappointment showed, but he was quick to recover. “And you are Slytherin’s Head of House? Were you a prefect like Grams?”

“Yes” Narcissa said, then smirked at Andromeda, narrowing her eyes. “And I was not only a prefect, but also Head Girl, in my day.” Andromeda made a covert rude gesture towards Narcissa, out of Teddy’s view. Not getting to be Head Girl would always be a comical thorn in Andromeda’s side – she had eloped with Ted before she began her seventh year, defaulting the post of Head Girl to Anita Berkins, a girl with whom she cultivated a spirited rivalry.

“Wicked! Did you play Quidditch as well?”

It was Andromeda’s turn to grin with smugness. “No, Teddy – Auntie Cissa has an unnatural fear of bludgers.”

Teddy laughed, while Narcissa sniffed haughtily. “There is absolutely nothing unnatural about a fear of bludgers – I call it self-preservation.”

“But the bludgers are the best part!” Teddy exclaimed, to Narcissa’s utter terror. Andromeda laughed.

“Teddy wants to be a Beater.” She said with a shoulder shrug that told Narcissa her sister had given up on the subject.

“A Beater?” Narcissa questioned. Andromeda may have given up on that endeavour, but Narcissa could very well give it her best shot – it also gave her an idea to get back at Andromeda for not accepting the money that was rightfully hers. “But what if there are no Beater positions to be
Teddy’s long pause told Narcissa he had not ever considered it. “I don’t know,” he finally said, in a bit of a panic. “What do I do?! I want to play in Hogwarts!”

“That’s simple” Narcissa said with a smile. “You must train for every single position. Make yourself invaluable.”

The young boy smiled widely. “Yeah!” He then sobered up almost immediately after. “Oh. But I don’t have a Quidditch kit” he said, scratching his blonde hair. “Maybe Harry can lend me his...”

“Nonsense. We’ll get you one.” Narcissa declared, shooting a look at an Andromeda so her sister knew exactly what she was doing. “Tell me, Teddy” she leaned closer to her grandnephew, putting her hands on his shoulders tenderly. Only Andromeda saw how wicked her grin truly was. “Have you ever heard of Junior League Quidditch?”

“Cissy, this is insanity” Andromeda hissed as the two sisters and Teddy strolled down Diagon Alley, arms laden with bags upon bags of Quidditch supplies, books, sweets, and any other thing Narcissa felt like torturing Andromeda with. Teddy walked a little ahead, sucking on an enormous lollipop and gazing at the shop windows they had yet to explore.

Narcissa only smiled at her sister. She had developed a perfect strategy – Teddy would look at something he liked; his eyes would then light up, he’d turn to Andromeda in supplication, Andromeda would not even voice her ‘No’... and then Narcissa would go and buy whatever the item was behind her back, surprising Teddy with it, to his immense delight and Andromeda’s eternal vexation.

It worked every time – Andromeda was not as sharp as she had been to Narcissa’s covert operations.

“Insanity?” Narcissa quipped, faking disbelief. “Insanity is not giving the proper encouragement for Teddy to pursue his Quidditch career...”

Andromeda mumbled angrily, but Narcissa could tell that, somewhere deep beneath the true exasperation, Andromeda found the entire situation hilarious.

“You’re going to spoil my grandson!” She seethed, lifting the many shopping bags she carried with the aid of a feather-light Charm.

“Nonsense,” Narcissa declared emphatically, noticing as Teddy busied himself with admiring the magical animals for sale at the Magical Menagerie. Andromeda saw where Narcissa was looking.

“I forbid you from buying him an owl. I am not cleaning owl droppings.”

“Suit yourself, but do I believe I still owe Teddy here a fine set of Keeper gloves – the ones at Quality Quidditch were, ironically, lacking in quality. Perhaps I ought to have them custom made out of dragon hide. Of course, he is a growing boy, so I suppose I should just get a new set custom made every time he outgrows them.”

Andromeda looked a little green around the edges. “Stop this madness!” she cried. Narcissa smirked, sensing her victory was near.
“There is a very convenient way to make me stop.” She said, pointing to Gringotts – her intended destination. The shopping trip had been a pretext to have some fun with Teddy and torture Andromeda for a little while.

Her sister shot her a glare, now realizing how she had been subjected to Narcissa’s machinations. “You sneaky piece of...”

“Grams!” called a voice by the Magical Menagerie. “Look at this ferret! It poops so much!”

“Well, you like a ferret, Teddy?” Called Narcisa, making to walk to the boy. Andromeda grasped her arm forcefully to stop her approach – she looked exceedingly thankful Teddy hadn’t heard her youngest sister.

“You win! You in, I concede defeat.” Andromeda barked. Narcissa quirked an eyebrow. “I’ll go to the sodding bank with you, just... just stop buying him things.”

Narcissa smiled widely in victory.

They left Teddy at the Magical Menagerie, under the promise he would not leave the store until they returned to fetch him; the boy seemed happy to chat with Mr. Woodward, the bubbly and knowledgeable store manager. Andromeda followed Narcissa into the bank like a petulant child in transit to the scolding of a lifetime. Narcissa simply held her head high, hiding her relief now that Andromeda had finally relented.

They approached one of the Goblins available. He ignored them for the better part of a minute, but Narcissa simply bid her time, refusing to give him the satisfaction of her impatience. “Your business here... Lady Malfoy?” he finally drawled.

Andromeda looked like she was about to correct him, but Narcissa held up a hand to stop her, unbothered. “Black. I wish to transfer half of the assets under the Black name to my sister. The paperwork is already filed, you’ll just need her signature.”

The Goblin scowled, but shuffled through a heavy ledger on his counter before summoning even more papers. Andromeda looked supremely uncomfortable; Narcissa surprised herself and her sister by taking Andromeda’s hand in her own.

“May we have a private room to discuss these transactions?” Narcissa requested. The Goblin rolled his eyes in annoyance, before giving them the papers and directing them to a door to the side of the bank – it looked like it led to a broom closet. Narcissa was pleasantly surprised when she opened it to find something that looked more like a waiting room.

“Alright,” she said, leading Andromeda by the hand to sit at one of the plush chairs provided. “Humour me, Andy. Why do you not want your money? Answer me honestly this time. None of that ‘I’ve already forgiven you’ crap.”

Andromeda squeezed her sister’s hand, a pained look in her eyes. Narcissa took a seat on the chair next to her, careful to not let go.

“I’m just...” Andromeda began, looking frustrated at not being able to express herself well. Narcissa waited patiently. “I don’t know how to do it anymore.”

The explanation only served to further confuse Narcissa. “Do what?” she asked.

“To... do what you do. To be a Black. It’s not just the money, Cissy. It’s the attitude, the demeanour, the way you carry yourself. I’ve been Andromeda Tonks for so long, I feel like I’ve
forgotten how to be Andromeda Black.”

Narcissa couldn’t say she understood, because that was the plain truth. Perhaps she could understand why Andromeda felt the way she did, but she would never truly understand how. She had been born a Black, became a Malfoy, and then a Black once more – she had never been removed from the higher echelon of Pure-Blooded Wizardkind. Even now, after the war, despite the numerous allegiances she had lost in her defection to the Light, she could still move discreetly within the same circles.

That was not the case for Andromeda. Sure, her sister still retained a certain... *je ne sais quoi* in her posture and speech that belied her true upbringing. But as far as everything else went – she had not been a Black for a long, long time.

But Narcissa also thought it was foolish to worry.

“You’ll always be both” she said earnestly, her grasp on her sister’s hands tightening to drive the point home. “You’ll always be a Black by blood, a Tonks by marriage and the child you and Ted created. There’s no need for you to *be* a Black in the strictest sense of the word” she scrunched her face in distaste. “In truth, I don’t believe the world needs any more Blacks. We’ve been a blight on this society for too long.”

Andromeda smiled, but she looked saddened. “Oh, Cissy, are you to be alone then? The only Black worth a damn?” she laughed.

Narcissa rolled her eyes. “I’m not sure I’m worth anything at all.” She remarked truthfully. Andromeda looked appalled.

“Cissy, don’t say such things!” She cried, encircling Narcissa in a warm embrace. “You’re worth the world to me.”

Narcissa was taken by surprise, enough to bring a tear or two to her eye – she adamantly willed them not to fall, deciding instead to enjoy having her sister back in a way she never imagined possible. Moments like this, with Andromeda, made her bitterly regret not reaching out to her sister sooner, wasting so much time she could have spent getting to know her again, getting to know young Teddy, and getting to know the late Nymphadora through Andromeda’s stories.

“Now, now” Narcissa said, composing herself. “Are you ready to take what’s rightfully yours?”

“Fine” Andromeda relented with a laugh. “Not that I’m going to use it, mind you. This is only so you stop spoiling my grandson beyond repair.”

“I don’t much care what you do or don’t do with it” Narcissa declared emphatically. “So long as you accept that it is yours.”

Andromeda made a big show of shrugging, but did not comment further. Narcissa felt nearly triumphant as she slid the papers over the small side table to her sister. It was long overdue, of course.

Andromeda rifled through the sheets of parchment, her eyes widening at every page.

“Cissy...”

“Yes?”

Her sister quirked a brow and turned the page to Narcissa, her finger pointing daintily at a number
on the bottom. “Tell me this is a miscalculation.”

Narcissa leaned over, examining the figure. “Not at all.”

Andromeda was silent for a long time. “Merlin’s hairless bollocks!” she finally exclaimed.

The youngest Black scowled at the vulgarity. “Is there a problem, sister dear?”

“Oh, pardon me, most illustrious Lady of the Noble and most Ancient House of Black” Andromeda squeaked with an awkward, exaggerated bow from her chair, “but this simpleton cannot recall ever seeing so many zeros; you are truly a lady of means.”

Narcissa could only roll her eyes. “That’s your half.”

It took Andromeda a minute to snap her jaw closed.

Hermione was elbows deep in rolls of parchment at the Black Library as night grew nearer. She had spent most of her weekend looking through some of the most ancient tomes and scrolls she could get her hands on; they were numerous and varied in usefulness and complexity.

Despite generations of meticulous record-keeping being readily available to her curious eyes, the Black Family had thus far not been partial to sharing the secrets to their centennial Blood Wards. The little she did find consisted of ward updates begrudgingly added after Ministry law made it illegal to kill Muggles and other undesirables for trespassing.

Hermione shuddered at the thought, the scar on her palm throbbing almost soothingly.

Even with those recalcitrant recounts of warding updates, Hermione still had very little information on how to actually make any changes to them – those Ministry-ordered files told her what was done, but not how. It infuriated the young professor to no end; she had brought all of her notes on Ancient Runes and Arithmancy, all of her research on the melding of the two disciplines in the dissection of warding charms, and yet...

Hermione felt she had all the pieces of the puzzle laid out in front of her. They simply refused to click into place. She had tried her best to determine the magical signatures of the wards to no avail. That led her and Narcissa back to where they did not want to be – they needed to find the site of the original runes that first warded the place.

The brunette blew a stray lock of hair from her eyes in a huff of sheer irritation. That particular task could very well take years. The property was massive, made even more unnaturally so by magic. Besides, wards added during renovation and planning for Black Manor got in the way of Hermione’s detection charms; the reason why they kept failing despite her ability was simple: they were overwhelmed by the confoundingly large number of wards in the place.

She looked in disdain at one of her notebooks, littered with scribbles. Hermione had become an expert in fine-tuning wards to very specific purposes. More than that, she had become, quite by accident, incredibly talented in fabricating wards from scratch – the geometrical patterns of her wards were all of her own design, not the usual ready-made shapes created by runes or general warding charms.

Hermione flipped some pages on an old Black Family records book, deep in thought. The property could only be warded by Runes due to the age of the wards encasing it – that was her first
assumption, and she felt certain she was correct. Usually, Runed wards surged upwards from one central point, like a bubble enshrouding its target in protective magic. If she could find that point of origin, the central point...

Her musings were interrupted by the loud creaking of the heavy doors swinging open. Hermione snapped up to see Narcissa walking in with a look of surprise.

“Ms. Granger,” she said, and her tone was playfully rigorous “have you spent all day in this library?”

Hermione smiled guiltily. “Not all day,” she defended. “I only came here at noon.”

“So you’ve spent” Narcissa looked at the grandfather clock by Hermione’s table, “roughly six hours hidden away in here?”

“For a good cause!” Hermione quipped, lifting a sheaf of loose parchment she had been examining earlier, brandishing it in her defence. “How was it with Andromeda this afternoon?”

Narcissa had just met Teddy the day before. Hermione had comforted her when the blonde seemed about to back out, afraid of what a ten-year-old would think of her, terrified of what he knew, horrified by what he had lost before even knowing it. To Hermione’s delight, Narcissa had returned from that first visit reenergized – the young professor had no doubt Teddy already had his Aunt wrapped around his little finger. It was a talent of his.

“It was wonderful” Narcissa said with a happy look, taking a seat next to Hermione, who now found that the room seemed to warm with Narcissa’s presence. “I’ve finally convinced her to take her share of the Black inheritance.”

Hermione nodded, acknowledging that it was no small feat. Narcissa had told her, in one of their talks in this very library, about giving Andromeda her due as one of the Black descendants. It also involved the creation of a vault for Teddy – Hermione knew that the boy already had more money than he could ever imagine.

“I have to say, I’m surprised Andromeda relented... I thought she’d hold out a bit longer.” She commented, noting there was a glimmer of mischief in Narcissa’s eyes.

“I may have... persuaded her by spoiling her grandson.” The blonde confessed, not looking even remotely sorry – if anything, she looked rather pleased with the subterfuge.

“Oh, Merlin.” Hermione laughed. “Is Teddy now owner of his very own Quidditch pitch, or something of the sort?”

Narcissa looked mildly sheepish, which prompted Hermione to gasp “Oh my Merlin. Really??”

“No, no, of course not” the blonde waved her off with a laugh. “He’s now trying out for Junior League Quidditch. With his new Quidditch kit, complete with a handmade Quaffle and Golden Snitch.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “I have a feeling that’s not all he got from you.”

Narcissa beamed. “You would be correct. It might have exasperated Andromeda to no end, but I have ten years of birthday and Christmas presents to make up for.”

Hermione smiled tenderly. “But what if you set the bar too high now?”
Narcissa merely shrugged in that effortlessly elegant movement that sent an odd electric shock down Hermione’s back every time she witnessed it. “Then I suppose I shall have to surpass it every year.”

Hermione had to laugh; Narcissa sounded like she meant it. She wanted to ask more about the outing, since Narcissa seemed so jubilant and carefree, which was quite unusual, but made a warmth pool in her belly in contentment. Narcissa’s attention, however, was diverted to the heavy tome Hermione had been looking at.

“How about you? Have you had a productive afternoon?” She asked, leaning in to examine Hermione’s notations on another piece of parchment, the angle shifting her robes at the front. The brunette’s gaze drifted upwards as she felt a surge of blood flushing to her cheeks – this, whatever this was she felt around Narcissa, was getting out of control.

“Ahem, uh, no, not as much as I’d like, if I’m honest,” she stammered, busying herself with rearranging the loose pages she held. “I’m still working on finding the origin point of the first wards created for this place.”

Narcissa’s brow quirked in thought. “The origin point? You can’t possibly be talking about something as rudimentary as a bubble-ward.”

“Yes and no” Hermione said, the flutter in her chest being replaced by the effortless delight she found in discussing academics with someone who was able to fully participate. “The property is obviously guarded by a vast arrangement of wards at present – so many my ward-detecting charm was utterly useless.”

“It was a good effort.” Narcissa reasoned, moving her chair closer to better skim over the notes on the table. Hermione chuckled.

“Not really,” she admitted. “But think of how old this property is. It has been warded since before the advent of the wand, as you said yourself. So, naturally, the only way it could have been warded then...”

“Would have been by the use of Runes.” Narcissa completed, eyes flickering with awe and anticipation.

“Precisely. Which means...”

“There is a central origin point.” Narcissa interjected for the second time; Hermione was so taken by the elation and anticipation in her eyes she could bring herself to care about being interrupted.

“Exactly,” she said, immensely happy that Narcissa reacted to advancement in research much the same way she did. “While we still need to find a specific point to see the runes, it certainly narrows things down; it’s not such patch-work job anymore.”

“That is fantastic.” Narcissa said, the awe in her voice at Hermione’s notes evident in ways that made the brunette preen in satisfaction. “Once we find that point, will you be able to determine the wards’ magical signature?” she asked expectantly.

“I hope so” Hermione said a little breathlessly. Then her enthusiasm dampened considerably. “It’s still a needle in a haystack.”

“Perhaps” Narcissa conceded, though it seemed she was still running high on the excitement of discovery. “But you’ve more than halved the haystack.” She said kindly, and her smile was simply so infectious Hermione could not help returning it.
“We’ll see... it’s still...”

“No, Hermione, think about it” Narcissa interrupted yet again, so entranced by the discussion she didn’t quite notice the little breathless gasp the brunette released upon hearing her name. “We know the wards must come from Runes since the property and the wards are so old. What if we’re looking at this wrong?”

Hermione furrowed her brow in question. “Wrong how?”

“We have been trying to look for wards in a maze of wards” Narcissa said, taking a forgotten quill from the table and flipping a stray piece parchment to its blank side. She hastily dipped the quill into Hermione’s inkwell and scratched a large concave curve onto it, drawing a straight line down from the middle of the arch, ending it with a large dot. Another dip, and several, smaller arches were added, each with a different central point; Hermione recognized it as a representation of their previous discussion of wards within wards.

“Yeah, it’s part of why it’s so difficult to hone in on one ward’s original magical signature; they all interact with one another,” the brunette affirmed as Narcissa scribbled until the little diagram looked like a veritable tangled mess of lines and arches.

“Yes” Narcissa conceded, sounding thrilled, “but what if we have approached this the wrong way? We’ve been trying to use the wards to find the runes. What if instead...”

“We used the runes to find the wards!” Hemione cut her off, now picking up Narcissa’s train of thought and, consequently, the resulting excitement. The wheels in her brain were turning a mile a minute; she looked attentively at Narcissa’s crude diagram, focusing on the mass of dots that gathered at the bottom, representing the points of origin of each ward.

“Would it be possible?” Narcissa asked in one shuddering breath of excitement; her cheeks flushed and eyes glimmering as if she had just run a mile.

“Theoretically,” Hermione mumbled, examining the chaotic arches and lines and dots like they were complex Transfiguration formulas, noting the multitudes of times the arches cross-hatched one another while the dots representing centre points all retained some distance. “The points of origin would not be as difficult; they would not interfere with one another as the wards do, since wards span such large areas...”

“In other words,” Narcissa interrupted again, standing in her excitement, and her voice was so affected by her enthusiasm Hermione could not help but meet her gaze head on, being completely taken by how those blue orbs shone with sheer and utter giddiness at their discovery. “There can be several wards within wards...”

“... but not nearly as many points within points!” The brunette finished, standing as well – the realization stoking the tenacious fires of her will to push even further. This was it; they had broken it, she was sure of it.

Narcissa gave a little yelp of pure and unadulterated euphoria, taking Hermione’s hand and spinning the brunette in a half circle of delight. Hermione could not even bring herself to over-analyse the incredibly out-of-character action, so consumed she was by the older woman’s exuberant playfulness at their discovery.

The two laughed together, the mirth of the breakthrough palpable. Narcissa did not even seem to notice she still held tight onto Hermione’s hand; she even squeezed it as she turned an expectant look to the brunette – the warmth Hermione felt in her chest returned tenfold.
“Can you do it?” came Narcissa’s breathless, eager question. “Do you think you can create a Rune-detecting spell?”

“Darling,” Hermione gasped out, and the two were too enraptured by the moment to make note of the out-of-place endearment. “I’m the Brightest Witch of Her Age” Hermione said playfully, cradling Narcissa’s hand in her own and squeezing back, completely consumed by her certainty that this was going to work. “I can do anything.”

Narcissa’s smile was blinding.
It was on Tuesday night, shortly before she received two students to serve detention with her, that Narcissa stumbled upon quite a worrying realization concerning a certain Transfigurations Professor. Rather, the realization didn’t quite concern Hermione Granger, but Narcissa’s own initial dismissal, her initial assumption of what fuelled the intensity of that hazel gaze towards her. It was on Tuesday that Narcissa realized, quite strongly, that it wasn’t what she thought it was.

It had never been a ‘fluke’. And Narcissa certainly wasn’t imagining it.

No, no. For once, the great Narcissa Black had misinterpreted the true intentions of the gaze. Something she had been so expertly well-versed in, something she had used time and again to her advantage through the years, and yet here she was, utterly and completely stumped by it.

Now she stood with the understanding that it wasn’t merely curiosity, or even simple professional admiration that fuelled Hermione’s gaze – no, it was something else entirely, and she doubted even Hermione herself realized what it was. But the question remained; how had she not been able to spot it sooner?

It had to be because it was Hermione Granger. The witch’s interest had effectively blindsided her because she was, well, Gryffindor’s Golden Girl. Who would expect such a thing coming from such an unlikely place?

Narcissa needed confirmation, and should it be achieved, she needed to put an immediate stop to it. Something had to be done – it wasn’t fair to Hermione to allow their rapport to blossom into anything more. As much as Narcissa enjoyed her company, her knowledge, and her overall presence, there were certain lines that should not be crossed.

So that had been her resolute conclusion – to maintain a cordial, professional relationship with her fellow professor and nothing more, for both their sakes’. And because she was Narcissa Black, she had every intention of seeing it through.

It lasted just about until Hermione came knocking on her office door early on Tuesday evening.

“You won’t believe what I just found, entirely by chance!” She had blurted cheerily when Narcissa opened the door to her office, inviting herself in with a breeze of the same unbridled excitement that had carried them over the weekend at Black Manor. Narcissa had been utterly disarmed to put her planning into practice.

“It doesn’t quite bring us any closer to finding the original warding runes in the property” Hermione had continued, cheeks flushed and breath a tad erratic. She carried an enormous book from the Black Library; the tome was so heavy her arms trembled holding it open for Narcissa to see. The Potions professor approached, taking the other end of the tome in her own hands and lifting it up, easing the strain on Hermione’s arms.

“But,” she went on joyfully, “it gives us some great insight into how your ancestors changed the original wards! I wish I had realized it sooner, but one doesn’t usually consider runes as transfigurative objects, though that seems to be exactly what was done to the Black wards, though I really can’t imagine how! I think that’s precisely why their magical signatures are so difficult to isolate and determine, you see, because they had been fundamentally changed in such a level that we...”
“Hermione.” Narcissa called, taking another step closer – her hold onto the sides of the scarred book cover moved until her hands ghosted over Hermione’s before settling there. The touch was enough to stop the young witch’s animated rambling.

Hermione’s cheeks flushed even further, and the moment her gaze connected with Narcissa’s, the latter could feel all of her painstakingly gathered resolve crumble into nothing. Perhaps it had been her exhilaration upon discovery; perhaps it had been her Gryffindor impetuousness. Perhaps it had merely been her intoxicating resilience. Narcissa didn’t know if perhaps it was the brunette’s hazel eyes, or the warmth of her hands beneath her own, but something then and there supplied her with the most startling awareness.

What an astonishing creature was Hermione Granger.

“Yes?” the brunette questioned, shrouded in Narcissa’s unexpected silence. The question caught Narcissa so curiously off-guard she had to take a moment to compose herself.

“Ah, yes. What, pray tell, are you talking about?” she finally asked, because wasn’t Hermione talking about Runes or some such thing when she walked in?

“Oh!” Hermione exclaimed; Narcissa felt her hands slip away, taking the heavy book to her desk and setting it there. The young witch motioned for Narcissa to follow.

“Here you go,” she said, pointing at some intricately hand-drawn diagrams featured on the old, well-worn yellowed pages. Narcissa recognized runes she had studied all her life, as well as some other rudimentary inscriptions designed for beginners in the discipline. However, she felt more than a little lost at the complex transmutative equations and diagrams that seemed to naturally follow – they were not like anything she had ever seen before, at least not paired with runes. It was an unnatural combination.

“What am I looking at?” she asked, effectively side-tracked by whatever Hermione’s brilliant mind had stumbled upon.

“We are looking at the reason why your family’s wards are so bloody tricky to work with. Well, at least one of them.” Hermione noted. She pointed to one of the more elementary sets of runes that seemed to serve as an example for whatever it was all those equations did.

“Your ancestors not only created some scary-strong Blood Wards” Hermione continued, indicating some of the more complex equations, “but they, somehow, managed to transfigure runes!”

“What?” Narcissa asked, truly baffled, because there was no way that could be true. Was there? One look at the eager Transfiguration specialist by her side told her that Hermione was certainly considering the possibility. “Is such a thing even possible?”

“It shouldn’t be” Hermione readily admitted, but there was a glint in her eye that told Narcissa precisely the opposite. “But somehow, your ancestors created runes with transmutative properties. It’s one of the most fascinating things I’ve ever seen!”

Narcissa tried to wrap her head around it, with great difficulty. “How?” she questioned. “How could runes be considered transfigurable objects? They are not even objects to begin with! How would one account for variables such as bodyweight? I find it hard to believe my family managed to transcend the most fundamental mathematics of transfiguration.” She argued.

“I don’t think that’s what happened at all” Hermione countered excitedly. “I think they somehow managed to create runes that abide to the transfigurative formula.”
Narcissa looked at Hermione as if the brunette had suddenly delivered a soliloquy in Mermish. Was there something painfully obvious that she was missing?

“How would one accomplish such a thing?” she asked, utterly confused. Had she forgotten everything she knew about transfiguration since the pretty brunette walked through her door?

Her thoughts came to a screeching halt. Pretty?!

“I’m not sure” Hermione persisted, entirely oblivious to Narcissa’s rapidly developing inner crisis. “But these diagrams don’t lie – they’ve managed to come up with exact values for the runes in the transfigurative formula. This is so exciting!”

“Yes, quite” Narcissa said flatly, her throat suddenly parched.

“Isn’t it? We have to figure out how they did it! This could change the face of Transfiguration as we know it!”

Narcissa forced herself to concentrate once more on the complicated sketches before her. It was hard to feel like such an idiot when faced with these transfiguration formulas – Merlin, she had become familiar with the exceedingly convoluted calculations for human transfiguration, for Salazar’s sakes – but that was exactly how she felt. She blamed the brunette next to her and the unfamiliar feelings that bubbled in the pit of her stomach.

“These formulas... they’re just so...” she began, tracing some of the diagrams with a great level of uncertainty.

“Completely bonkers.” Hermione finished for her, a smile on her face that Narcissa simply had to reciprocate.

“I’m inclined to agree.”

“I’ll have to study them more closely, but I was just so excited to show you.” Hermione confessed, and Narcissa did not like how the brunette’s flushing cheeks made her feel – not one bit. She didn’t know what to say to that.

“Oh, my bad, it’s almost time for detention, isn’t it?” Hermione said, suddenly very interested on the clock that was about to chime.

“Yes.” Narcissa gasped, clinging to that lifeline. She had nearly forgotten she was supposed to be overseeing William and Stuart in their respective detentions.

“I’ll get out of your hair then,” Hermione babbled. “What are you having them do? For detention?”

“Oh, we will be going to the Staff greenhouse to collect a few ingredients to replenish my stocks.” Narcissa replied.

Hermione grinned. “Sounds great. Could you let me know how it goes? I mean, Stuart is in my house, after all...” She seemed to stop and ponder for a second. “Actually, considering he is a Gryffindor and all, would you like some help overseeing this? Wouldn’t be as boring as it could be.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary!” Narcissa said a little too fast – Hermione’s smile faltered a fraction, but it was more than enough for Narcissa to realize how her tone affected the younger witch. “I wouldn’t want to burden you. Besides, you’ve made some excellent progress in our ward research,
I would hate to interrupt your momentum with something as trivial as detention.”

The Transfiguration Professor seemed somewhat mollified by her desperate save, but Narcissa found she had not the energy to try any harder. Thankfully, Hermione relented.

“Alright then,” she said, though she eyed Narcissa with a bit of confusion in her gaze. “I’ll leave you to it. Do let me know how it goes though!” She quipped, once again lifting the enormous book and carrying it out. Narcissa saw her out with a smile.

“Of course! Good night, Hermione!”

Narcissa took one deep breath as the brunette’s steps faded down the corridors, just in time for the clock to chime thunderously in her quarters. Her students would be there any second, so she took a few minutes to compose herself.

William was the first to arrive, as Narcissa suspected. The young boy looked a little pale, but he smiled as he greeted his Professor with a polite “Good evening, Ma’am.”

“Good evening, William” Narcissa replied. “We have another student joining us shortly – would you mind helping me polish some of my instruments while we wait? Not that I would like to add work to your detention” she added playfully. “This is completely voluntary.”

William smiled widely. “I don’t mind at all, Professor,” he asserted happily, removing his robe and draping it over one of the chairs as he followed his Head of House into the classroom that adjoined her office.

Narcissa and William occupied themselves with cleaning, polishing, and fine-tuning some of the scales and instruments the Professor kept for her students’ collective use.

“Professor?” William asked after a while, as he polished one of the many small knives Narcissa stored in her classroom.

“Yes, William?”

“I was wondering” he asked as he examined the little knife against the light of the torches that illuminated the room. “Why do you not use magic to clean Potions instruments?”

Narcissa smiled. That was a question she had grown used to, ever since she was old enough to notice the difference it made to maintain her instruments by hand versus by magic. Severus had been the one to point it out to her, and she, like many others, had not believed him at first, but all it took was a lifetime of watching him concoct the most extraordinary brews for her to see how it did matter.

“I assume Professor Flitwick has begun his lectures on simple cleaning charms” she observed knowingly. William grinned through a small flush.

“Yeah” he confirmed, continuing to polish the blade he held in his hands. “We practiced a Simple Silver Polishing Charm today, and I was just wondering why you don’t use them. They do seem much simpler than doing it all by hand.”

“In many ways, they are.” Narcissa conceded. “Chars are exceedingly convenient. But tell me, William, what does a Charm do?”

“It... cleans away the dirt?” he guessed, uncertain.
“Not quite,” Narcissa smiled kindly. “A Charm changes an object’s inherent qualities and properties. A Cleaning Charm changes an object’s ‘unclean’ quality to a ‘clean’ one. In its essence, a charm magically alters an object.”

“Alright. But what difference does it make when cleaning?” He pushed, genuinely confused.

“That depends, Mr. White. To you, a first-year student, none. To someone working on brewing potions using the same instruments daily for many, many years, quite a lot.”

“So... the more magic you use on an object, the more altered it becomes?”

“In a way. The more an object is altered magically, the farther it goes from its original state. Even if we replace its starting qualities, it still alters it magically. This is why, for example, you notice how certain materials are worn out by too many alterations. If this weren’t the case, there would be no need for tailors in the Wizarding World – we would all just alter our clothes magically.”

“I see.” William conceded. “So cleaning everything by hand just... preserves its original qualities?”

“Exactly.” Narcissa praised. “In the case of finely-tuned instruments such as my silver scales, it is even more important to keep their original qualities, as alterations can lead to small but incremental changes in measurement.”

“That’s so interesting.” William said as he turned the little blade in his hand, admiring his handiwork. “I thought Wizards would just use magic for everything.”

“We can become a little too dependent on our gifts.” Narcissa agreed. William looked even more pensive.

“I didn’t think I would see magic as a gift” he confessed suddenly. “I used to think it was a curse until the Headmistress came to talk to my parents.”

Narcissa felt an uncomfortable lump in her throat at the admission. Now, she wished she had accepted Hermione’s offer to stay – the other witch would surely know how to navigate this conversation. Not Narcissa, who had been taught for all her life that her magic was the most precious of gifts, bestowed upon her bloodline and making them superior to nearly everyone else, especially non-magical beings.

“Well, magic can be problematic” she chose to say instead, because it was nothing more than the truth. Thankfully, William smiled.

“I suppose” he conceded. “When I was little, strange things kept happening. I thought there was something really wrong with me. And then I found out that no, I’m just a wizard.”

“And you’re on your way to becoming quite a great wizard” Narcissa said truthfully. William preened with the praise.

There was a tentative knock on Narcissa’s door. “Ah,” she said. “That’ll be your detention partner.” With a deft wave of her hand, she motioned for the door to open. Stuart stood timidly by the door, his face scanning the room like a cornered animal. His eyes locked with William, and, while the latter offered a wave in greeting, Stuart’s face drained of all colour when he noticed the other student.

Interesting.

“Good evening, Mr. Davies.”
“S-sorry I’m late, Professor” Stuart stuttered, still looking at William with wide, surprised eyes that darted to his professor every so often.

“You’re right on time. We will be going down to the greenhouse, so I suggest the pair of you choose a few tools suitable to pruning some plants.” She said, motioning toward some tool kits that were already assembled and ordered in leather pouches on one of the classroom counters.

William was quick to reach them, and even offered one to Stuart, who trembled so heavily he dropped it to the floor with a resounding thud. Narcissa patiently waited for the two to ready themselves – William with the small knife he had taken so much care in polishing.

The three made their way to the greenhouses, warmed by one of Narcissa’s wordless warming charms as they traversed the snowy courtyard and trail that led to the Staff greenhouse. All the while, Narcissa noted how Stuart kept his distance from William, who for his part seemed perfectly content to walk in silence, with only the sound of snow crunching beneath their feet.

“Very well,” Narcissa said once they arrived at the greenhouse. “Boys, while this is still a detention, I will give you the opportunity to earn back some of the points you lost. Today, we will be pruning young Alihotsy leaves.”

“Alihotsy?” Stuart asked, furrowing his brows. “That name sounds familiar.”

“The Hyena Tree?” William interjected. Narcissa could not help the little bit of pride she felt for her student.

“Very good, Mr. White.” She stepped closer to a row of vibrant, colourful bushes with sprawling green leaves speckled with red spots. “I suppose the identification warrants a few points. Two points to Slytherin.”

The two boys approached the massive vases housing the colourful plants – Stuart still followed quite timidly behind William, seemingly trying to avoid any interaction with the young Slytherin. “Mr. Davies,” Narcissa called, hoping to put the boy a little more at ease. “If I recall correctly, you did some research on Alihotsy on one of our first assignments for the year. Can you tell me one interesting fact about it?”

Stuart looked like his head was about to explode; his eyes darted once more, and his cheeks puffed momentarily as if he were physically restraining himself from speaking. Finally, he let out a deep breath. “Alihotsy can help ward off banshees,” he murmured, looking straight down to the muddy ground.

“Excellent” Narcissa praised him. “Two points to Gryffindor. Now, gentlemen – we need about one thousand individual leaves, to be snipped one by one. We have a plentiful supply, but we must be careful to not damage the stem nearing the leaf, nor the leaf itself.”

She stood near one of the thickest, most bountiful plants housed in the large pots, pulling thick dragon leather gloves from the kit she carried at her side. “You must remember to wear gloves” she said as she slipped them on “can either of you tell me why?”

Stuart looked like he wanted to say it, but was again physically holding back. William spared him a glance as if giving him an opportunity to respond; once he saw Stuart was not to take it, he spoke with confidence.

“The Alihotsy sap can burn the skin when in prolonged contact.”

“Very good; another two points for Slytherin. Come on, you two, gloves on.” She gave the two
boys some time to be properly equipped. “Now, observe.”

Narcissa unsheathed her knife from its decorated holster, then showed the two students how to properly harvest the Alihotsy leaves by delicately holding the stem between the blade and her gloved thumb, then giving it a sharp twist to make the leaf snap cleanly away. William and Stuart watched closely, each unsheathing their own knives.

“We need about a thousand of these. I suggest you take three hundred each; I shall take the remainder. Discard any torn leaves or roughly-cut stems; they must be sliced cleanly or the sap will dry out.”

The Potions professor allowed the two to work in silence as she tackled some of the bushier, more unkempt Hyena Trees further down the greenhouse. For a long while, the only sounds in the darkened space were the rhythmic snapping of stems onto sharp blades and Stuart’s occasional grumbling when his stems or leaves were damaged in the process.

It was a long time before Narcissa overheard any talking.

“This isn’t so bad, as far as detention goes. I think.”

It was William – Narcissa hadn’t really expected Stuart to talk at all, but the fact that the timid William White was the one attempting to start a conversation was quite interesting. The young boy seemed to prefer silence even when he was around his friends.

“I guess.” Stuart grumbled in response – another groan followed as he violently tore another leaf.

“Your blade’s dull. Here, I’ve got an extra in my kit.” Came William’s voice only a moment after. Narcissa heard yet another grumble, possibly signifying Stuart’s thanks, before William once again directed himself to his peer.

“What are you in detention for?”

“Oh... out of bed after hours,” replied Stuart, and Narcissa could hear his hesitation and fear in the wavering of his voice. That little tid-bit was also most interesting.

“Yeah” Stuart responded, and then his voice dropped to a very low whisper – Narcissa kept her concentrated harvesting lest they think she was actually hearing them. “She surprised me in the corridors – scared the living daylights out of me, wooshing like smoke down the hall.”

“Wooshing?” William asked, and Narcissa could detect the humour in his voice.

“Literally -- she turned into smoke!”

She heard William’s chuckle, and then there was silence again. It was short-lived.

“I just can’t believe I got caught out of bed for something so stupid.” William bemoaned, sounding a bit more dramatic than was his nature. Narcissa wondered what the young boy was getting yet, though she had her suspicions.

“What were you doing out of bed?” Stuart asked, and the curiosity in his voice was pure and genuine. Was the Gryffindor looking for the answers he failed to get the night Narcissa interrupted his night-time foray?
“Sending a letter,” William explained simply. “It was urgent and I’d forgotten to do it during the day” he lied, and then pivoted. “How about you?”

Stuart stopped his mildly more successful snipping. “Me?”

“What were you doing out of bed?” William asked, his tone perfectly amiable, but now confirming Narcissa’s hunch. The young Slytherin had a goal similar to her own in his detention.

“Ah, I... I just went for a walk” Stuart whispered, picking up the pace as he nervously harvested more leaves. “To clear my head.”

“Oh?” William prompted; it was such a gentle, welcoming prod for Stuart to continue the conversation that Narcissa was mildly impressed.

“I had a disagreement with my brother.” Stuart admitted.

“Edgar, right?” William probed. “I remember him – got in quite a tiff in the corridors a few months ago. You were in the middle of it too.”

Narcissa heard Stuart’s surprised gasp; even the sound of his knife cutting the stems translated his nervousness.

“Ah, yeah. That” the Gryffindor blubbered in hoarse whispers. “I... I’m sorry about that. Start-of-term pranks, I suppose.”

“Your brother has an odd concept of pranks” William commented, and Narcissa guessed Stuart didn’t recognize the bait.

“You’re in Slytherin, you should know” Stuart suddenly hissed, with more emotion – anger – than anything else he had said thus far. The passion in his inflection seemed to surprise even Stuart himself, as he speedily backtracked. “My brother’s just a... a hothead sometimes. I hope he doesn’t cause you any more trouble.”

Narcissa wondered if William would be able to spot the insincerity of the hastily added hope Stuart tacked onto his statement.

“Oh,” William replied, still happily snipping away at his Alihotsy bush. “I wouldn’t worry.” His voice then took on a sickeningly sweet tone, one that was as insincere as Stuart’s backpedalling, but that carried an obvious, decidedly intentional threat:

“I can handle your brother just fine.”
Spring was slow to arrive at Hogwarts that year – March had come and was on its way out when a surprise snow covered the grounds once more, much to Hermione’s delight. The snow made it seem like they were still in the clutches of winter.

The young Transfiguration Professor shuddered as her steps crunched the snow beneath. Every year, she wanted desperately to cling to the last cold winds of winter, the last delicate snowflakes that always lingered on her wild hair as they fell, covering the world in silence. If she could, she would gladly choose to stay in winter forever.

She looked over at the dark expanse of the Black Lake, covered in a thin, fragile sheet of ice. Thankfully, the bulk of the student body would return home for Easter break, and she would have some peace to deal with March, the worst of months. The month when her demons always returned, stronger than ever, when her nightmares became more vivid, and when her cursed scars throbbed most painfully.

What a macabre sort of anniversary it was.

Hermione walked aimlessly towards the lake, taking in what was most likely the last snow of the year, her memories stretching themselves out through her mind in slow motion. After so many years experiencing the same thing at around the same time of year, she had learned to ignore the dull throbbing in her arm that remained from March all the way through May. The real pain only came at night.

She reached the outskirts of the lake and sat directly on the muddy shore, without a care for the state of her robes and casting one of her famous bluebell flames more for the comfort of its blue hue than for warmth. The blue glow of the spell she had performed since childhood was comforting and safe, cocooning her in memories of a happier, more innocent time.

Every March, Hermione was reminded of the terrifying ghosts that would haunt her nightmares for as long as she lived – it was like her body had an internal alarm clock that rung with pain at this time of year. March reminded her that, no matter how far she went or how much better she was doing, there would always be that seed of fear that grew into a choking vine around her heart and soul as it was watered every year around this time. It felt a bit like failure, but Harry reassured her it wasn’t, that there would always be others out there with scars and fears to match her own, and she was inclined to believe him. She knew of no one else besides him who could understand the demons she dealt with.

Although, she pondered as an errant snowflake settled briefly upon the tip of her nose before melting into nothingness and leaving a cold trail of water in its wake, there might be someone. The thought had not come to her out of nowhere – rather, it had been induced by the vision of a white fox scurrying along the banks of the Lake, further east of her. It rolled about in mounds of snow, momentarily disappearing from view before re-emerging to scurry along once more.

“I wonder what you think about in March.” Hermione wondered aloud, fully aware that Narcissa’s Animagus form was too far to hear. Despite their increasingly intimate conversations through the months of their reacquaintance, Hermione figured the night they had spent at Malfoy Manor that March in 1998 would not be spoken of ever again.
Plus, she thought glumly as the realization hit her for the third or so time that week, she was quite certain Narcissa had taken to avoiding her again. This time, however, it felt much worse than after their chance encounter at the greenhouse when term had just started, when Narcissa’s hair glittered like silver in the moonlight. No, this time Hermione felt absolutely stumped – she had no idea what she had done to warrant the other woman’s avoidance. Narcissa was still perfectly cordial, but their outings to Black Manor had nearly stopped completely; their walks around the Hogwarts grounds in the sunset had become non-existent, and even their nights of silent, companionable grading had all but faded to the background. All she saw of Narcissa nowadays came at meal times and the odd passing in the corridors.

The blonde’s absence was made worse by Hermione’s strange... fondness for the other witch. In the months spent getting to know one another, Hermione had been forced to come to terms with the simple, unequivocal fact that she liked to be around Narcissa and had come to value her as a friend.

It just made the Potions Professor’s prolonged avoidance hurt much worse.

It was as she brooded over such thoughts that her eyes locked with the icy blue orbs of the lithe white fox several metres away in the farther banks of the lake. The animal stood completely still, graceful and elegant in its pristine white surroundings, and Hermione could find it in herself to chuckle. Even in her Animagus form, Narcissa was the picture of poise.

Perhaps she was thinking too much into things. Perhaps Narcissa also needed some time for self-reflection around this time of year. The thought gave Hermione a little hope.

“Maybe March isn’t easy on you either.” She murmured to the wind, her gaze still meeting the blue gleam over the murky dark waters of the Black Lake.

The students would be leaving for the short Easter Holiday break the day after the next, and Narcissa could not be more grateful for the respite. The days leading up to the holiday had been packed with assignments and tests and essays and practicals, much to the dismay of every student and professor within the castle, but everyone tried their best to get in the swing of things in preparation for final exams taking place soon after the break was over.

She hated this time of year with a passion she never knew she possessed, though the feeling had very little to do with the teaching and grading work. In truth, Narcissa had failed to anticipate how much the last days of March would affect her in the presence of Hermione Granger.

Said witch had just taken a seat by her side at the Staff Table for dinner, looking exhausted and, for lack of a better word, haggard. Her hair, which had been tamed into bouncy curls as she aged, was back to the frizzy mane Narcissa remembered seeing all those years ago. Dark shadows marred a face that had become significantly paler without its usual rosy tint, and even her lips were cracked and devoid of colour.

Narcissa wanted to say something, but could not offer more than a nod of acknowledgement as Hermione took her seat. There was nothing she could say or do to make the memories of Malfoy Manor more bearable for either of them.

“Is William White staying at Hogwarts for the Easter break?” Hermione suddenly asked, scooping
a sad dollop of potato mash onto her fork.

Narcissa turned to the brunette in surprise at the question, then whipped back to look at her own plate.

“Yes,” she confirmed.

“That’s good.” Hermione said simply, and neither of them spoke for a long time through dinner. Narcissa felt each bite turn to ash in her mouth; her gaze kept stealing to the forlorn brunette next to her, and her mind raced through questions she did not want the answers to. How was it that avoiding Hermione had been so much simpler at the start of term?

Because it had been for her own benefit, her mind told her. She could think of the nightmares that plagued Hermione, and having a hand in creating them would fill her with guilt forever. Narcissa wasn’t just hiding from Hermione, she was avoiding her own guilt like the Dragon Pox.

“I was thinking of checking in on the Manor after supper” Hermione began after a long pause in which she mostly played with the food on her plate. For one moment of sheer insanity Narcissa thought she referred to Malfoy Manor and her mind relieved the young girl’s screams so viscerally she couldn’t align the Hermione sitting by her side with the teenager who writhed in agony on the marble floors of her old home.

“No,” asked the Hermione at the Staff Table, the one who had grown into a formidable woman, the one who was safe and sound by her side. She wore a look of concern in her sunken eyes, and Narcissa realized she had grasped her silverware in a tight enough grip that her knuckles had gone white and her hands started to shake.

“Oh” Narcissa let out in a shaky breath. “I’m sorry,” she tried to recover, setting her fork and knife down so that the tremors in her hands were not so apparent. “What was it that you said just now?”

Hermione spared her a comforting smile and Narcissa felt deep guilt and shame gnaw at her core again – who was she to deserve any comfort, from this woman in particular?

“I was thinking of going to Black Manor, to see if I can try out a tweaked version of my ward-tracking spell” the brunette explained, her tone free of any judgement. “If you would you like to come.”

No, Narcissa’s mind screamed at her. No, I shouldn’t, I shouldn’t take any of your time or my sanity. “Perhaps,” she said instead. “What sort of tweaks have you made to it?”

Hermione gestured vaguely. “I’m trying to see how a ward-tracking spell could be adapted to track warding Runes instead. I have a hunch that we might be able to find some good examples of warding runes in some old parts of the house or outer edifices.”

The brunette turned in her chair to face Narcissa more directly. “How old is the main house? Is it the oldest structure in the property?”

“The chateau finished construction in 1507...” she said thoughtfully, thinking back to her family’s rich, dark history. “But it is not the oldest building on the land. There were several other buildings that were erected in the Middle Ages, though very few stand today...” a thought occurred to her.

“Are there any we could visit to try and test the charm? I have the feeling that the older the better – I want to get as close to the original runes as we possibly can.” Hermione pressed; her tired eyes showed a glimmer of that excitement that had wreaked havoc with Narcissa’s emotions a few weeks earlier. Much as she had been that one Tuesday before detention, Narcissa was helpless to
stop them.

“Well,” Narcissa began after a pregnant pause. “There is one edifice that, to my knowledge, is the oldest still standing in the property.”

Hermione smiled through her chapped lips – Narcissa could see small rips forming on the plump skin as they quirked upwards to show teeth. “Great. Which one is it?”

Narcissa sighed deeply. “The Black Family Mausoleum. Its first incarnation was erected in the year 908. Its last renovation was in the 1500s.”

“Great!” Hermione quipped, taking a final bite of her cold potatoes, clearly energized by the possibility of a breakthrough in their efforts. “Are you up to going?”

Narcissa felt a wave of discomfort. “Yes, but...” her words died in her mouth. She should tell Hermione; she should warn her of what awaited in that dark place. The Potions Professor took a deep, fortifying breath. “Bellatrix is buried there.” She said solemnly; her hands started to tremble slightly again in waiting for Hermione’s response.

The brunette looked away, up towards the enchanted ceiling that now showed grey clouds and mist that covered the once bright moon. It was a long moment before she turned to face Narcissa again.

“She’s not at the Lestrange tombs?” Hermione asked softly, her gaze undecipherable.

“No,” Narcissa confirmed, looking down at her plate. “I... I didn’t want her so far from home.”

Narcissa’s discomfort was made unbearably worse by the look of understanding Hermione sent her way. The girl should have been the last person in the whole wide world offering her such a thing.

“It’ll be alright.” She assured the blonde, taking Narcissa’s hand in hers. Had Narcissa been in any stronger a state of mind, she would have pulled away, but she wasn’t, and wallowed in the guilt of having Hermione’s touch comfort her so.

“When would you like to go?” Hermione asked, still smiling sweetly. It was infectious.

“I suppose there’s no time like the present.” Narcissa smiled back.

---

The idea of visiting the Black Family mausoleum should not have filled Hermione with the kind of excitement she felt when discovering new things, at least in her view. No, it should have filled her with fear and distress, or at the very least a healthy dose of pure and unadulterated dread.

And yet, as she took Narcissa’s hand in hers to Apparate them to the grounds of Black Manor, all she felt was the tell-tale voracity for discovery she had experienced so many times with the blonde in particular. It made Hermione think the feeling had more to do with being with Narcissa than what she was actually discovering.

Which was ludicrous, yet simply felt true. She would certainly come to analyse the meaning of it all at a later time, but presently, all she could preoccupy herself with was Narcissa’s hand in her own, which had yet to let go even if they had already popped into existence at Black Manor.

“The original tombs were nearly all destroyed in the twelfth century, if I am not mistaken”
Narcissa spoke airily, as if she didn’t quite care whether Hermione heard her or not. “That was when the Mausoleum began to take the shape it has today. My ancestor Bartholomew Black was the one responsible for its current architecture – from what I understand it, it was because of him that my family developed a fondness for the Gothic style. At some point...”

Hermione let Narcissa babble. Something told her that the other witch was trying to be as informative as possible for her benefit, to distract her from all the darkness she would face when they finally went in.

The mausoleum became visible after only a few minutes of walking down one of the manicured gravel paths leading away from the main house. Once again, Hermione had the feeling that the distance they covered was much greater than the passage of time would lead her to believe – she made a mental note to ask Narcissa about it some other time.

Gothic indeed, Hermione thought with a smirk. It stood as a stark contrast to the main house’s Neoclassical construction with its hints of Baroque, looking much older and exceedingly severe. The building was bigger than she had expected – she wondered how she had never seen it before in her many excursions to the Black Estate. It was large enough that it actually featured flying buttresses, and its sloping towers nearly vanished in the fog despite being relatively small.

The construction had Hermione gasping in awe, though its impressive size or even the grandiose flying buttresses were not to blame for the reaction. Rather, Hermione was astounded by the intricate stained-glass windows that were backlit by flickering green hues from within. The biggest of them, at the front of the mausoleum, depicted a bird in flight, in the usual style of a Phoenix, though the bird in question was entirely different.

A stained-glass raven seemed to beckon the two witches inside with its massive open wings. Below the intricate mosaic of glass, a familiar inscription in the stone, along with the Black Family Crest: *Toujours Pur*.

A wide-open arch was shuttered by iron doors that featured intricately carved figures inlaid with silver – they seemed to move, but Hermione could not tell if they did so magically or if the light of the moon coming and going due to the rolling fog was simply tricking her eyes.

Narcissa stopped her rambling as they approached the heavy black door. Hermione felt the other woman’s hand tense in her grasp, and the comforting squeeze she gave in return was almost involuntary. It was enough for Narcissa to realize they still had their fingers woven together and delicately extract her hand in favour of unsheathing her wand. The brunette sent Narcissa a questioning glance.

“Three taps” the blonde explained, rhythmically tapping her wand onto some of the engraved figures Hermione could now see were ravens, wings magically fluttering in silvery glimmers.

The door creaked open tortuously slowly, gradually illuminating the two witches in the green light that Hermione could now see came from enchanted torches lining a room that looked a lot like a church’s nave. The green glow gave the entire place a frightening atmosphere, and Hermione found herself wishing that she still had the warmth of Narcissa’s hand in her grasp.

Narcissa surprised her with a gentle hand at the small of her back, guiding her inside with comforting pressure. The touch electrified Hermione’s spine, raising the hairs on the back of her neck and sending a flush to her cheeks.

“You’re shivering” Narcissa said offhandedly, not looking at Hermione. “Are you cold?”
“A little” Hermione lied, now torn on whether she still wanted Narcissa touching her. The hand-holding had been comforting, but the weight of the woman's hand on her back was... something else. She felt one of Narcissa’s wordless warming charms envelop her being and regretted the lie immediately – she was suddenly sweltering in her robes.

“Thank you,” she said despite her discomfort. The two made their way deeper into the gallery of tombs – there were several, everywhere – in the walls, in the corridor itself, in the ground upon where they walked. Some had simple engravings, other elaborate plaques, while others had full sculptures dedicated to the fallen Blacks. Hermione counted several names, several years, going back centuries, all lit by the same green-flamed torches and candles.

“Cheery place.” She commented, and to her relief, Narcissa chuckled.

“You can see my family was very... dedicated to the aesthetic.” She quipped, and Hermione was immeasurably glad to see her laugh. She stopped somewhere in the middle of the endless corridor – which had no doubt been magically extended.

“How would you like to start?”

Hermione took a few steps, taking in the silence of the tombs and the flickering of green flames. “I’m not sure. This place was magically extended, so it will be difficult to determine the origin point.” She sighed. “I suppose we can just perform a scan, see if it yields anything.”

“What is the charm?” Narcissa asked, and Hermione recognized the same eagerness for discovery she felt in that blue gaze.

“Refugium Reperio” Hermione said, taking her wand out of the sleeve of her robes. She demonstrated the move for the spell to Narcissa, who mimicked it effortlessly.

“The tip of your wand should light up in bright purple as you get close to an origin point – get close enough and it will direct a beam to the origin point.” Hermione explained as Narcissa cast the spell and began to walk with her down the eerie corridor.

“Ingenious” Narcissa commented, examining the faint lilac glow at the tip of her wand, and Hermione couldn't help but feel the inflation of pride in her chest.

They walked together in silence, their shoes clicking and echoing over the tombs of generations of Blacks. Every now and again, their wands would glow slightly brighter, only to fade almost immediately. Despite the silence and the exceedingly strange location, Hermione felt more at peace than she had since the wretched month of March began.

It lasted just until she stumbled upon a tomb she had been warned was there.

Bellatrix Black – for that was how her name was engraved onto a magnificent silver plate affixed to the marble floor in one of many alcoves that branched out of the main nave – had a prominent plaque in her memory, along with a marble sculpture of a raven in flight to memorialize her life. A wreath of white roses rested at the base of the raven, surrounded by candles emitting the same green glow that enveloped the rest of the burial chambers.

When she heard the choked gasp, Hermione was surprised it hadn’t come from her own chest. Rather, it had come from Narcissa, who had just noticed what Hermione was looking at so pensively.

“Narcissa?” Hermione hesitated, turning to the blonde. Narcissa’s wand trembled in her grasp.
“I’m sorry,” Narcissa nearly whimpered; her eyes did not meet Hermione’s, but were affixed to her sister’s tomb. “Perhaps this was a bad idea. We can try some other time if... if this makes you uncomfortable.”

Hermione tactfully chose not to point out that Narcissa seemed a lot more uncomfortable than she at that moment. It was strange – when Narcissa had warned her Bellatrix was buried at the mausoleum, Hermione had steeled herself against her darkest demons and chosen to face them head on. But then and there, face-to-face with her torturer’s final resting place, she felt a bizarre but welcome sense of peace.

Here she was, strong, healthy, with her magic flowing hot and fierce through her veins. Bellatrix was – quite literally – beneath her.

“I’m alright,” she said, and felt it ring true to her own ears. It was as if a massive weight had just been lifted from her shoulders.

“Good,” Narcissa whispered, sounding pained. “Yes, good.”

Hermione took a few steps until she was close to Narcissa, close enough to see the worry lines marring her brow and the rapid rise and fall of her chest. “How about you?” she asked, tenderly reaching out and taking Narcissa’s free hand in her own. It felt cold to the touch. “Are you alright?”

Narcissa jerked in surprise at Hermione’s contact, but did not pull away. Hermione could immediately see she was desperately clinging to some vestige of the Ice Queen mask she had usually worn so effortlessly. It didn’t escape Hermione’s notice that it seemed remarkably hard for Narcissa to revert back to it whenever she was around.

“Yes,” Narcissa began, but saw something in Hermione’s gaze that made her backtrack almost immediately. “No,” she finally admitted, anguished. “I don’t...” a deep breath, and the mask crumbled to pieces as an errant tear escaped her control. “I don’t come here often,” she gasped. “Not like this.”

Hermione wanted to ask what that meant, but whatever words she could possibly say evaporated into the air as she saw the tears flowing freely down Narcissa’s cheeks. Not once, during the entire time they had worked together, had she seen the other woman so distraught, so broken and vulnerable. Hermione gave the hand she held what she hoped would be a comforting squeeze.

A sob wrenched itself out of Narcissa’s chest, and the sound echoed sombrefly amongst the tombs. The blonde shut her eyes tightly in an attempt to physically subdue her tears, and teeth worried her bottom lip as the last of her resolve crumbled in the failure to keep her grief and guilt at bay.

In a bold move, Hermione dropped her wand, letting it clatter noisely upon the marble that confined the body of Bellatrix Lestrange, and her hand tentatively came to rest upon Narcissa’s pale cheek, tenderly wiping away at the tear tracks she found there.

The motion made Narcissa’s blue eyes – now looking stormy grey and ethereal – snap open in surprise. Hermione was momentarily mesmerized by those eyes, by the tears pooled at the lids, by the diminutive reflections of green flames. Hermione heard the sound of Narcissa’s own wand joining her own upon the eldest Black sister’s tomb, followed by the uncertain pressure of Narcissa’s hand delicately clasping her wrist.

“Hey,” the brunette finally spoke, wiping away fresh tears from the other witch’s cheek with her thumb. “It’s alright.”
Narcissa let out a sound, half a laugh, half a whimper. “Is it?” she questioned through a choked sob. “I think not. I think it is utterly pathetic,” she admitted, her eyes fluttering closed as Hermione softly wiped away at her tears in gentle caresses.

“What in Merlin’s name is pathetic about any of this?” Hermione could not help but ask. “About grief?”

“Grief isn’t pathetic,” Narcissa retorted adamantly, even if the roll of her eyes indicated she thought otherwise right then and there. “What is pathetic is for whom I grieve. And with whom,” her laugh was bitterer now, laced with cynicism and sadness all at once.

“There’s nothing pathetic about losing a sibling,” Hermione said earnestly.

“Perhaps not,” Narcissa agreed. “But there is some cruelty in fate to have me mourn her in your company.”

“Maybe,” Hermione conceded, because if she was honest with herself, she half-expected their roles to be reversed at this moment. She had expected to be a mess, with Narcissa’s comforting presence offering a glimpse of sanity and reassurance into her nightmare, not the other way around. “But she was your sister and she’s gone. I’m right here” she reasoned.

She had meant to reassure Narcissa, but the blonde choked back another sob. “You are,” Narcissa murmured before Hermione could say anything else. “By some kind of miracle. You were very close to not... so close. And I...”

“You need to stop this” Hermione beseeched, letting go of Narcissa’s hand to cradle her face instead. “What’s done is done, and it’s not your fault.”

Narcissa’s responding snicker was her harshest yet. “My sister was gone long before you found yourself at Malfoy Manor” she said, her tone wistful. Hermione braced her body for the despair that would undoubtedly come with the direct mention of her capture as it always did, but to her shock, it did not.

At some point, she would come to wonder why she felt so strangely at peace with memories that had continuously haunted her for a decade. What had changed? What had made her stop imagining Narcissa’s cold blue eyes staring unflinchingly as she writhed in agony beneath Bellatrix Lestrange? What had made her stop trembling at the mere mention of the name, here in all places?

Now, however, was not the time for such an analysis.

“Sit with me.” She requested, out of the blue and surprising Narcissa enough to interrupt another sob.

“Sit?” The blonde queried, puzzled. “Here?”

“Yes,” Hermione confirmed, taking Narcissa by the hand and leading her to the wall opposing the grandiose raven sculpture marking Bellatrix’s tomb. She sunk to the floor as gracefully as she could, still holding onto Narcissa’s hand while the other witch stood, teary-eyed and looking at her as if she had gone mad.

Hermione patted the marble floor next to her, beckoning. Sit, was the unspoken command.

Narcissa lowered herself elegantly to sit by Hermione’s side, leaning delicately against the sculpted column behind herself and Hermione. She spared another look of befuddlement to the brunette. Hermione, for her part, would take the witch’s confusion in stride if it meant any sort of comfort
from her grief.

“Tell me about her.” She pleaded once Narcissa was situated, legs stretched out in front of her and daintily crossed at the ankles.

Narcissa quirked a brow, deftly wiping errant tears away. “About Bellatrix?” she asked, bewildered.

“I know more than I care to know about Bellatrix Lestrange,” Hermione remarked, taking Narcissa’s hand once more and cradling it in her own. “But I want to know about Bellatrix Black,” she elaborated, motioning towards the silent tomb in front of them. “I want to know more about the woman who deserves every tear you shed mourning for her.”

Narcissa opened her mouth, then closed it again, as if debating how to even begin to respond to such a request. “I... I’m not sure...”

“Let me help,” Hermione said, flashing a beaming grin she was happy to see affected Narcissa; the blonde responded with a smile of her own. “You told me before that Bellatrix was fond of pranks. What was one of her most memorable ones?”

The Potions Professor laughed, evidently caught up in a memory. The sound, so out of place considering their odd location, rung like music in the desolate nave. Hermione ignored an increasingly familiar flutter in her stomach.

“Where to begin...” Narcissa wondered aloud, running a hand through her hair and releasing long blonde locks from the elaborate bun that confined them. “I think the time when she enchanted this wig...”

It was hours and hours of listening to the wild adventures of Bellatrix Black. It was late, but Hermione could not bring herself to care. She had heard about Bellatrix’s exploits of Mr. Filch, of her hijinks involving enchanted suits of armour at Black Manor, of her tricks against the Black sisters’ etiquette tutors. She heard about after-curfew escapades to the castle kitchens for a bounty of sweets, always to be shared with her sisters. She heard about the fiercely protective Bella, who let not a soul speak ill of her baby sister. She even heard of a vulnerable Bellatrix, heartbroken with the death of a pet, or saddened by the loss of a friend.

Hermione herself had not contributed a word. She leaned against the cold wall, content to listen to Narcissa tell tales of childhood shenanigans involving her sisters. Narcissa had cried, laughed, then cried some more, and now continued to speak through whispers as her head rested against Hermione’s shoulder, her hair draping a curtain of the finest gold over the young professor’s chest. Hermione had finally broken her resolve and taken one of those silky locks and had been occupied with twirling it in her fingers for the past half-hour. If Narcissa had noticed, she made no mention of it.

Narcissa heaved a deep sigh, then remained silent for long moments. Hermione shared the silence happily.

“I think she could have been saved, before... before the worst.” Narcissa said pensively, her voice heavy and tired.
Hermione nodded, though truly she had to admit she lacked perspective. “Before Azkaban?” she dared ask, because she was still Hermione Granger and, as such, curious beyond measure.

She felt Narcissa’s subtle shake of her head. “Before that, in fact.” Another deep sigh. “You might as well know. In March 1976, Bellatrix lost her daughter.”

Hermione sucked in a breath of surprise. “She had a daughter??” she yipped, a little louder than she intended, though she couldn’t help it. She had never heard of Bellatrix and Rodolphus having any children before.

“Yes. Ophelia.” Narcissa motioned towards a plaque affixed to the wall behind Bellatrix’s tomb. Hermione squinted to see the name Ophelia Black, along with a single inscription of the year 1976. “She was stillborn; Rodolphus didn’t want to bother with a memorial at the Lestrange burial chambers” Narcissa explained. “So Father had her brought here. But losing Ophelia was the beginning of the end for Bellatrix.”

Before, Hermione would never have been able to imagine the madwoman who tortured and killed so many with glee as a mother. Right then and there, after so many sweet stories about her sister, Narcissa had painted the picture of someone who could have been one – perhaps even a loving one.

So March marked the beginning of the end for Bellatrix... and the anniversary of Hermione’s scars by her hand.

“Merlin” the brunette quipped, trying to lighten the mood. “No wonder you look so glum in March.”

Narcissa laughed – it was tired and heavy with emotion, but it was also real, and Hermione counted that as a true victory. “I can’t say it is my favourite time of the year” she said, that sarcastic faux-haughty tone Hermione liked so much returning word by word. Narcissa sighed again. “It’s been so long since I... since I’ve felt so much, I suppose. I’m used to keeping my feelings at bay, but sometimes...”

“Sometimes it’s good to have a good cry and let it all out.” Hermione interjected, craning her neck to look at Narcissa directly. The blonde chuckled.

“Yes, I suppose.” She conceded, taking the hand that twirled her hair in her own with a grateful glance. Hermione could not have contained her smile if she tried.

“Thank you.” Narcissa said after a pregnant pause.

“Anytime,” Hermione said truthfully, rubbing circles onto the back of Narcissa’s hand with her thumb in lieu of twirling her hair.

She pondered March, she pondered Bellatrix, she pondered sitting right where she was, with Narcissa Black, surrounded by the dead and enshrouded in comfort and warmth. Suddenly, the thought occurred.

“Narcissa?”

“Yes?”

Hermione fumbled over her next words. “I was wondering... and you don’t have to answer, this is just my curiosity talking. When... you see, back when we were on the run, it was easy to lose track of time and...” she took a breath. “What I mean to say is that, I know it was March, but I don’t
know when exactly... Would you... do you know when... Do you know when we were taken to the Manor?”

She felt Narcissa’s body tense, only to relax into her again after a moment of consideration. When the Potions Professor next spoke, she sounded spent, exhausted beyond belief.

“Yes. It was March 19th,” she said gravely.

“Oh,” Hermione croaked as it dawned on her. “Today is...”

“March 19th” Narcissa confirmed.

Chapter End Notes

FYI the dates here are kinda sorta a little lotta bit arbitrary. Malfoy Manor technically happened around Easter 1998, but that took place in April and I was just like, fuck April man.
The steam rising from the hot water of the Prefect’s bath was thick enough to make the entire bathroom look fuzzy and opaque. Beaming through the stained-glass windows, the last vestiges of the day’s sunlight refracted into a hundred different colours through the dense fog.

By the side of the magnificent tub and its innumerable golden taps sat a well-tailored set of school robes, methodically folded, a gleaming silver Head Girl badge sitting atop a carefully rolled Slytherin tie. A plush white bathrobe had been discarded to the side with a little less care, gathered into a haphazard pile.

Narcissa Black lowered her full body into the rosy waters of her bath, relishing in the feel of the scented soaps and oils after a long, stressful day. It was dinnertime, which made it the best possible time for a long, relaxing soak without any unwanted interruptions. Granted, the Prefect’s bath was already quite exclusive, but she preferred absolute solitude in these occasions.

She swam – for the extravagant tub was in fact as large as your average swimming pool – to the other side, re-emerging only when her hands touched the marble of the opposite end. She turned another of the taps, and soon bubbles began to form, quickly spreading to cover the entire surface. Satisfied, Narcissa leaned languidly against the cool marble, closing her eyes for a moment of tranquil bliss.

Which did not last long.

“I thought I’d find you here, Black.”

Narcissa’s eyes snapped open at the familiar, utterly infuriating tone that she came to know so well two years prior. Of all people that could possibly interrupt her only time of relative peace, Lily Evans was surely the worst.

The redhead eyed her triumphantly through her emerald gaze, smirking smugly as she stood by Narcissa’s discarded clothes – and wand, the blonde realized with an internal hiss.

“Evans.” She said coolly, making sure the inflection of her voice made the name sound like the worst possible insult. It was a talent she had perfected over the years, but it hardly seemed to have any effect on the Gryffindor before her.

Lily’s smirk stretched out, victorious. “You’re a damned hard woman to get a hold of.” She quipped, strolling disconcertingly close to the pile of clothes Narcissa had left at the other end.

“I suppose I must be, to riff-raff like you. Your company is not exactly the kind I choose to keep.” Narcissa responded evenly.

“Oh, how you wound me,” Lily bemoaned dramatically, bringing a hand to her chest in an
exaggerated impression of mock hurt. She kept pacing in the general vicinity of Narcissa’s clothes, and the young Slytherin was getting tired of whatever Evans was playing at. Weren’t Gryffindors supposed to be brave?

“What do you want, Evans?” She drawled, inspecting her nails and choosing to treat the other girl interrupting her relaxation as if she were a bug on the tile – one that she would squash with her heel later.

“To talk to you. I’ve been trying for weeks, but your little bodyguards wouldn’t let me. Which is why I’ve had to resort to sneaking in on you while you’re in the bath” Lily explained, her smug grin becoming impossibly wider. “So really, you brought this upon yourself.”

Narcissa quirked an eyebrow, but couldn’t help a smug smirk of her own. How useful were her little pawns, all so eager to do her bidding – a nything for the Princess of Slytherin, the fabled Narcissa Black. Bella had her ways of achieving notoriety in the castle, but Narcissa had never been one for violence. She had always preferred the subtlety of manipulation. “And why the sudden obsession with my person?”

The question clearly annoyed Evans, which made Narcissa supremely happy.

“Are you kidding? Our Potions assignment. The one worth a whole chunk of our grades for the term?” She shook her head. “I thought you’d have learned from our debacle fifth year.”

Narcissa sighed dramatically. “I learned how exhausting you are to be around.”

Lily huffed angrily, a reaction that Narcissa enjoyed immensely. The redhead could certainly talk a big talk, but keeping one’s head about them was never a quality granted to Gryffindors.

Lily’s foot stomped down onto the marble, a sound that would have been a lot more dramatic had it not been muffled by the absurd humidity created by the steam. To Narcissa, the other girl looked comical.

“This is not a joke! It takes a month to brew Amortentia, and we have not even started our project analysis!”

Narcissa rolled her eyes, annoyed at Slughorn for assigning them the idiotic potion. Severus and Rosier got Veritaserum, but she got to work on a love potion, of all things, with Lily Evans, of all people. She would have even taken something as mundane as a Pepperup Potion if it meant she wouldn’t have to work with the self-righteous Muggleborn again.

Fate – and Slughorn – were seemingly not on her side.

“Well!” Evans hissed, her eyes wide and hands on her hip. Narcissa let out another sigh.

“If you really wished to speak to me so urgently…” she remarked, languidly swirling the water with her hands and still not sparing the redhead another glance as she smirked. “You could have sent an owl.”

“Ugh!” The other witch grunted, and Narcissa revelled in the satisfaction of knowing Lily Evans was out of her depth. How fun.

“I’m not going to send you an owl when we’re in the same sodding school!” Lily said through gritted teeth. “In fact,” she continued, determined. “We’re both right here.”

Narcissa had no plans to look up, but the sudden swish of fabric – of clothes being swiftly
removed and discarded without much care – made her head turn abruptly, just in time to catch a
glimpse of Lily Evans’ nude form climbing into the tub, as graceful as a lame fawn.

“What in Salazar’s name do you think you’re doing?” Narcissa fumed, feeling the tremors of
anger running through her body the moment the other girl was in the water.

“Me?” Evans said innocently, draping her arms along the edge of the tub as she leaned back.
“Seeing as I am a Prefect, and this is the prefect’s bathroom, I am taking a bath.” She made a big
show of sniffing the air. “Go easy on the eucalyptus, I don’t want to smell like a damn forest.”

“Get. Out!” The blonde seethed.

“Make me.” Evans bit back. “What’s the matter, Slytherin Princess? Is the water too muddy for
you?”

“Not just the water” Narcissa snapped back. “You’ve polluted the very air with your foul
presence.”

“Tough.” Lily quipped, making a big show of stretching her arms as far as they could reach, as if
showing Narcissa she aimed to take as much space as she possibly could just to spite her. “Water’s
a little on the cold side, no? But who’s surprised, since the Ice Queen’s the one taking a bath?”

Narcissa took a deep breath before levelling the other girl with her most withering glare. “Get
out now, Evans, before I make you regret it.”

“I’m not going anywhere” Lily said adamantly, a wicked gleam in her eye. “But if my presence is
so polluting,” she enunciated the word with a great deal of mockery, gesturing toward the grand
doors many paces behind her. “You are always welcome to leave. Of course, that might be a little
difficult without all of these,” she jeered, reaching out and unfurling Narcissa’s Slytherin tie,
letting it dangle from her hand inches above the foamy water.

Narcissa’s blood boiled. “Take your filthy hands off my things.” She hissed. The nerve of that girl!

“As you wish.” Lily replied, unceremoniously tossing the tie back onto the pile. “But now that
you’re here, I figured it would be a wonderful time to discuss our upcoming project.”

The Slytherin did not deign respond; she was too furious, and Lily was happy to keep talking.

“I think we have to start with creating an ingredient list; I know of a place in the forest where we
can gather Moonstones for our powder. We can set a few controlled magical fires and leave them
unattended for a few days, hopefully that’ll yield us enough Ashwinder eggs for a hearty batch.
If...”

“For Salazar’s sakes, just stop talking” Narcissa suddenly interrupted, pinching the bridge of her
nose in frustration. Who did this girl think she was talking to? As if Narcissa Black would go
traipsing about the forest to gather rocks. “What is this, the Dark Ages? I have the list; I’ll send it
for my Apothecary to look at in the morning,” she said, hoping resolving the issue would make the
redhead go away faster. She needed to draw a fresh bath.

Lily raised an eyebrow in question. “Your Apothecary?”

Narcissa rolled her eyes. “My family’s Apothecary. If you think for one second that I am going to
prance about the woods to harvest pebbles, you are sorely mistaken. No, I’ll buy the ingredients
like a civilized person.”
Lily’s brow furrowed. “Not everyone can afford to buy those ingredients – they can be quite costly – it doesn’t mean they’re not civilized.”

“Luckily for you, I’m a woman of means and practicality.” Narcissa bit back, not caring for a lecture on morals from some sanctimonious Gryffindor. “I’m sure you’ll find some other way to be useful.”

The redhead pouted, looking like she wanted to argue, but clearly was unable to say anything against the sheer convenience of having their ingredients ordered in. That took a good week off their lengthy project.

“Fine,” she finally conceded. “I guess that gives us a little more breathing room. But the brewing itself still takes a month to...”

“Two weeks.” Narcissa interrupted.

“Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry, is there mud blocking your ears as well? I said two weeks.”

Lily did not rise to the bait. “I heard you. Care to explain that time frame – half of what is dictated by the actual creator of the potion?”

“Laverne de Montmorency was a fool” Narcissa stated, looking at her fingers, which were beginning to prune. So much for a relaxing bath – all of it had been thus far spent in the company of Lily Bloody Evans. “Her Moonstone powder was coarse and ineffective. The one I plan on buying is much finer and purer. As such, it does not need as long to be rendered into the potion. With the powder I’ll get, plus my copper cauldron, I am confident I can half the brewing time.”

She expected Lily to try to argue against that particular course of action, to tell her it was insanity to go against the potion’s very creator, but the other girl looked... intrigued.

“You’re sure?” the Gryffindor asked, clear interest showing in her tone.

“I’m positive.” Narcissa said with an air of finality. She was the best in her year – bar Severus, perhaps.

Lily kept staring at her with an unreadable look. It drove Narcissa insane after a few minutes of uncomfortable silence.

“What?” She finally barked, crossing her arms over her naked chest under the bubbles, annoyed.

“Y’know,” Lily began, playing with a handful of foam. “If you weren’t such a stone-cold bitch, I think I would have very much liked to be friends with you.”

Narcissa did not know what to say to that – like she would ever choose to be friends with a mudblood – but something in her expression must have shown, because Lily laughed.

“You’re so smart, and talented, and you can be so funny sometimes. ‘I am a woman of means and practicality’” she mimicked with another laugh.

Narcissa scoffed. “I call that being well-rounded, and I would not be wasting it in your company.”

That only made Lily chuckle more. “There’s the stone-cold bitch we all know and hate!” She declared humorously. “You’re so different from your sister.”
“I certainly am” Narcissa agreed, thinking of how Bella would not have hesitated in blasting Evans through the wall for the attitude. “Count yourself lucky I am much more well-mannered than Bellatrix.”

“I don’t mean Bellatrix” Lily said matter-of-factly, “you’re not so different from her at all. I meant Andromeda.”

Were it any other person, Narcissa would have asked how she and Bellatrix were at all similar, because everyone knew they were polar opposites, but this was the insufferable Lily Evans, and she didn’t want to waste any more of her time.

“I met her this summer with James. Andromeda.” Lily continued, as if Narcissa wanted to know – she didn’t. She did not want to hear another word about her traitorous sister. “And your niece, too. She’s really cute.”

Narcissa gritted her teeth. Andromeda and her little band of rejects. Meeting with the likes of Lily Evans and James Potter and Sirius, no doubt. Mudbloods and blood-traitors, the lot of them, undoubtedly scheming against everything Bella and Lucius and the others were working for. Meddlesome little pests.

“Andromeda told me she writes to you. She was thrilled to hear we’re paired up again in Potions,” Lily added smugly.

“Enough.” Narcissa said through gritted teeth. What did Lily Evans aim to accomplish by rubbing her relationship with Narcissa’s disowned sister in her face? Whatever it was, the Gryffindor was about to be greatly disappointed.

“She seems to think there’s still something redeemable about you” Lily pressed on, not heeding the warning that came from Narcissa’s tempestuous gaze. “Head Girl, top grades... if only you didn’t have a total shit-stain for a boyfriend – her words, not mine.”

“Lucius is my fiancé,” Narcissa said, because that was the first thing that popped into her head.

“Ha!” Lily chuckled. “Does your little band of merry bodyguards know that? You know they only want a shot to take you to the altar... and the marriage bed.”

“If you’re finished with your nonsense,” Narcissa sniped, “of course they know. It’ll be the wedding of the century – not that someone of your... lineage could even begin to comprehend that.”

“So, are they already getting a piece of what Lucius thinks he’s getting, or are you the one giving them a hand, so to speak? I mean, what other reason would they have to stick around, aside from your sunny disposition?” Lily goaded, adding a rude gesture for good measure.

“Enough!” Narcissa seethed, nearly standing in her rage. “I will not tolerate this vulgarity!”

“What are you going to do, deduct points?” Lily prodded.

“Only because I turned down the position.” The redhead quipped smugly. “Yeah, that’s right. Headmaster Dumbledore sent me the letter – badge and everything – and I turned it down.”

Lily straightened, looking all-consumed with triumph at Narcissa’s expression of utter bewilderment. “How does it feel, to know that a filthy little mudblood was first pick over you,
huh?” She settled back against the marble. “Enjoy the authority while it lasts, Head Girl; it’ll be the last time you have control over anything. Unless...” she drifted off, swirling the water by her side.

Unless what Narcissa wanted to ask, heart beating a mile a minute. The pride she had felt when she received the letter announcing her as Head Girl disintegrated; she had been second pick over a mudblood.

Lily continued, either oblivious to her inner musings or relishing in her silence. “Unless you pull an Andromeda.”

All the frustration Narcissa had felt with the redhead up until that point evaporated into thin air. Her body was overtaken by a numbness the likes of which she had only felt when she read the letter Andromeda had left on her pillow, explaining her elopement.

But unlike the last time, the numbness faded away quickly. It was replaced by searing hot wrath.

“I see now.” She said hotly, each word a sharp, venomous bite. “The Potions project was nothing but a pretext for you to try to do Andromeda’s bidding and recruit me to your little merry band of fools!”

“Recruit?” Lily tried to laugh it off, but Narcissa could tell by the look in her eyes she had been caught in her true motive. “You make it sound like some kind of army. She’s just trying to tell you to rethink the company you keep.”

“And whose company ought I keep, then? Hers? Your own? You disgust me. Get out of my sight!” She hissed, hands balled into fists under the rose-coloured water and foam. Narcissa had humoured this insolent mudblood for far too long. If Evans knew what was good for her, she would remove herself from the vicinity immediately. With her ire boiling so hot in her veins, she was itching to try some tricks Bella had drilled into her since her work for Riddle had begun.

“What are you going to do, Narcissa? Hex me? Your wand’s right here” Lily patted the pile of clothes next to her, deliberately letting the water from her arms drip onto the Slytherin uniform excessively. “Plus, we both know I’m the better duellist” she challenged, eyes gleaming.

Narcissa’s hands trembled, but now she felt power, her power, reminiscent of so many lessons with Bella, at her fingertips. She looked at the Gryffindor with a gaze shrouded in disdain.

“You’re assuming” she said, shifting her voice to its smoothest, silkiest, deadliest tone “that I would need my wand.”

Lily looked ready to quip back with a retort, her mouth agape in its formulation. Her eyes, however, widened in pure terror as she felt an invisible force abruptly pulling her down deep into the water, submerging her completely in the blink of an eye.

Narcissa furrowed her brow in concentration, willing the spell to keep the other girl down; bubbles began to form upon the surface where Lily’s head of fiery red hair had been just moments before. The Slytherin could feel the other girl struggle in her magic. In a bold move, she concentrated deeply on a spell she had only recently learned, bolstered by her wordless, wandless success.

Suddenly, the walls of Lily Evans’ mind were open to her, like they were made of paper. She didn’t prod – she had no wish of seeing what the other girl had in her mind – she only wished to send a message to the only place where Evans would hear her at the moment.

I could hold you under for two, three minutes. More. Can you make it that far, Evans?
In the end, Narcissa released the Gryffindor after about fifteen seconds – just enough for Lily to resurface, panting and gasping and utterly terrified. Her eyes were red and she coughed profusely as she reached tremulous hands to the edge of the tub, scrambling to climb up, naked but too afraid to remain in the water after what had just transpired.

“You... you insane bitch!” She spat, bloodshot eyes finding Narcissa with a gaze of pure venom. “How did you do that?! How did you get inside my head?!”

Narcissa stood, so empowered by what she had just been able to do she could not even bring herself to care about her nudity. She walked towards Lily with purpose, leaving a trail of water and suds in her wake – the Gryffindor trembled with fear, but her gaze was defiant.

Narcissa wandlessly summoned her robe before kneeling to gather her clothes. She took the opportunity to level the redhead with her iciest glare.

“Stay out of my way, mudblood.”

Narcissa realized she was dozing in the bath when she jerked awake in the tepid water. The temperature was more enough to tell her she had been in the water long enough for the warming charm to wear off and for her fingers to prune excessively.

She shuddered as she wandlessly recast her warming charm, half from the cold of the water, half from the memory her subconscious had decided to rifle through. She banished all thoughts of Lily Evans – and a younger version of herself – to where they would not resurface.

Despite the memory stirring some less-than-pleasant emotions, Narcissa felt... relaxed. That was certainly a first for March. She was under no illusion that Hermione’s comfort at her sister’s grave had nothing to do with it.

It had been... pathetic, yes, but also something inexplicably more complicated. Narcissa had accompanied the brunette there with every intention of being a source of strength for Hermione. She had assumed the Transfiguration Professor would need it in such an environment, surrounded by the biggest demon from her past.

Instead, the tables had turned completely. Narcissa blamed herself – she should not have visited the mausoleum. Every time she had visited Bellatrix’s tomb, she did so in her Animagus form. Feelings, emotions, and even memories became much easier to compartmentalize and thus internalize. It was a handy little trick; an unexpected perk of transformation.

Being there without the shield of her fox form, with Hermione of all people, ended up being a little much to her system. Somehow, whenever Hermione was around, Narcissa had much more difficulty keeping her walls up and strong.

She couldn’t let that continue. Or rather, she shouldn’t, but there was something about the brunette’s presence that was just so... exhilarating, that Narcissa could not help but let her guard down.

It could only end badly, she was sure of that.
Her musings were interrupted by knocks coming from the door to her private quarters. Speaking of the devil; Hermione’s muffled voice came through all the way to the bathroom.

“Narcissa? It’s me – sorry, the door was open. You won’t believe what I found!” She quipped excitedly, no doubt already making her way in. Narcissa could only smile at the excitement about research and discovery. Now that was something she could partake in.

“Give me a minute, I’ll be with you shortly.” She called back, her grin widening as she heard a racket – Hermione probably knocking into something.

“OK! Sorry, I think I dropped some books.” Came Hermione’s embarrassed voice.

“Of course you did.” Narcissa said to herself, thoroughly amused as she rose and summoned her bathrobe, eager to make her way out and get yet another opportunity to pick Hermione’s phenomenal brain. Their shared interests and the laborious research on the Black Manor wards had created a tentative friendship, and considering everything, Narcissa had to admit she was grateful for the young witch’s companionship.

Another tumble came from her sitting room, and she heard Hermione cursing.

There was nothing wrong with companionship. Nothing at all.
Hermione grumbled as she busied herself with rearranging the books she had knocked over in her excitement. She wanted to say it wasn’t her fault, not entirely – Narcissa had a habit of placing haphazard piles rather precariously onto side tables.

Plus, she had come in rather animatedly, but she couldn’t help it. She thought she had just stumbled upon a major breakthrough as far as the Black Manor wards were concerned, and she wanted to let Narcissa know about it as soon as she possibly could. Their shared excitement over research never failed to brighten her day; it showed a side of Narcissa Hermione very much doubted had been seen by most people. She felt immensely privileged to be privy to a relaxed, eager Narcissa, and wanted to elicit such reactions often.

And thus, she found herself in Narcissa’s quarters. The blonde had already told Hermione she was always welcome, particularly if she was there to discuss the tricky wards that had consumed much of their time. She had gone in confidently, carrying a thick stack of loose parchment upon which she had been gathering some of her notes on how the Blacks had managed to create Runes that somehow presented transfigurative properties.

When she called for Narcissa, she heard the blonde’s muffled reply, presumably coming from the bedroom attached to the sitting room. Her little run-in with one of Narcissa’s massive piles of books had distracted her momentarily, so when she turned to Narcissa the second time the other witch called her name, she choked on her own saliva.

Narcissa’s voice had definitely come from her bedroom, but Hermione had expected to see her stepping out to greet her. Instead, her eyes inadvertently looked straight through the door, which hung slightly ajar, and connected to Narcissa, clearly stepping out of a bath, wrapped in a plush grey bathrobe, her long blonde hair darkened by the water and hanging all the way to the small of her back.

Hermione’s surprise made her knock Narcissa’s books onto the ground for the third time in the span of two minutes. Unfortunately, the sound drew Narcissa’s attention and their eyes connected through the half-open door.

Narcissa’s eyes widened slightly in surprise, and to Hermione’s horror, the woman began walking her way, the bathrobe tightened only barely by a delicate knot resting upon her midsection, the swaying of the fabric reaching just above Narcissa’s knees.

“Hermione, are you alright?” Narcissa asked once she reached the door, leaning against it delicately and tilting her head slightly in question. She didn’t seem to care that Hermione was seeing her in her current state – her lack of concern led the brunette to furiously overthink her reaction. Hermione made a deliberate effort to breathe very slowly, fighting the rush of blood she felt surging to her cheeks.

“Ah, yes!” She said, much too quickly. “Sorry for interrupting your bath, I... I can come back later,” she breathed out.

“Oh, no, it’s perfectly alright.” Narcissa said, reaching down and tying the bathrobe a little more securely around her. “You had something to show me?”

“Ah...” Hermione croaked, her mind a complete blank as her eyes followed Narcissa’s graceful hands twisting the robe’s ties into a tighter knot. “Ah! Yeah, the wards!” She finally caught
herself, dropping down to her knees to gather the parchment she had also dropped to the floor. Research, now that was something she could easily shift her focus to. “I think I may have figured out how your ancestors made Runes that followed certain transmutative properties.”

“Oh!” came Narcissa’s enthusiastic exclamation, and now Hermione could breathe a little easier, eager to return to the normalcy of their academic discussions. Narcissa would go, close the door, get appropriately dressed for company, and then they could take their time dissecting some complex, dangerous, and ridiculously old spell work, perhaps over a soothing cup of tea. Hermione could want for nothing more.

Therefore, she felt her nervous system short-circuit as her eyes suddenly connected to the exposed skin of Narcissa’s knees as the blonde knelt next to her, assisting her as she gathered the loose leaves of parchment that littered the floor.

“How could they do it?” Narcissa inquired as her eyes pored over Hermione’s messy scrawls on the sheets she picked up. “Have you found anything detailing how they circumvented the limitations of Transfiguration? Perhaps there are records of similar spells, though if I am honest, I am not quite sure where to even begin looking for such...”

Hermione had to stop from physically shaking herself. She could see Narcissa’s rosy lips moving, but she was painfully aware her brain was decidedly not registering any of what the other woman was saying. Something to circumvent, something records, something...

“How are you feeling?” Narcissa called for the second time, and Hermione had to force her eyes to focus on Narcissa’s blues. Her cheeks felt warm and her stomach tightened itself into a knot. “Are you sure you’re alright? You look feverish,” the blonde said, reaching a hand to Hermione’s cheeks as if to test for her temperature.

“I’m fine!” Hermione nearly yelped, a hand reflexively catching Narcissa’s before it could make contact – she didn’t know if she could handle that. The blonde’s eyes widened and she stiffened in Hermione’s sudden grip, surprised by the sudden movement.

“I’m good,” Hermione repeated, quickly letting go. This was not how she had felt when she held Narcissa’s hands at the Black Mausoleum. That touch had been filled with comfort and warmth – this one had been inexplicably charged with something she couldn’t place, and wasn’t sure she wanted to. “Here,” she continued quickly, not giving Narcissa any time to interject. “Let me show you what I’ve found so far.”

She quickly gathered the loose parchment in a crumpled mess in her arms, but the priority was to get some distance between herself and Narcissa. The blonde eyed her quizzically, but stood, motioning towards the sofa and chairs elegantly arranged around the room.

“Very well,” she said, sounding unconvinced. “Please, take a seat.”

Hermione gladly made a beeline for one of the chairs, not willing to risk taking a seat on the sofa and having Narcissa settle next to her, not in her current state. She flopped onto her seat rather inelegantly, but was relieved when Narcissa daintily made herself comfortable, curling her legs under herself and leaning over the arm of the sofa.

“Well,” she said, sounding unconvinced. “Please, take a seat.”

Hermione gladly made a beeline for one of the chairs, not willing to risk taking a seat on the sofa and having Narcissa settle next to her, not in her current state. She flopped onto her seat rather inelegantly, but was relieved when Narcissa daintily made herself comfortable, curling her legs under herself and leaning over the arm of the sofa.

“Alright” Hermione began again, regaining control of her breathing. “I think I found out how some of the original warding runes were created using transfigurative properties.” She said, getting right down to business – it was what she did best.

“What have you found?” Narcissa asked, the gleam in her eyes betraying her interest.
“Well, for starters, I found some incredible research done by a certain Cassius Black, in the fourteenth century. It’s the oldest research I’ve been able to find, and it has been incredibly helpful. It detailed a lot of his own theories about how the first wards were created, and they actually sound plausible. I mean, they are bonkers, but they are plausible,” Hermione continued, handing one of the now-crumpled parchment sheets for Narcissa to examine.

Narcissa’s teeth nipped at her bottom lip, deep in thought as her eyes quickly scanned the complex diagrams before her – for once, she began feeling a bit out of her depth. “How did they do it?” She asked, eager to hear Hermione’s explanation.

“Well, we were thinking about this wrong. Runes are not transfigurable objects, therefore they do not abide for the transfigurative formula.”

Narcissa’s brows furrowed in confusion. “Wait a minute, didn’t you say they had somehow managed to do it?”

“Yes,” Hermione conceded, curling her lips into a smile. “But the diagrams I had found then were only part of the story. Cassius research goes a step further!” She rifled through some more of the papers she had gathered on her lap before handing a small stack over to Narcissa.

“Why aren’t Runes transfigurable?” Hermione asked with a gleam in her eye.

Narcissa laughed heartily at the question. “Is that a trick question?” She quipped with a smile, and her tone was playful enough to elicit an unfamiliar warmth in Hermione’s chest. “Am I being quizzed, Professor Granger?”

Hermione managed to keep her flush at bay, only just. She shook her head, smiling as if she guarded a secret. “Not a trick question at all.”

“Very well,” Narcissa sighed, leaning back in deep thought. “They do not have enough transfigurable properties to abide to the transfigurative formula. Things like body weight, viscosity, texture – their values are inexistent or irrelevant for transmutative purposes.”

“Excellent, Ms. Black” Hermione quipped in her most professorial tone. “Twenty points to Slytherin!”

Narcissa chuckled, and Hermione rerouted the conversation. “You see, when I first found those crazy diagrams, we were thinking that, somehow, Runes had been transfigured into something. That’s not the case at all.” She paused, reaching into a pocket in her robes. After some fumbling, Hermione took out a fairly large stone pendant attached to a leather cord; she handed it to Narcissa.

The blonde turned it over in her hands, feeling the weight of the polished stone. It was a talisman, the kind of which the druids of old used for their enchantments. It was crudely but beautifully carved into a familiar rune, though she wondered why Hermione of all people would be in possession of such a charm – the brunette just didn’t seem like the type.

“Interesting...” Narcissa said, amused as she recognized that particular rune. “May I ask why you have a fertility talisman in your possession?” She couldn’t help but ask, delighting in how Hermione’s cheeks flushed to a deep shade of red.

“I hoped to get that past you...” the brunette bemoaned, ignoring Narcissa’s look that said she should have known better than to try to get anything past the Slytherin. “That was a not-so-subtle hint from Molly, years ago. But that’s not important!” she quickly got back on track. “What is this
talisman?”

“Yes, yes” Hermione agreed, waving her hands in excitement. “But what makes it a fertility talisman?”

“You keep phrasing questions like that, and you wonder why I think they’re tricks” Narcissa quipped with a laugh as Hermione began to bounce in her seat with impatience. “The carved rune depicted is most often associated with Damona, one of the Gallo-Roman goddesses of fertility.”

Hermione gave Narcissa an appraising look, visibly impressed. “Well done, you know your Runes” she cheered with a smile. “But yes – what makes this a fertility talisman is the rune carved onto it. Now how do you suppose it was carved?”

Narcissa rolled her eyes, and Hermione had to laugh. “Alright, alright, no more ‘trick’ questions” she relented. “Say this was carved by hand, as most rune talismans usually are. What is stopping a talented witch or wizard from transfiguring the rock into a carving of a rune?”

Narcissa froze at what Hermione insinuated. “Good Godric” she whispered after a beat, completely in awe. “The wards weren’t created by transfiguring Runes! Something else was transfigured into warding Runes!”

Narcissa’s smile was blinding in her satisfaction as Narcissa finally caught on. “Exactly!”

Narcissa’s eyes darted from the talisman in her hand to the diagrams on the parchment. Her mind was eagerly rifling through every memory she ever held regarding Runes, transfiguration, her family’s history, and her knowledge of magic in general.

“Remarkable” she couldn’t help but breathe out. Of course, the functions of those wards when they were first created were obviously less-than-savoury, but they had to admit how impressive that bit of magic was.

“So in the end, it’s not like your family broke all rules of Transfiguration as we know them” Hermione quipped, looking rather pleased with herself. “They were just really, really, really good at math.”

Narcissa had to laugh at that. “Indeed,” she agreed. She could not even begin to imagine the intricacies of transfiguring something into a sculpture of sorts – they needed to account for different dynamics, different ways in which the material would behave, and somehow maintain part of its structure. Transfiguration worked in transforming a known object into another known object, but this was transfiguring an object into a new form. She had to wonder why her ancestors chose to go the transfiguration route – the formulas for such calculations would undoubtedly give the average wizard a galloping migraine.

“So the Runes themselves never really had any transmutative properties to begin with,” Narcissa whispered as she mulled over Hermione’s discovery, “but rather, the materials from which they were made retained their own.”

“Precisely. Somehow, your family managed to create a series of these – they’d have to, for wards such as these. Which leads me to the good news!”

Narcissa smiled. “Which would be?”
“I am positive my Rune-tracking charm will work! I just need to set it to look for origin points specifically. That would certainly eliminate any interference from other miscellaneous runes that might be found on the property.”

Narcissa’s grin got impossibly wider. “Hermione,” she murmured, fingers delicately drifting across the page she held in a pattern Hermione couldn’t help but follow intently with her gaze. “Thank you. You’re just... extraordinary.”

The brunette preened and flushed, feeling that inexplicable warmth in her chest begin to expand at Narcissa’s words and smooth, velvety tone. Her immediate reaction was to wave the praise off, even if inside, she relished in it.

“Oh, not at all” she retorted with an ill-concealed gasp. “It’s just... I just looked at some books, that’s all.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Hermione” Narcissa countered, her blue gaze softer than Hermione had ever seen it. “You made sense of centuries of complex spell-work, runes, and some of the darkest blood wards ever conceived. Were it not for you, Mr. Longbottom and I would be hopelessly stuck with a fully functional hospital that could not receive a great number of patients... we could never open it. Now, there’s hope.”

Hermione took a moment consider it. She had never stopped to think about it, because Narcissa’s request for her assistance had been so intriguing at the start of term, but a new wizarding wellness facility opening and not accepting any Muggleborns would... not go well.

“I suppose opening it would send the wrong message.” She pondered aloud. Narcissa froze at her statement.

“Oh, no, please don’t think – I didn’t embark on this for publicity. I – Merlin, how can I – there was no m–”

“Narcissa,” Hermione interrupted, seeing at once where Narcissa’s mind had gone to. “I never thought that. Neville vouched for you at the beginning of the year – that’s all I needed.”

The blonde looked exceedingly grateful at Hermione’s reassurance. It was the truth – Hermione had never even considered how much something as big and audacious as creating an entirely new Wizarding Wellness Ward could be construed as a publicity stunt for someone like Narcissa Black. She didn’t think it was needed, in any case – Narcissa seemed to have a much worse opinion of herself than the rest of the wizarding world at large did. It was a mystery Hermione had yet to crack.

“Well,” Narcissa breathed out, her relief painfully evident. Hermione briefly wondered if she had gotten better at reading the Slytherin, or if Narcissa was just more comfortable around her, and thus, more open. “I’m glad. It would be a shame to see a project we have cultivated for so long fall through after so much work.”

“How long have you and Neville been working on this?”

Narcissa’s elegant shoulder shrug made another appearance. “It was a plan of mine for a long time. I approached Mr. Longbottom about it...” she narrowed her eyes, deep in thought. “Three years ago, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Three years?” Hermione repeated, taken by surprise. What a secret for Neville to keep for three long years. “That’s... a while. When did you first get the idea?”
Narcissa shifted in her seat, her long legs unfurling from under her and crossing over one another. Hermione was momentarily distracted – and immediately reminded of what the other woman was wearing – as the bathrobe hitched up ever so slightly along her pale thighs with the movement.

“The seed had been planted in my brain immediately after the war. St. Mungo’s wasn’t... exactly welcoming those first few months, but they desperately needed people who knew their way around more than the most common healing spells and potions. They... begrudgingly allowed me to help while I awaited my trial.”

Hermione wanted to interject with her surprise. She had been off with Harry and Ron rounding up as many escaped Death Eaters – and more than their fair share of Dementors – before the trials began, and as such, had very little idea of what happened in the months immediately after the war ended. There hadn’t been much time in between mourning and capturing escaped convicts to think of much else.

“They were overworked, severely understaffed, and because of the hospital’s location, it was nearly impossible to keep magically expanding it as fast as they needed it to. I opened the doors of Malfoy Manor to patients and Healers, and that went a long way in establishing some tentative trust. After I was... acquitted” Narcissa said the word as if it pained her “the hospital’s Research Department reached out. They wanted me to come on board.”

Hermione smiled, thinking of how many doors that opened up for Narcissa. Before the new Potions Professor had been hired, she had looked through some of her research at Minerva’s behest. It was the first time Narcissa had truly impressed her. The St. Mungo’s Potions Research and Development Department world-renowned in the subject; Narcissa had certainly proven herself a valuable asset in those first few months to be called to work there without yet having the Mastery under her belt.

Hermione would forever be grateful for the Potions Department. Once the post-war chaos had died down and she deemed it safe enough finally go on the search for her parents in Australia, their help had been priceless in her efforts to restore their memories without causing further damage. Despite all her research on memory charms and her ability with them, the mind was a complex, intricate structure, and it took very little to damage it beyond repair. The fact that her spell had been an extreme solution for extreme circumstances, there was absolutely no room for error – one simple mistake and her parents’ minds would be destroyed forever.

The Potions Department had come in with a wide array of serums, draughts, and elixirs the likes of which Hermione had never even heard of before. So much of working with the human brain and mind was based entirely on guesswork, but the measures the specialists had taken to safeguard her parents’ minds before she could counter the damage she had done were invaluable – Hermione was convinced they had been essential for her parents’ total and seamless recovery.

“After that, I was made a research fellow” Narcissa continued, her tone a little wistful, but smiling all the same. “It was hard work, and not everyone was welcoming – at least not when I first started. I’d like to think that, over time, my research spoke for itself.”

“I owe a lot to the St. Mungo’s Potions Department” Hermione admitted, thinking back on how out of her depth she could have been without their help. “When I went to find my parents and return their memories, Kingsley arranged for some expert opinion, and I’m really, really glad he did.” She sighed. “I don’t think they would have recovered so well without it.”

“Ah, yes. Memory charms, correct? Those can be quite problematic to work with.” Narcissa faltered, suddenly looking extremely self-conscious, with a hand running nervously through the golden strands of her hair and her eyes looking intently at the forgotten parchment that lay on her
The reaction stumped Hermione. “Narcissa?” The blonde remained quiet, and Hermione couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something wrong. Then the thought occurred to her.

“You were already working with the department then, weren’t you?” she asked, feeling her heart thundering wildly in her chest. Hermione knew the answer – she was suddenly aware of something monumental – she didn’t even need Narcissa’s slight nod to confirm it.

“You were the specialist.” Hermione managed to gasp out, awe in her voice.

Narcissa’s cheeks pinked, but she did absolutely nothing to deny it. “I was one of them, yes.”

“You... you...” Hermione stuttered, the revelation too momentous for her to even form coherent words – it was as if her brain was having difficulty processing the importance of that fact. There were so many things she wanted to ask, like how, and most importantly why, but the one swirling in her head at that moment had more to do with why Kingsley hadn’t told her in the first place. She had read stacks of notes and research and instructions detailing exactly which concoctions would assure the smoothest possible recovery for her parents. Even months after their memories had returned, the department had provided William and Katherine Granger with specially-made draughts to ensure their minds did not suffer any after-effects of such intense magical interference.

And Narcissa had been the one responsible.

“You never told me.” Hermione lamented; for whatever reason she felt tears pooling at her eyes and felt embarrassed by them. “Kingsley never told me either.”

Narcissa stiffened in her seat, caught off-guard by Hermione’s sudden onslaught tears; she looked like she wanted to comfort the brunette, but knew not how.

“It... it never really came up during our acquaintance” she defended weakly -- the statement held no conviction and Hermione at once knew it was just another pretext for Narcissa to hide behind. “And I... when Kingsley came to me in the department, I told him I would prefer it if you didn’t know.”

The confession hung in the air with Hermione’s quiet snifflies. She didn’t feel sad – it was some sort of bittersweet emotion the couldn’t quite recognize. “But... why?” She groaned as her voice struggled to leave her throat, raspy and blubbery from her tears. “We’ve been working together for months, and I... I never even got the chance to thank you.”

Hermione hiccoughed, wiping at her errant tears. She hid her face in her hands in embarrassment; she couldn’t believe she was crying over something that wasn’t sad at all. There was absolutely no reason to be crying, yet here she was, unable to stop her tears.

The soft touch of a hand upon her knee made her jerk, and her eyes connected with Narcissa’s, who now knelt by her side, looking uncomfortable with the situation but trying to make the best of it.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, a hand coming to cradle Hermione’s cheek. The brunette leaned into the warmth of the other witch’s touch almost by instinct. “I didn’t think you’d accept my help – I was the wife of a Death Eater and... During the war, back at the Manor, I –”

“Narcissa,” Hermione interjected, taking Narcissa’s hand in her own “You helped save my parents. Why didn’t you tell me when you came to Hogwarts?”

Narcissa shrugged, her hand trembled in Hermione’s. “It never came up. Furthermore, I thought
you would prefer to keep your distance from someone like me.”

Hermione scoffed, agreeing with the sentiment somewhat. That might have been true at the beginning of the year – it certainly wasn’t now. Plus, if she had known, she would certainly have been a lot more receptive to Narcissa from the start.

“I wish you had told me.” She reiterated.

“I’m so—”

Narcissa was cut short by Hermione’s arms winding themselves tightly around her shoulders. The Slytherin froze in place, caught off-guard by the gesture – it took her a long moment to finally reciprocate, wrapping her arms around the brunette and allowing Hermione to lean deeply into the embrace. She felt the wetness of the Gryffindor’s tears and the heat of her breath against her neck, and was at once enveloped in the sheer warmth that Hermione radiated.

“Thank you.” Came the young witch’s teary whisper on her skin.

Narcissa could only hold her tighter.
Chapter 30

On the last day before students left for their short Easter Holiday, Hermione took some time off in the evening to go to London. The errand wasn’t urgent or even terribly important, but she just needed to know. That was what it always came down to – she needed to know things: the hows, the whys, and the why nots and everything in between.

She could have asked Narcissa first, but after their emotionally charged conversation a few nights prior, Hermione felt like she needed some space. There were too many thoughts swirling in her brain, too many emotions connected to memories that were just now starting to make sense. Most importantly, she had come to recognize that there were feelings attached in her quest to make sense of the enigma that was Narcissa Black.

What an idiotic realization, she thought bitterly to herself as she walked through Muggle London. There was fondness, and then there was attraction, and now Hermione couldn’t pretend the latter didn’t exist as far as Narcissa was concerned. The breathlessness that overtook her whenever she was around Narcissa had been nearly unbearable during their last conversation, and Hermione wasn’t so deeply entrenched in the land of denial to say Narcissa in a bathrobe didn’t have anything to do with it.

No, it had had a lot to do with it, and she couldn’t in good conscience keep pestering Narcissa with personal questions without first doing a little self-reconnaissance. The perplexing attraction was obviously there, but then, what did it mean for them? For her?

Hermione loved unpacking complicated things, but this was a little too complicated, even for her. So she would leave it alone for the time being.

Her arrival at the Ministry came nearly on auto-pilot, even if it had been years since she last stepped through the grandiose atrium. There were very few witches and wizards about, as it was far past closing. She made her way to one of the lifts still functioning and spared the glowing button of her old department floor a nostalgic look before jamming the button for Level 1: Minister of Magic and Support Staff.

Hermione stepped through the open lift doors without batting an eye to the security wizards posted at every corner, happy that she still retained enough security clearance to do so despite not being a Ministry employee any longer. Being a war-hero and such certainly came with a few perks. Plus, she had been one of the warding engineers to make this space as secure as it was now – she felt a hint of pride as her wards welcomed her with familiarity. Anyone without the proper clearance would simply find themselves in the Atrium again and again.

A uniformed Auror spared her a nod of acknowledgement as she approached Kingsley’s door. She responded in kind before moving to knock, but the door opened before her knuckles connected to the shiny golden plaque with Kingsley’s name and position.

“Ms. Granger, what a wonderful surprise,” came Kingsley’s rich, booming voice. He stood by his opulent desk with a smile on his face; Hermione spared a smile of her own as she walked in and the door closed behind her. “I was intrigued to receive your owl yesterday,” he continued, getting straight to business and motioning for her to take a seat.

“Hello, Kingsley. I’m sorry intrude, and for requesting an audience on such short notice.”

The good-humoured Minister waved her off, settling into his own chair with a contented sigh. “I
will always have a few minutes to spare for Gryffindor’s Golden Girl, decorated war-hero.” He reached into a drawer on his side of the desk and pulled out a sheaf of parchment bound by red strings. The top page had been stamped; bold letters aggressively read ARCHIVED in deep red.

“I pulled the files you requested” he pointed out, tapping his wand onto the central knot holding the pages together and making the strings vanish; the pile practically doubled in size. “But I must admit I’m curious. The Records Department, or even St. Mungo’s would have been able to help you with this. May I ask why you solicited my assistance specifically?”

Hermione leaned over, her eyes scanning the first page and already finding some of the evidence she had come looking for. “Is that all of it?”

Kingsley nodded solemnly, eyeing the brunette curiously as she flipped over a few pages, her eyes darting rapidly over lines and lines of text. “Yes,” he confirmed, “every file on your parents’ memory recovery the Ministry has. From initial search to treatment to post-recovery check-ups – all that St. Mungo’s and the Memory Division here at the Ministry have to offer.”

Hermione hummed appreciatively, still busy skimming page after page – she was already a third through the stack. Every sheet of parchment had been formatted in the usual way of Wizarding bureaucracy, requiring a flurry of signatures at every turn. The ones Hermione had been looking for were popping up with incredible frequency – the initials N.B. could be found at varying intervals.

Now she could even recognize Narcissa’s signature; the sharp N and the way the s’s of her name were dashed together in a seamlessly neat script; the elegant curve of the B followed by the assertive loop of the L. It had been indistinguishable from any other signature before, but now she dusted her fingertips over the dried ink almost reverently, sending a silent thanks to the woman who had undoubtedly made her parents’ recovery possible, without ever telling her.

There were no other signatures.

“How many specialists were assigned to my parents’ case?” Hermione questioned, still tracing the name beneath her fingers.

“There were several experts from the Memory division working on their case at any given time” Kingsley said, eyes narrowed as he tried to remember; there was a hint of confusion in them as well. “I believe four or five, total.” He smiled. “Not that they were needed, might I add. Your talents with Memory Charms were more than up to par.”

Hermione nearly scoffed – she very much doubted they would have been up to par without Narcissa. “How about from St. Mungo’s?”

Kingsley froze for a moment – Hermione only caught it because she knew him too well. He eventually leaned on his elbows over the surface of his desk, his hands steepled in front of his face.

“I believe they assigned one specialist, one of their best.” He said, eyeing her carefully. Hermione could see, plain as day, he was hiding something and gauging how much she knew. “Why do you ask? Is there are problem? Are your parents doing well?”

“No, no problem. They are doing very well, thank you,” Hermione replied, thankful for Kingsley’s genuine concern. “But I was wondering why you kept Narcissa’s involvement a secret from me.”

The large man sighed deeply into his seat, eyeing Hermione quizzically. “How did you find out?”
“Does it matter?” Hermione retorted, then winced, aware she sounded a bit too harsh. She took a
breath. “Narcissa told me.”

“Oh?” Kingsley interjected with a raised brow. “And how did that even come up in conversation?”

Hermione scowled, not liking the Minister’s tone. “She and I talk.” She shrugged. “We’ve worked
together for some time now. We have a professional rapport.”

“And that rapport has come to include conversations about one of the most difficult times of your
life? That’s the sort of professional rapport I have with my therapist.” Kingsley quipped jokingly,
softening his tone. Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose and let out a deep breath.

“What do you want me to say, Kingsley? We’re friends.” Or at least she supposed they were. They
were friendly, of course, but there was also more to it. More to it as in I will hold you while you cry
over your dead crazy sister who tortured me in your home while you watched

“Friends? I must admit that surprises me.” He sighed. “In case Ms. Black has not told you, she was
the one who wanted to keep the secrecy – I was against it from the beginning.” He defended
kindly.

“If you were so against it, then why have her work the case?”

Kingsley exhaled heavily, looking more tired than he had in years. “There was no one else,
Hermione. Narcissa was – is – the best. Some of the best Healers and Memory experts didn’t want
to touch your parents’ case with a ten-foot pole.”

Hermione winced. It was true – that had been the source of much despair while she searched for
them. William and Katherine had been living as Wendell and Monica Wilkins for nearly three
years by the time Hermione finally located them in Australia. Her memory charm had been
so specific, so intricate and such a one-in-a-million shot that it had stumped some of the Ministry’s
most experienced memory specialists. She had managed to erase one particular part of their
memories – herself – while rebuilding an entirely new network of memories, filling in the gaps
where needed. For all intents and purposes, she had expected it to be permanent – there had been a
part of her that doubted she would ever survive the war. Truth be told, she had
amazed herself when it worked; now, there were academic articles written about her feat.

Kingsley continued, his voice brimming with an unknown frustration. “No one knew exactly how
to undo what you did – not without some catastrophic consequences. After the Memory Division
turned into a dead-end, I went to St. Mungo’s. They’re more research-oriented; I thought that
maybe they would at least take an interest on the case. Which they did; one person in particular.”

“Narcissa,” Hermione whispered.

“More or less,” Kingsley responded. “She didn’t know the case was your parents’ at first, but what
she told me seemed promising. When I finally told her who it was for, she said she would only
continue to work on it if you never knew she was behind it.” He exhaled heavily through his nose
at the memory. “My hands were tied. She was the only one who knew what to do.”

“So she single-handedly saved my parents’ memories.” Hermione murmured, mostly thinking
aloud. Kingsley was quick to shake his head.

“You did a lot too, Hermione. Memory charms are tricky things to work with.”

“Yeah,” Hermione confirmed, but she was smiling now. “And if it weren’t for Narcissa, I could
have destroyed their minds forever.”

Kingsley didn’t confirm or deny that statement, but Hermione didn't need him to. She could just think back on the time she scrambled with memory theories, potions and charms trying desperately to find a fix so that the damage she had caused did not become irreparable.

She spared one last look at the whirlwind of N.B.s on the pages on her lap before returning them to the stack. “I just wish I could have known, so I could have thanked her.” Hermione turned her gaze to Kingsley’s. “Thank you, Kingsley. I think that’s it, for now. I just needed... confirmation.” She said, standing to leave.

Kingsley smiled broadly. “You are more than welcome, Hermione. Please do not hesitate to reach out, whatever you need.” He began to walk her to the door. “For what it’s worth, I’m glad Narcissa’s presence at Hogwarts hasn’t affected you much.”

Hermione quirked a brow. Something in the way Kingsley had phrased that last statement didn’t sit well with her.

“She’s a wonderful colleague to have” said a little defensively. Kingsley waved her off.

“Of course, but you remember dear Alastor: constant vigilance!” He laughed a little. "It is always best to keep one’s guard up around a certain kind of people.”

Hermione stopped dead in her tracks. Did she hear him right? “A certain kind of people? What on earth does that mean?”

The Minister of Magic regarded her quizzically. “You know, Hermione. Death Eaters, Dark Wizards and the like. We can never be too careful.”

The Gryffindor felt anger simmering within. “Are you talking about Narcissa?” She said through gritted teeth; she could tell the intensity of her response surprised Kingsley. “Has she not done enough to prove she’s changed?”

Kingsley was taken aback. “Hermione” he began to reason “You mustn’t forget who she is.”

“Who she was. And what she wasn’t. As in, she was never a Death Eater!” Hermione hissed, eyes gleaming with an anger she didn’t quite recognize, but embraced all the same.

“Hermione, don’t forget,” Kingsley continued, and Hermione’s blood boiled at the patronizing tone his voice had taken, “she was married to a Death Eater for a long time, and her son eventually became one as well. Her own sister was Voldemort’s right-hand. We cannot ignore that.”

“How can you say that?” Hermione questioned angrily, taking a step to face Kingsley head on, not caring that the man towered over her small frame. “Narcissa was never a Death Eater herself. Narcissa lied to Voldemort when it mattered most. Narcissa gave me my parents back, and I couldn’t even thank her!”

“Why the rousing defence?” Kingsley asked, looking genuinely stumped. “I thought you, of all people, would understand the need for some caution.”

“Caution?” Hermione retorted, incredulous. “She’s a co-worker, a friend!”

“One that you should keep at arm’s length” he warned, levelling Hermione with an odd look. “Is this not an instance of ‘keep your friends close, your enemies closer’?”
Hermione scoffed, bewildered. “Enemies? Narcissa is not the enemy, Kingsley. She hasn’t been for a long time!”

Kingsley groaned. “Hermione, don’t let yourself be swayed by what Ms. Black did to help your parents. It is good she has so much to contribute, but there were always reasons why she stayed on the other side for so long.” He lowered his voice in warning. “You don’t know what she is capable of.”

Hermione could only scowl in disbelief. Kingsley, always so fair and just and willing to see the best in people, now sounded like a completely different person.

“Her husband still writes to her, did your friendship ever touch upon that subject?” He asked knowingly. “It is part of the reason why she’s still under surveillance.”

Ex-husband, Hermione’s mind furiously wanted to correct, but she had been effectively sidetracked.

“Under surveillance?!” she practically screeched. “It’s been a decade, Kingsley!” Her eyes narrowed, and she felt angry tears pooling at her lids. She wiped them away furiously. “Will nothing she does ever be enough to make up for her mistakes?”

Kingsley looked gobsmacked at the strength of Hermione’s reaction. “I thought you, of all people...”

“You thought wrong!” Hermione retorted, ignoring the nagging thought in the back of her mind that she would have very much agreed with Kingsley just a few years prior. But that didn’t matter now – she didn’t know Narcissa then as she knew her now.

“Very well,” Kingsley said solemnly. “I won’t push the issue. Just... don’t get too close, Hermione.” It would have been easier to be angrier at Kingsley’s statement if Hermione couldn’t tell there was genuine concern in his tone. “We don’t know what Narcissa is capable of.” He repeated.

“Will you stop the surveillance?” Hermione bit back, fury still thrumming in her body.

“I’m afraid not” Kingsley replied, then his voice softened. “But I suppose I can bring the matter under review.”

Hermione scoffed. That was the best she would get for the time being.

She stomped her way out of the Minister’s office without looking back.

It was late at night when Hermione found herself knocking furiously on Narcissa’s door after her heated exchange with the Minister of Magic. Ideally, she should have waited until morning, but her mind would not let the matter rest. She had gone to Kingsley for answers, and while she had gotten some, she ended up leaving with more questions.

She had also left with a strange conviction beginning to grow in her chest; it grew and spread much in the same way the warmth she felt whenever Narcissa was around did. Coming to Narcissa’s defence so strongly in Kingsley’s presence had made it all-encompassing and all-consuming; she
felt it in every fibre of her being.

The brunette knocked again after hearing no response, her heart thundering in her chest and ears. A light finally became visible from under the door, and Hermione took a deep, fortifying breath as Narcissa’s shadow cautiously approached.

Hermione had expected the Slytherin to call out and ask who was there, but was surprised to hear the locks, followed by the grinding creak of the door.

“Hermione?”

Hermione had a great deal of questions to ask, but they all died in her throat at the vision of Narcissa, looking like a medieval fairy-tale queen in a floor-length night robe of velvety green fabric adorned with gold, her hair loosely braided and falling haphazardly over her shoulder. One of her cheeks bore a smattering of red, and Hermione realized they were the marks left by a soft pillow. Her eyes, those endless pool of blue, gleamed like sapphires in the darkness, reflecting the torches in the corridor.

She looked magnificent.

“Hermione?” came Narcissa’s voice once more, laced with concern and confusion. “Are you alright? Has something happened?”

No, I’m not alright, Hermione’s mind wanted to say, to scream to the heavens and to anyone who would listen. The conviction – and warmth – grew even stronger in her chest. I think I’m falling for you and I’m powerless to stop it.

“No” she said instead, lost in the other woman’s jewelled azure gaze. Her voice felt raspy and breathless, and not quite her own. “I... I... I spoke to Kingsley today” she said dumbly.

“Oh,” Narcissa replied with a raised eyebrow, evidently confused by the stuttering apparition to her doorstep. “Is everything alright?”

“No,” Hermione murmured, lacking the strength to find her voice. “I... He said” she exhaled forcefully with her exasperation. “You didn’t want me to know about what you did to help my parents. Why?”

Narcissa suddenly looked uncomfortable. “I should think the answer is obvious” she said after a moment of thought. “Would you want my help? Help from someone who watched as you...” her words got caught in a sudden strangled sob.

“But why keep it a secret?” Hermione questioned, desperately trying to understand. “For so long? Even after we started working together I... I had no idea.”

Narcissa had no response; she simply stood at her door, her gaze downcast.

“Kingsley said you were the only one who knew how to help” Hermione continued, desperately wanting to reach out to hold Narcissa, or at least take her hand, but not trusting herself. “How did you even know how to do it? How...”

“Hermione” Narcissa interrupted, looking uneasy. “Please don’t... Please don’t ask me that.”

“But why?” Hermione pressed, her confusion and desire at war with one another. “You’ve done so much for so many – has it all been for forgiveness? I could have forgiven you years ago, if only I had known!”
“Hermione” Narcissa pleaded, her eyes awash with a deep anguish that Hermione could not read, much less understand. “Please don’t... whatever idea you have of me, whatever you think you know... It’s not – it’s not the whole truth.”

Hermione took a step forward and was crestfallen when Narcissa suddenly jerked back. “What do you mean?” She entreated sadly, tentatively taking Narcissa’s hand in hers. The blonde flinched at the contact, but did not pull back. “I...” Hermione began, feeling the tremor in her voice but pushing through it. “I want to know more. If you’ll let me.”

Narcissa looked like she was holding back tears. “Some things are better left in the past where they belong.”

Hermione was about to interject, but Narcissa’s hand reaching up to softly touch her cheek stopped her in her tracks. She leaned into the touch instinctively, eyes fluttering closed at the feel of a gentle caress. It lasted all of two seconds before Narcissa pulled away entirely, taking a step far back into her quarters.

“Good night, Hermione.”

The door clicked shut.
Narcissa walked into the empty darkness of Charles House with an uncomfortable lump in her throat. Any remainder of its previous life and vibrancy had all but disappeared, leaving behind upturned furniture and a thick layer of dust after her father’s passing. Druella had packed up and left barely a day after her husband’s death, taking refuge in one of the family’s vacation homes in France and leaving the ancestral Black home behind without sparing it a second thought.

At present, Druella was temporarily back in London for the trial of her eldest daughter. Narcissa could not bring herself to attend, not even for Bellatrix’s sake. She feared what seeing her sister, bound in chains as she had seen Lucius, would do with what little resolve she had left. It was a risk she was not willing to take, not after her own family’s escape had been so marginally avoided – by the skin of their teeth, without a shadow of a doubt.

She had come with the intention of speaking to her father’s portrait. Many nights she had waited by the empty silver frame, seeking his advice and comforting words. She had yet to be successful.

“I knew I’d find you here.” came a voice from the other end of the room, coupled with the sudden lighting of several candles scattered on the dusty floorboards.

Narcissa whirled to face the intruder head on, wand at the ready in the blink of an eye.

Druella sat at a plush high-backed chair, her dark gaze gleaming with severity in the flickering shadows.

“I see you have finally learned to be ready. I suppose Bellatrix’s lessons sunk deeper than I originally thought” she drawled, unfazed by the wand pointed in her direction. “Oh, well, better late than never, isn’t it so?”

Narcissa scowled at her mother. She had never been Druella’s favourite – the very opposite, in fact, and after spending so many of her younger years desperately trying to gain her mother’s approval to no avail, she had finally stopped trying.

“What are you doing here?” her words were as acerbic as she could make them.

“Don’t be insolent; this house still belongs to me.” Druella said coolly. “But I suppose I could ask the same of you. Does your sister not deserve the same courtesy you afforded your deplorable husband?”

Narcissa’s eyes narrowed. “You’re one to talk, mother. I would have guessed the great Druella Black would have taken the opportunity to see her only daughter one last time” she retorted, never lowering her wand.

“My only daughter?” Druella scoffed disdainfully. “Listen to yourself. Only daughter indeed – you always had an unbecoming penchant for dramatics. Poor little Narcissa, so pure, so easily hurt. Apple of your father’s eye, so wounded not to be somebody’s darling.”

Druella stood, her commanding presence seemed to fill the room.

“It would have been better, I think, had you died at birth. I will admit the thought crossed my mind, when you were naught but a snivelling infant.”

The nefarious admission from her mother had no effect on Narcissa, who had been expertly trained
in hiding and burying her emotions by the very woman standing before her now. She wasn’t called the Ice Queen for nothing.

“Now that” Druella said venomously, smirking with a sadistic pleasure as she took in her daughter’s frozen, schooled features. “That makes it marginally easier for me to love you.”

Narcissa wanted to laugh with incredulity. Never, in all of her life, had her mother ever told her she loved her.

“How dreadfully sentimental” she drawled instead. “Care to explain what you are doing here? Why are you not at the trial?”

Druella’s eyes turned cold, as if reminding Narcissa where her Ice Queen fame had come from. “There is nothing I can do for Bellatrix. She made her bed, let her lie in it and rot” the Black matriarch murmured, her voice icier than her gaze had been. “In a way, I suppose I ought to congratulate you” she said, as if it pained her.

“I’m afraid I don’t follow.”

Druella rolled her eyes, much in the same way a petulant, impatient child would. “Do not play the fool, though I believe the part may come a little too easily to you” she hissed. “I’m speaking of your little stunt; of what you did to keep your disgraceful husband out of Azkaban.”

Narcissa’s façade cracked for the first time. Druella chuckled darkly in triumph, lips tugging into a malicious smile.

“I must admit, I didn’t think you’d have the guts – or the skills. Honestly, I thought you had whored your way through the Wizengamot or something more to your nature.”

Narcissa made the mistake of bristling at the statement; her mother’s shark-like grin widened. “But memory manipulation? The Imperius? I didn’t think you were witch enough.” Druella laughed viciously. “Who knew you even possessed the ability?”

Narcissa took a breath, schooling her features once again. “You forget I was top of my class.” she said, unable to keep silent when her ability, her own wizardry was called into question.

Druella only chuckled in her face. “Ah, there’s that foolish pride you are so notorious for. A grievously Gryffindor trait, most unbecoming. Not the most pleasant sort to be around.”

Narcissa straightened. “What do you want, mother?”

Druella rolled her eyes, as if dissatisfied Narcissa was unwilling to continue their verbal sparring. She turned and gracefully sunk back into the chair she had occupied.

“I’ll get straight to the point” she said. A lazy move of her hand summoned a golden cigarette box. She took her time lighting one and taking a long, pensive drag, letting the thick purple smoke it released linger in the air for a few moments. After a long, pregnant silence, she turned to face her youngest.

“What you did to Lucius... What does he remember?” she asked, discreetly waving her wand around to summon another chair. It came screeching onto the wood and leaving a mark of its path upon the dust. Narcissa did not sit.

“What most of it” she said, regarding her mother cautiously. “He simply feels that the memories are not his own, or they are murky, unclear” she explained, ignoring the smell of the smoke her mother
seemed to be deliberately – though discreetly – puffing her way.

“Murky and unclear?” Druella repeated, her gaze belying her interest. “As if he had been actually Imperiused?”

“Yes” Narcissa confirmed, letting out a breath she didn’t know she had been holding. “I designed the spell to mimic the after-effects of the curse. That way...” she swallowed, having difficulty in admitting it out loud for the first time, to her mother of all people. Not even Lucius knew what had been done to him – it was imperative to maintain plausible deniability at all costs. No one thought to question her too thoroughly – she was viewed only a pure-blooded housewife, a little trophy for the big bad Death Eater, and she strived to keep it that way.

“That way he would not be lying, not even under the influence of Veritaserum” Druella completed for her, as if reading her line of thought. She took one long drag of her cigarette, releasing the smoke through her nostrils as her gaze turned pensive.

“Remarkable” she finally whispered, so low Narcissa wasn’t sure she meant to say it at all. Narcissa struggled to conceal her surprise – it was the closest thing to praise she had ever gotten from Druella her entire life.

The Black widow pondered for long moments, the purple smoke hanging in the air, making it thick.

“And Bellatrix?” she finally demanded, after an eternity had passed.

“What about Bellatrix?” Narcissa asked sincerely. As her mother had said, there was nothing that could be done for her.

Druella rolled her eyes once more. “Surely you could give her the same opportunity you gave Lucius.”

Narcissa stiffened. “He’s my husband, the father of my child.” She said. What happened to ‘she made her bed, let her lie in it and rot’, she wondered.

Her mother scoffed imperiously. “And she is your sister, blood of your blood. You would do well not to forget that.”

“I was born a Black, but I am a Malfoy now. There is nothing I can do to help Bellatrix – she is too far gone. It makes no difference that she is my sister – the Bellatrix I once knew is dead.” Narcissa retorted solemnly.

Druella scoffed again, her features marred with utter disdain.

“Listen to yourself speak... ‘I am a Malfoy now...’ It is just like you, with your flighty, inconstant nature, your wavering loyalty.”

Narcissa’s eyes directed all the anger she held within her toward her mother; Druella seemed not to notice or care.

“I have a family of my own now. I will stop at nothing to protect them,” she murmured.

“Once a Black, always a Black” her mother retorted, and Narcissa wanted to scoff, wondering if that logic applied to people such as Andromeda and Sirius. “Don’t forget why you’re a Malfoy, Narcissa. It is the result of your own pettiness, your own childish impetuousness. Remember that, when your little world crumbles to pieces around you.”
Narcissa bristled. “What is that supposed to mean?” she questioned hotly.

“Save it, child. We both know you only married that pompous fool out of an infantile desire to displease me.”

“That is the most absurd...”

“The truth is often absurd” Druella interjected, that malicious grin returning. “Sure, you fancied one another; but then again, you fancied so many other young men, and so many fancied you. Merlin and the world know how Lucius fancied plenty of other young women, especially after he graduated.”

“You lie.” Narcissa hissed through gritted teeth. She and Lucius had been in love; he had come to visit her in Hogsmeade every weekend without fail after he graduated. He had written her every single day. “We love each other.”

“Oh, surely you cannot be this naïve” Druella let out a disbelieving laugh. “You think Lucius would wait patiently for his little supposedly virginal betrothed to graduate without cavorting around with other, less respectable girls while he still had the chance?” she shook her head. “He fancied you, alright, but that didn’t stop him from fooling around with other girls before his marriage. Face it, Narcissa, he only married you because he knew you’d be the best match he could ever possibly have” she said, clearly taking a sadistic delight in breaking the news to her daughter. “And how could you not be? You were very well trained, if I do say so myself. I will take all the credit for that.”

Narcissa was painfully aware her Ice Queen façade had long crumbled. Her nails dug bloody crescent shapes into her own palms, and she felt the heat of errant tears running down her cheeks. Druella could see the effect her words had on her youngest, and seemed all the more satisfied for it.

The Black matriarch stood, discarding her cigarette onto the floor and stepping on it with a decisive heel before walking towards her daughter. Her venomous smile was impossibly wider as she patronizingly patted Narcissa’s cheek, barely gentler than a slap but so much more violent in intention.

“Oh, don’t look quite so shaken, darling” she laughed, contempt dripping from her every word. “You still married the man of your dreams.” Her voice was at its most demeaning as she continued. “Even though I pushed against it, for your own good. Even when Geoffrey Flint gave your father an incredible offer, that fool could never say no to you. He settled for the Malfoys solely because you already had.”

After another long moment, Druella began to look impatient at the silent tears streaming down Narcissa’s pale cheeks. She roughly brushed them away. “Come, now; such weakness is deplorable and undignified” she scolded bitterly.

“Yes, Ma’am” Narcissa said before she could help herself, hating how her brain reverted itself to the reflexive instincts she retained after a lifetime of such lessons with Druella. She gazed at her mother with pure hatred. “Why were you always so cruel?” she murmured through her tears, uncaring for the loss of dignity and feeling more like a lost child than she had ever felt. “Why could you never love me?”

Druella chuckled with intense disdain.
“Oh, darling, I have always loved you” she mocked, giving Narcissa’s cheek a sharp pinch and stepping closer, looking absolutely triumphant. “But I have also always despised you.”

Her mother began to slowly walk away, stopping only to pat Narcissa’s shoulder condescendingly on her way out.

“Oh, before I forget” she suddenly quipped evilly. She reached into her robes, and then there was an abrupt, violent thud of an object hitting the floorboards. By Narcissa’s feet now sat a silver locket, decorated with silver filigree and a single shard of the blackest obsidian.

“Your father wanted you to have this when he died” Druella said airily as she walked away. “It must have slipped my mind.”

The sun and warmth that came with the spring’s belated arrival seemed to be unable to touch Hermione. It was like a dark cloud had formed upon whatever space she inhabited, determined to follow her no matter where she went.

The cloud came with guilt, longing, and so much confusion over what happened the night she came nearly beating down Narcissa’s door. Over the months they had worked together, the blonde had not shied away from the personal – the first breakthrough in that tentative friendship they had begun to cultivate in Autumn had come from facing their mutual nightmares over a batch of Wideye Potion, under the light of the full moon.

Since then, their friendship had evolved through academic discussion and the periodical breaking of several walls when it came to personal. Life before Voldemort, life after Voldemort. Narcissa’s family, Hermione’s family. Hermione’s grief, Narcissa’s grief. And now, suddenly, there was a wall Narcissa seemed unwilling to break.

Not that Hermione wanted to push it, if the Slytherin was truly that uncomfortable. She just wanted to know why. Why was it so different from all the other deeply personal subjects they had discussed? How could something as good and extraordinary as restoring her parents’ memories be so taboo, when crying over a crazy murderer in Hermione’s arms wasn’t?

Hermione blew an exasperated breath as she walked aimlessly through the castle. It was nearly empty because of the holiday, but she didn’t want to go outside in her usual walk around the Black Lake. The shining sun was grating on her mood – all she wanted then and there was for some temperamental Scottish weather to come her way. She wanted rain, cold, and fog, because that would go just wonderfully with how she felt inside.

It would have been easier if Narcissa had been avoiding her, like she did when there was any uncertainty between them. Instead, the Slytherin Head of House was as cordial as ever, taking time to talk to Hermione during meals at the Staff Table, accompanying her to Black Manor for further research, and even joking with her about all the grading they’d have to do once students returned for break.

Hermione hated it.

It was all perfectly cordial and nothing more. Whatever timid intimacy there had been between them was out the window – Narcissa was polite, annoyingly so. Polite, tactful, poised and irritatingly impersonal.

The Gryffindor briefly wondered if her newly-discovered attraction to the other woman might be
clouding her judgement. She pondered the thought as her feet guided her up the winding stairs to the Astronomy Tower, and by the time she reached the peak, she had dismissed the idea entirely.

No, Narcissa was definitively different around her. Her quest for answers had led her to a land of unending, impersonal cordiality and it frustrated Hermione to no end, because she couldn’t understand it.

She wanted to get to know Narcissa better. Why was the blonde so willing to share stories about Bellatrix, about her family’s dark past, but not those about the good work she had been doing for the past decade? The extraordinary things she did to atone?

Hermione leaned over the railings of the Astronomy Tower’s balcony, deep in thought, for hours. The sun began to set, painting the skies in pink and purple hues, daubing the turbulent waters of the Black Lake with fractals of light that glittered in her vision.

It was so beautifully vibrant, yet so agonizingly monotonous.

The sky became dark and dotted with stars; the full moon shone brightly upon the hallowed grounds of Hermione’s alma mater, and she still remained at the Tower, feeling foolish for sulking, but unable to direct her emotions elsewhere.

“You weren’t at dinner.” Came a voice from behind, tentative with that insistent, practiced affability Hermione had come to hate over the past few days.

She didn’t want to turn to greet Narcissa, not if the blonde continued with the rehearsed cordiality, but her body had a mind of its own, spinning in place to face the Slytherin.

“No,” Hermione began, looking anywhere but at Narcissa’s blue eyes, because those were what most disarmed her, every time the other witch was around. “I just wanted to think for a while.”

Narcissa looked demure in the shadows of the tower. Despite the darkness, Hermione could tell her hair was up in an unusual high ponytail, yet it still cascaded tantalizingly down her back. A few unbound tendrils framed her face, pale as the moon above.

“May I join you?” she inquired, teeth nipping at her bottom lip in a display of uncertainty that had become more frequent, one that endeared her greatly to the young Gryffindor.

“Of course.” Hermione responded automatically, even if deep inside she felt she could use another hour or several of solitude.

Narcissa stepped to the balcony, standing at a fair distance from Hermione, enough that even her arms outstretched at her sides on the railing did not come near the brunette. Hermione could only sigh deeply, looking over at the dark splotch that was the Black Lake.

“Leo seems to be unusually bright tonight.” Narcissa spoke, after long moments of utter silence.

Part of Hermione was annoyed at the attempt at small talk, feeling she deserved better. But another part felt that familiar warmth make itself present in her chest. Despite the mundane statement, that was the first time in days that Narcissa had said something that didn’t feel practiced.

Her eyes went up to the sea of stars, easily identifying the lion constellation in the sky. Indeed, Leo was unusually bright and clear, roaring into the universe. Something in her felt that Narcissa was trying to say something beyond the banal conversation starter.

“Yes,” she agreed, eyes scanning the starry night sky. “The one I can’t quite see is Hydra.” It was a
lie – she could name all the constellations she had studied in this very tower.

Narcissa chuckled, and from the corner of her eye Hermione could see the other witch’s eyes gleaming. “Not surprising,” she quipped, stepping just barely closer to Hermione. She raised her hand, as if she could reach and trace the constellation’s pattern on the sky itself. “Despite being the largest of Ptolemy’s constellations, its only notably bright star is Alphard.”

Hermione followed Narcissa’s delicate finger as it traced the stars, trailing the starry pattern she already knew.

“How so?” Hermione found herself asking, turning ever so slightly and dusting her fingertips over the rail, as if subconsciously moving closer.

“Hydra reminds me of my own family” Narcissa said after identifying the constellation. She chuckled appreciatively “family names aside.” She leaned over the railing with a wistful look in her eyes.

“Big, ancient, and important” Narcissa said playfully, but her look remained pensive. “Not to mention lacklustre despite its grandeur, save a few exceptions.”

The statement puzzled Hermione. Narcissa turned to look at her, and the brunette’s confusion made her smile. “In the Black’s long, winding, serpentine family tree, there are very few notable bright stars.” She said. “I see them as blackened burnt spots on a tapestry, but they’re the brightest and most illuminating in a long line of unpleasantness.”

Hermione sighed, turning to face Narcissa more directly. She had taken another step in the blonde’s direction; she had but to stretch her hand to touch Narcissa’s arm, which rested upon the railing.

“I am not one of them.” Narcissa suddenly said, taking Hermione by surprise.

“I beg to differ” the brunette responded truthfully. “I think you have more than earned having your head blasted off your own family tree” she finished lamely.

Narcissa laughed, and the sound was like music; it inflated Hermione’s chest with fondness and heat.

“I’m serious” she reasoned, feeling a smile beginning to tug at her lips. “Look at what you’ve done, Narcissa. To my parents, to Black Manor. To me.”

Narcissa’s expression sobered, and she eyed Hermione with uncertainty for a moment. Her head hung down after a soft sigh escaped her lips.

“I think not, Hermione.”

“Why?” Hermione questioned, taking the plunge and reaching out to touch Narcissa’s arm. Narcissa trembled at her tentative touch, but the Slytherin did not budge. Instead, her hand came to rest atop Hermione’s, brushing timid patterns upon her knuckles. “I don’t want to push you” the brunette added as an afterthought, “but I... I want to get to know you better, Narcissa.”

Narcissa’s hand stilled for a brief moment. She smiled, albeit a little sadly. “You already know me far better than most.”

Hermione could sense the truth to that statement, but she also knew deep down that it wasn’t all there was to it. To this. Whatever this was.
“And I’m thankful for that,” she said sincerely. Who would have thought she’d find herself getting so close to Narcissa Black? The Hermione from ten years ago would have scoffed at the preposterous notion. “But... I’ve come to know you as a wonderful, intelligent, complex woman, Narcissa” Hermione began, unsure where this bout of confidence was coming from. “You just... captivate me.”

“Hermione,” Narcissa breathed out, grasping the brunette’s hand a little more tightly and looking a little exasperated, out of her depth “There’s so much you don’t know about me.”

“I’d like to learn” Hermione confessed. “If you’ll let me.”

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple” Narcissa admitted with a pained look. She straightened. “May I confess something?”

“Yes.” Hermione blurted, the sound of her own blood being pumped through her veins deafening in her ears.

“I am a selfish, awful woman” Narcissa asserted, waving off Hermione’s immediate protestations with another squeeze of her hand. “I never expected you to be so... kind to me. But you were, you still are, and I came to greatly enjoy your company. I don’t deserve your kindness or your sympathy, and yet you give them so freely, so earnestly. I can’t help but take them, greedily.”

“If I give them so freely” Hermione started, her Gryffindor bravery bringing her other hand to rest upon the junction between Narcissa’s neck and shoulder, feeling the shiver the touch elicited in the soft gasp that left Narcissa’s throat “how can you be selfish in accepting them?”

Hermione felt Narcissa swallow under her touch, her breath shallower than it had been.

“Because,” she began again, and her eyes glimmered with unshed tears, “if you knew all there is to know about me, you wouldn’t. I choose to take your kindness and compassion precisely because I know I am most undeserving.”

Hermione looked so deeply into Narcissa’s eyes she wondered if she would drown in their tempestuous depths. Her gaze lowered to Narcissa’s rosy lips, and she felt the other woman’s heartbeat in her hand. She felt her stomach do summersaults and her throat go dry, and at once realized there was one moment, one single opportunity to do the unthinkable and bring her lips to Narcissa’s.

She had to let it pass.

“Can you let me decide for myself?” She pleaded, battling her own desire. “Please?”

Narcissa looked uncertain, and Hermione had to ask herself if the other witch had felt the charge of the moment pass through them like a whip of lightning.

“I don’t know” Narcissa confessed, sounding so fragile Hermione felt a protective surge rush through her body, wanting to hold her close. “I’m not sure I’ll be able.”

Hermione smiled, gently tilting Narcissa’s chin upwards. “You’ll just have to trust me.”
Narcissa regarded the unsightly black mark staining her robe sleeve with quiet consternation. The stain – an ugly blot of ink that had bled through the fine woven fibres of her expensive robe – happened after some careless strokes of her quill, which had been overladen with ink. She looked down at the parchment she had been writing on.

Her sleeve and hand had left an unpleasant streak of ink. The usual loops and curls of her handwriting, once praised by many a teacher, had become erratic and clumsy – she could barely recognize those pointy L’s, those boxy A’s. To her horror, it seemed she had written the same line twice in her distraction.

The ugly stain seemed to regard her right back, responding to her dismay with a brand of unique disdain she had come to associate with her mother. Her mind idly wondered what Druella would think of such atrocious penmanship, or such clumsy writing practices. “Undignified”, her mother would most likely say, with her signature scowl and cold voice. “Poor and inelegant, clearly indicative of your weakness of will. Sharpen your quill and write the line ‘I shall mind my penmanship like a lady befitting my most undeserved station’ one thousand times.”

Narcissa had to shake the image of her mother’s disapproving scowl from her mind; a twinge of a long-forgotten pain made her stained writing hand twitch and contract involuntarily. The quill she held dropped to the parchment with the uncontrolled movement.

The Potions Professor flexed her hand, disheartened at the return of an action that had been painstakingly curbed years and years ago. Her eyes found the mess on the parchment before her once again – the streak of ink, her illegible scrawl, the stains on her hand and sleeve.

She reached for her wand, muttering an annoyed Tergeo at her soiled sleeve. Watching the ink being slowly siphoned away by her magic gave her no satisfaction; the fact she had to perform it at all made her uneasy.

This was unlike her, this distraction. Narcissa had always prized her ability to compartmentalize her feelings and emotions. It was the one skill she had been thankful to learn from her mother; it had helped her tremendously through life, even if the arduous process of mastering it scarred her deeply. But now, her emotions were scattered and unkempt in her mind – it was as if the carefully spun yarn of her feelings had been unravelled and now lay in a messy pile.

And who had been the one to pull the thread? None other than Hermione Granger, Brightest Witch of Her Age, Gryffindor’s Golden Girl.

It was madness – that much Narcissa knew. Friendship, companionship – that was one thing. Thinking she had misread the girl’s gaze had been a fluke – Narcissa had never misinterpreted anything at all. It had all been wishful thinking on her part, a part of her that hoped that what she was seeing so plainly was not the truth.

But that night, in the Astronomy Tower? Not even her strong, wilful ignorance could misconstrue the intensity with which Hermione’s eyes burned then.

It was desire.

Narcissa felt foolish for deliberately dismissing the possibility from the start. She had thought the pull she felt towards the young Gryffindor had been one-sided – that Hermione’s fondness was
merely a product of a natural curiosity begging to be sated.

She could see clearly now, it wasn’t so. Hermione’s gaze had been as clear and bright as the constellations they named in the obsidian skies, burning like embers in the night.

The question was now, what could she do?

The obvious answer was to put an immediate stop to it – to change their dynamics, to be nothing by cordial until Hermione understood that Narcissa needed to establish limits and boundaries they should not ever cross. That would certainly be the most sensible thing to do.

However, Narcissa had meant what she told Hermione: she was a selfish, greedy woman. Plus, she had already tried cordial, and the way it made Hermione look at her like a complete stranger made her utterly miserable.

Could she dare give into her selfishness and keep the young professor’s company, in whatever form it was given? She scoffed to herself. A young Narcissa would not have hesitated to take it – it would be advantageous in all fronts to befriend Hermione Granger. But the present Narcissa, with all she had lost – and all she had gained – knew how precious such a gift could be.

Because that is what Hermione Granger was. A gift. Narcissa could not help but look at the Gryffindor with absolute awe, because Hermione was awe-inspiring and formidable, an astonishing presence in her life she could never have predicted.

And the fact that Hermione seemed so resolute in taking the good and the bad that made Narcissa... that was what tempted her most in the brunette. Not her extraordinary intelligence or her spectacular magic, but her fierce convictions and understanding nature. If Hermione had found the strength within herself to comfort Narcissa as she cried for Bellatrix, was there anything the Gryffindor could not do?

Would it be so bad if she knew the whole truth?

Perhaps not. But what if Hermione’s understanding and fondness also had limits, and the truth pushed past them?

That would be catastrophic.

Her self-reflection was interrupted by a tentative knock on her door. Narcissa’s heart swelled with anticipation; there was usually only one person in the castle who ventured down to her office at this hour of the night. A certain Transfiguration Professor.

“Come in,” she called, tossing the streaked parchment in her wastebasket.

Narcissa was surprised to see none other than Harry Potter himself standing awkwardly at her open door. Despite growing into a tall, strong Auror, some of his manners could still be decidedly adolescent in their timid nature. It was nearly endearing.

“Good evening, Ms. Black.”

“Mr. Potter,” she greeted back, standing to receive him. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

“I’m just bringing you some post” he quipped, brandishing an envelope.

Narcissa smiled. “The Boy-Who-Lived, reduced to a post-owl. How the mighty have fallen” she
joked.

Harry smiled widely, adjusting his spectacles. He walked purposefully to her desk, handing her the envelope addressed to William White. Narcissa looked at him appreciatively.

“She received his last letter, then?”

Harry nodded in confirmation. “Not using owls certainly makes it more difficult, but I think yours was the right call. Bones has an eye on the house, so she’s keeping me updated.”

Narcissa took the envelope, taking a minute to inspect William’s mother’s handwriting. It was very small and cramped, shaky and nearly illegible. The envelope was quite thick, as if Mrs. White had written several pages to her son. Narcissa could understand why – they had no contact during the first semester, and she knew how much a mother could miss their child the first time they were away.

It had taken very little time and observation on Auror Bones’ part to determine that Robert White was an aggressive, controlling sort of man. His wife Martha, so meek and loving, clearly missed their son dearly – her longing was punctuated by frequent visits to the boy’s empty bedroom whenever her husband was not around.

The odd post-delivery system had been her idea once Hermione informed her Harry had put one of his Aurors in charge of watching over the White residence. William seemed desperate to contact his mother, but clearly the usual owl post had been out of the question. So she had offered for William to write his letters and give them to her – she would in turn make sure they found their way to Susan Bones, who would ingeniously deliver them along with the residence’s usual Muggle post.

“Thank you for bringing it to me. William will be pleased to hear back from his mother,” she said truthfully. “But did it warrant you coming all the way here? An owl would have sufficed.”

The Chosen One gave her a sheepish grin. “Ah, yeah, well. Figured I’d drop by and see Hermione too, y’know.”

Narcissa quirked an eyebrow. For someone who had eluded Voldemort for years, Harry Potter was an atrociously bad liar. There was something he wasn’t telling her.

“Would you care for some tea, Mr. Potter?” Narcissa offered with a knowing glimmer in her gaze, already snapping her fingers to summon for some tea before the Auror had the chance to respond.

“Don’t mind if I do” he said, taking a seat on one of the chairs facing her desk. “I also wanted to thank you, you know, for helping with William.”

Narcissa took her own seat, bemused. “No need to thank me. William is a student of mine, and a Slytherin. I do no more than my duty.”

“That’s not true,” Harry argued as a tea set floated in, clattering onto the desk and distributing the teacups. “You could have just let WiSer deal with it.”

“Ah,” Narcissa interjected with a knowing look. “I believe you should thank Hermione, then. She’s the one who thought to contact you – I’m afraid she’s more familiar with ministerial incompetence than I am.” He raised an eyebrow, and she backtracked. “No offence intended to the good work of the DMLE.” she added hurriedly.

Harry laughed openly. “None taken. The bureaucracy is... a little disheartening, for sure. But I
don’t mean calling me – I meant this” he gestured towards the envelope she had set aside, “making sure he could still talk to his mom, even if he can’t contact her directly. Thank you for giving him the opportunity.”

Narcissa took a moment to ponder that as she sipped at her tea. “You sympathize with him,” she said, looking down into her teacup. “I was only recently made aware of your extended family. The Dursleys?”

The young Auror shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “They were... well, living with them was terrible. I mean, Dudley – that’s my cousin – he came around after a while. I don’t speak to my uncle at all, but sometimes my aunt writes me.”

That surprised Narcissa, especially after Hermione’s recounting of Harry’s life before he finally came to Hogwarts. Harry could see her surprise plainly.

“I suppose ‘Mione told you about how they hated magic. My aunt and uncle still do, but sometimes...” he took a deep breath, and his shoulders sagged considerably. Narcissa could see a much older Harry Potter, one that had carried the weight of his responsibility to the Wizarding World for far too long when he was far too young for such a task. “I don’t know anything about my parents. Most people who could tell me about them are dead.” He said simply, his green eyes sad.

“Surely that can’t...” Narcissa began reflexively, only to be stunned by the realization. After all, who were those closest to the Potters? Pettigrew, the mole. Her cousin Sirius. Remus Lupin. So many others from the original Order of the Phoenix.

All dead.

Harry gave her a sad smile. “Aunt Petunia still doesn’t like magic... but she tolerates the occasional letter whenever I want to know a little about my mother’s past.”

Narcissa began to comprehend just now how little Harry knew about his own parents. She could not relate, not even a little – her family’s history had always been a point of pride, painstakingly recorded for future generations to learn and commemorate. It struck her that she would be one of the few people to know of how Lily and James had been at school – they were in the same year, after all.

Her memories flashed back to her many tense interactions with Lily Evans. Perhaps she could tell Potter a little more about the woman his mother was, omitting certain details – like how she had nearly drowned Lily in a tub. Intentionally.

“I suppose I wouldn’t be of much help in this” she began, sending him the most comforting gaze she could muster. “But I would be happy to tell you about her, if you wish.”

His green eyes – Lily's green eyes, so intense and defiant – widened in genuine surprise.

“Oh! Could you, please?” he asked, his body language shifting to match his excitement. “I didn’t know you knew one another.”

“Well,” Narcissa continued rather sheepishly. She’d have to filter her interactions with Lily somewhat. “We were not exactly friends, as I’m sure you’re aware. But I worked with your mother on a few occasions – Potions assignments, namely. We were also Prefects together.”

Harry’s smile was wide. “I always heard about how good she was in Potions – mostly from Slughorn, but still.”
“Yes,” Narcissa confirmed, a little embarrassed by the memories. “Quite good, in fact. I believe she and I were spirited rivals in the subject during our entire acquaintance.”

She didn’t know exactly why, but whatever she said seemed to have brought some quiet happiness to the Auror’s eyes. His lips were still quirked in a shy smile, as if he appreciated immensely the little that Narcissa was able to provide.

She truly had never met someone as transparently genuine as Harry Potter.

“Thank you,” he said. “Could you tell me more, some time? If you’re willing?” His question was tentative, and he reminded her so much of a young Draco. How must it have been for this boy, this mark in Wizarding history, to grow up with no family to love him like a family should?

“It would be my pleasure, Mr. Potter.”

“Thank you.” He stood and bowed a little awkwardly before directing himself to her once more. “There was actually another reason I wanted to meet you today, Ms. Black.”

“Oh?” Narcissa questioned, unsurprised.

“The Anniversary Gala is coming up soon. I wanted to encourage you to attend this year.”

Narcissa frowned. The Anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts was solemnly celebrated each April, culminating in a grand gala at the Ministry after memorial services for those who had fallen in battle. Narcissa received invitations every year, and every year she declined, sending instead a generous donation to the school.

“I was just thinking,” Harry continued, evidently sensing her hesitation, “things have changed. You’ve helped so much, and you’re a Professor here now. It just feels right.” He didn’t push her. “Consider it, please?”

Narcissa nodded. “I will think about it, Mr. Potter. Thank you again for the letter.”

His smile returned, and it was blinding. “Great! I’ll leave you to your work then – maybe I’ll say hi to Hermione.”

Narcissa returned his grin. “Do send her my regards.”

Narcissa’s second interruption of the night scared the living daylights out of her. She had been absent-mindedly tidying her desk and trying to forget her earlier writing mishap when she was startled by screams coming from her fireplace’s general vicinity.

“**AUNTIE CISSA, HI, HELLO! ARE YOU THERE??**”

Teddy Lupin’s head had sprouted from the dying embers of her fire, startling her enough to make her drop the papers she had just gathered.

“Goodness! Teddy, you scared me.” She gasped, a hand flying to her chest in alarm. The boy seemed contrite, but only just barely – he was evidently excited about something.

“**SORRY! HELLO, AUNTIE, I WAS JUST WONDERING—**”

“**Teddy!**” Andromeda’s head was now comically emerging from the embers, right next to her
grandson. “You don’t have to scream into the Floo, Salazar’s Sakes, boy” her glowing eyes settled upon Narcissa with a bemused expression. “Oh, hello, Cissy. Teddy here wanted to ask you something.”

Narcissa smiled at their antics, her heart warm with happiness. “I’m all ears.”

“OH YES, ouch, sorry Grams! My birthday party is next week! I’m turning eleven! Please come!”

“Teddy, how do we phrase polite questions?” Andromeda admonished half-heartedly.

“Oh, yeah. Auntie Cissa, would you please come to my birthday party next week?” The boy’s head turned to his grandmother as if testing the waters. “I would be, uh, so very honoured with your presence.”

Andromeda’s disembodied head nodded her approval, and Narcissa had to laugh. “Of course I’ll be there, Teddy.” Another opportunity to spoil her grand-nephew and irritate Andromeda beyond measure? Narcissa wouldn’t miss it for the world.

“Knock-knock, is Professor Granger in?”

Hermione’s head whipped up from the intricate Rune formation she had been tinkering for the past few hours to find her best friend leaning smugly against her doorframe.

“Harry!” she exclaimed, overjoyed. “Get in here!”

The two friends shared a long hug. “How are things? How’s Ginny?”

The father-to-be (again) blanched comically at the question. “Pregnant and miserable and thus making me miserable. I still love her!” he added quickly.

Hermione chuckled. “Well, you’ve gotta – isn’t that what the whole marriage thing is about?”

He rolled his eyes dramatically. “Don’t remind me.”

Harry made himself at home, plopping down on one of Hermione’s chairs and eyeing the work on her desk curiously. “That doesn’t look like your normal Transfiguration fare,” he commented, his interested evident.

“Very observant, Potter. Five points to Gryffindor!” She rounded her desk, gesturing towards her handiwork. “These are some security wards I’ve been experimenting with. Could you try to reach into this runed circle?”

“Sure,” Harry quipped, stretching his arm over Hermione’s desk only to have his hand bump into an invisible wall. “Ow,” he said playfully, poking the unseen dome that formed the barrier. “Why does it feel so funny? Like I’m hitting a brick wall instead of a smooth one?”

“Oh, does it? Interesting!” Hermione exclaimed, eagerly reaching for her quill and dotting a few notes on a parchment already littered with her in-depth observations and complicated calculations. “Thanks for that – unfortunately the creator of the ward can’t really feel the full-effects of it, y’know, because—”

“Because their magical signature is the same” Harry interjected with a knowing smile. “I remember, Professor Granger – your impact at the DMLE is not easily forgotten.”
Hermione felt her ego inflate a little bit at the comment, but she felt it was deserved. She had been the youngest warding specialist to ever work for the DMLE – her ward designs were now some of the ones taught and tested in Auror training.

“What brings you to my humble abode at Hogwarts?” She finally asked after a cursory examination of her notes. She was getting close to unlocking the secrets of the Black Family wards, she could feel it. She couldn’t wait to show Narcissa what she was working on.

“I delivered a letter from William’s mother to Narcissa” her friend explained, and Hermione nodded in understanding. She was happy Narcissa had thought of a way for William to communicate with his mother discreetly. Harry had kept the two professors updated on the surveillance Auror Bones maintained at the White residence. Hermione still desperately wanted to do more for the young Muggle-born, but she was aware their hands were tied.

“That’s good,” she commented, vanishing her research to give Harry her full attention.

“I also wanted to see you and ask a favour.”

Hermione raised a brow. “A favour? What can a humble teacher such as myself do for the mighty Harry Potter, Head Auror of the DMLE, the Boy-Who-Lived, the Hero of the Wizarding World, The Chosen O—”

“Augh, save it!” Harry yipped, blushing up to the roots of his messy black hair. He shifted in his chair. “I wanted to talk about the Anniversary Gala?”

“Oh?” Hermione frowned. The Ministry’s Remembrance Gala was a function she was forced to attend every year. The Golden Trio were always guests of honour – there wasn’t much they could do to escape it. She liked having a memorial to those who had given their lives to their cause, but she loathed the gala. It never felt like the occasion to party, even if she understood that people wanted to celebrate the victory and commemorate more peaceful times. “What about it?”

Harry straightened in his seat. “I want you to convince Ms. Black to come this year.” Before Hermione could answer, he raised his hands to stop her “I know, I know, but hear me out...”

“Harry,” she interjected with a smile. “I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

“Oh,” Harry breathed out. He broke out in a grin. “Great! That’s brilliant – I've tried convincing her, but I figured since you two work together, maybe you’ll get a little more leverage” he laughed.

“I’ll do my best” Hermione replied, mock-saluting her friend.

Suddenly, she thought of her conversation with Kingsley. Would Harry know about the Ministry’s surveillance of Narcissa? Hermione could think of no reason why he wouldn’t -- he was Head Auror, after all. But she also could not imagine him keeping such information from her.

“Harry, could I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

Hermione swallowed. “I talked to Kingsley a little while ago. And he told me something about Narcissa.”

Harry furrowed his brow in confusion. “Kingsley? Why were you talking to him about Ms. Black?” He over Hermione’s chair, his features lined with worry. “Is something wrong? How can I help?”
“Oh, no, nothing’s wrong. Not really” Hermione waved him off. “I suppose you might as well know... Narcissa was one of the St. Mungo’s specialists who helped my parents regain their memories.”

Harry let out a low whistle. Hermione knew she didn’t need to explain the significance of her discovery – Harry, Ron, and eventually Draco had been there with her, at every false turn and dead-end in the arduous journey in restoring the Grangers’ memories. He knew how grateful Hermione had been to the Potions Department – and now he knew how thankful she was for Narcissa’s intervention.

By his look of surprise, Hermione surmised Harry hadn’t known either. Narcissa and Kingsley had kept the secret well.

“That’s... amazing, ‘Mione. Kingsley knew?”

“Yes,” Hermione nodded. “Narcissa asked him to keep it a secret from me. But that’s not what I wanted to ask you about. Kingsley told me something else” she took a deep, fortifying breath. “He said Narcissa was still under surveillance.”

Hermione could immediately see Harry didn’t know anything about it. She didn’t need Legilimency to read her friend; Harry was like an open book. Still, she felt compelled to ask.

“Do you know anything about that?”

“No,” he said firmly, and Hermione could tell he was getting frustrated. No one had been as quick to proclaim Narcissa’s innocence than Harry had been. “If there’s surveillance, it’s not coming from my department, or I would have known” he said bitterly.

The implication worried Hermione. “Would... would any Auror do this behind your back?”

Harry huffed angrily. “I would hope not. Unless Kingsley has Unspeakables doing it, I would hear about it.”

Hermione’s blood ran cold. “Would he?” she asked, voice wavering. “Would he have Unspeakables on the field, just to watch Narcissa?”

Harry looked defeated. “Had you asked me that yesterday, I would have said no. But I also would have said Kingsley wouldn’t bother tailing anyone after ten bloody years.” He hissed. “That’s unacceptable! Ms. Black saved me!”

“And she saved my parents,” Hermione added. “And she’s doing so much for the Wizarding World. Has been, for the past decade.” She sighed. “I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I” Harry said, his face solemn. “But bloody hell, ‘Mione, I’m going to find out. This isn’t right – Narcissa has done her share to make up for her time in the wrong side. It’s enough for me, it should be enough for Kingsley.”

Hermione let out a sigh of relief. She had an ally.
Chapter 33

The Potions Research and Development Department was the complete opposite of the rest of St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. While the hospital held a bustling energy with its never-ending movement of patients and Healers and all sorts of strange things – he had just seen a boy who had a literal beak for a nose – the Research Departments housed deep in the bowels of the magically altered building were starkly different.

The Potions Department reminded him a little of his time at Hogwarts – it was in the lowest floor, a basement that could have very well served as the damp, eerie Dungeons where students learned the first things about the difficult discipline. There were few lights, and the department itself was quite small; only ten or so witches and Wizards silently worked at their expansive benches, jotting down notes as their cauldrons simmered.

He didn’t even realize all the benches were separated by magical glass until he got close enough to see his reflection. A few of the researchers there spared him a glance as he walked by, his deep purple robes billowing behind him – it wasn’t every day that the Minister of Magic himself came to such a place.

None of them interested him in the least – the problem in his hands was far beyond their capacity, of that he was sure. No, none of them could help him, with the exception of the woman standing at the bench in the far corner of the room, somewhat isolated from the others. Her blonde hair was tied into a tight bun; she wore the white frock and protective apron that were the standard around dangerous brews, along with thick dragon-hide gloves. She had a golden cauldron on a low heat, her wand hand drawing lazy circles in the air atop it while the other busied itself with writing on a long piece of parchment already littered with notes.

If Narcissa noticed Kingsley Shacklebolt’s approach, she did not show it. He stood in her space, leaning over the bubbling cauldron with honest curiosity.

“I would not breathe in too closely if I were you, Minister” her soft voice admonished gently, giving him no other acknowledgement. “That is an Elixir of Lunacy you’re about to inhale.”

Kingsley reflexively held his breath – a wave of Narcissa’s wand enchanted a golden lid upon her cauldron. She concentrated solely on the notes before her.

“Madam Malfoy.” He greeted politely, making sure to include a formal bow. Narcissa’s face scrunched up in distaste.

“Black.” She said coolly.

“Right. Terribly sorry.”

The blonde raised an eyebrow, still not looking at Kingsley directly. “It is quite unusual for a Ministry official of your calibre to grace us with their presence” she said simply – Kingsley could not detect any malice in her tone, only a slight curiosity.

He laughed a little. “You’re quite right. I’m afraid I’m in need of assistance, Ms. Black.”

That caught her interest – Kingsley found himself on the direct line of sight of a pair of gleaming blue eyes. “How may I be of assistance?”

Kingsley produced a thick wad of parchment from within his robes – the file was incredibly
detailed and had been ultimately useless in an endeavour he now feared was to become an exercise in futility. Narcissa was their last hope.

“I thought you might be able to help me with a case I am working on.” He said sombrely, placing the file on the woman’s bench and motioning for her to open it.

Narcissa did, after eyeing him curiously for a few moments. Kingsley noted she was an incredibly fast reader – her eyes scanned each page madly, and no more than a few seconds went by before she flipped each one and began looking at the next.

The witch got perhaps halfway through the considerably large file before her head suddenly snapped up and she was facing him again.

“I’m sorry, I can’t help you,” she said flatly. “Perhaps someone in the Ministry’s Memory Division would be better suited for this case.”

Kingsley tried not to let the immediate rebuttal rattle him – he had expected it.

“Narcissa” he pleaded, and he could tell that she wasn’t happy by his usage of her first name. “I would urge you to reconsider. You are the only one who can help. Let me assure you, this matter” he placed his heavy hand onto the half-open file for emphasis “is of the utmost importance.”

The look she gave him was guarded. “What makes you think I would be of any help in this – provided I’m even willing to entertain the notion of helping you in the first place?”

Kingsley took a moment to exhale deeply before speaking. “Do you remember November, 1981?”

Narcissa visibly stiffened; her gaze turned impossibly colder, and Kingsley had a very clear memory of seeing that set of icy blue eyes in the Wizengamot as Lucius Malfoy was tried for his crimes and found innocent on account of the Imperius Curse allegedly used against him.

“Vividly.” She said simply, her voice as cold as her gaze.

“Then you remember how I was a young Auror at the time. How I interviewed your husband and yourself before the trials began.”

“Now that I don’t remember so vividly.” She quipped venomously.

“I do” he responded. “I also interviewed Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrange – both of whom said you trained with your sister Bellatrix quite frequently. Bellatrix, who always used her superior skills and understanding of the human mind for nefarious purposes.”

He pushed the file closer to Narcissa, who looked at it as if she were willing it to burst into flames. “Now tell me – why would the infamous Bellatrix Lestrange take the time and effort to teach her housewife sister anything at all? Wouldn’t she be busy with her own work for Voldemort?”

The blonde flinched at the name; Kingsley pressed on. “Surely you supported your husband, but you were never nothing more than the Lady of the House, no?”

Narcissa raised one defiant brow, and Kingsley felt emboldened to keep going. “So I took the time to look over your Hogwarts records. Top of your class, impeccable work in Potions and Charms. I put it in my head then you had something to do with Lucius odd memory loss, but I could never prove it. Maybe I was wrong then. But now, you work here” he gestured around the quiet laboratory – some of Narcissa’s co-workers abruptly turned their heads back to their own work,
“and let’s just say, a common Pure-blooded housewife wouldn’t be here researching neurological pathway reconstruction.”

The blonde scoffed. “Then it seems to me you greatly underestimate housewives and their considerable talents.”

Kingsley sighed. “Listen, this is an opportunity to do some good. At least take a good look at the case. I won’t lie to you – we are pretty desperate. I’ve been to the Memory Division already—no one wants to touch this one.”

“Now that doesn’t surprise me at all” Narcissa quipped, taking the file from under his hand and flipping it to a particular page. “This goes far beyond memory erasure, or even memory manipulation,” she explained, brows furrowed in what seemed to be a mixture of awe and frustration. “This is... this is like a memory implant. Whoever did this clearly did not want the original memories to be restored.”

“I assure you, they did – they still do, desperately so. The complexity of the spell was borne out of extreme circumstances, which are now no longer an issue.”

Narcissa looked unconvinced. “Extreme circumstances notwithstanding, even attempting a full memory restoration with this amount of memory tampering would be... reckless.”

“Never mind reckless. Would it be possible?” Kingsley insisted, holding onto a faint flicker of hope that this would not be the end of the rope – it couldn’t be.

The Minister could see he had been too transparent in his tone – Narcissa looked at him like she thought he was hiding something. She wasn’t wrong.

“Tell me who this is for.” She demanded.

“Answer my question first. Is it possible?”

Narcissa let out a long breath, then looked at the pages before her once again. She flipped them more carefully now; her eyes no longer darted rapidly over the parchment. Kingsley waited patiently as the witch spent several minutes looking over every single page of the file, right to the very end. When she looked back up, she seemed terribly conflicted.

“Hypothetically speaking...”

“Please,” he interrupted. “No hypotheticals. Can you do it or not?”


The dim flicker of hope sparked anew in Kingsley’s chest. That was already more than they had gotten from all sorts of Ministry specialists. He chose to count it as a small victory.

“Are you confident in your ability to do it?” He asked, unable to keep that hope out of his voice.

“Yes.” Narcissa affirmed strongly, but then looked downcast. “At least, I’m quite certain my theories are sound. I’ve had neither opportunity nor reason to test them.”

“Then let me give you both. Right now.” Kingsley insisted – there was no way he was letting this opportunity go, not when they were the closest they had ever been.
“There is another problem” Narcissa added glumly. “Another reason why I’ve never tested my theories. The method...” she took a deep breath, sounding pained. “It is not Ministry-sanctioned – nor should it be, and for good reason.”

“That won’t be important” he said gravely, knowing at once he meant it. Narcissa’s posture shifted completely in her shock.

“I don’t think you understand...” she began tentatively. Kingsley waved her off.

“I understand perfectly well, Ms. Black. This is important. Trust me – the Ministry will gladly look the other way if these individual’s memories are restored. No matter the means.”

Narcissa looked wary; her brows furrowed, distrusting. “Is that so? And should I fail? Would the Ministry look the other way then? Would it meddle even more in my affairs – perhaps it would step up the surveillance? Or should I prepare for Azkaban?” she challenged hotly.

Kingsley raised his hands in surrender. “You’re our only hope, Narcissa. You’ll have carte-blanche to work on this however you see fit.” He assured her. Inside, however, he was undeniably impressed Narcissa even knew of the surveillance – the ones assigned to her case were the very best when it came to discretion. Clearly Narcissa was better.

The witch still looked doubtful. “Tell me who it is.” She demanded firmly.

“Give me your word you’ll work on it.” Kingsley countered. “I need your word, Narcissa, or we may lose everything.”

Narcissa took a long time to decide. She looked at him, then her gaze was diverted back to the file on her desk, sitting there like an awkward pause, overladen with their heavy mutual silence. He released a breath he hadn’t known he was holding when Narcissa finally looked back at him.

“I cannot make any promises.” She said after an eternity. “But I give you my word, I will try.”

Kingsley could barely contain an exclamation of relief. “Just give it your best shot” he insisted. “That’s all we ask. You’ll have access to all of the material we have gathered on the patients’ condition, as well as any notes from other Healers and Memory Experts that have seen them thus far.”

“Alright,” Narcissa sighed, looking equal parts curious and resigned. “Can you tell me who they are now?”

Kingsley took a deep breath. Fair was fair.

“They’re Hermione Granger’s parents.”

Narcissa visibly flinched at the war hero’s name; the hands that rested on her desk immediately balled into fists, and her eyes were wide and... terrified.

“Absolutely not!” She hissed with a grimace. “I’m sorry, I can’t help you. Not with this! Not for her.”

“Narcissa!” Kingsley pleaded. “You gave your word.”

The Potions researcher looked utterly furious. “That was before I was aware I’d be meddling with Hermione Granger’s family affairs!” She seethed, pushing the file to the edge of her work bench as if merely looking at it were some sort of crime.
“You gave your word! Think of the good this can do – think of how much it could help your image.” Kingsley argued – surely Narcissa would understand how this was an opportunity someone like her ought not to throw away? “Let the Wizarding World see your improvement.”

It had been the wrong thing to say; he knew it as soon as he saw her eyes change from a sea of calm to a wrathful ocean in the span of a second.

“That has nothing to do with this!” She nearly screeched. Several heads in the lab turned in their direction; Narcissa cleared her throat and continued at a more discreet volume. “She will never accept my help – nor should she. I would think her insane if she let me within a mile of her parents!”

Kingsley was baffled. “Narcissa, whatever differences you and Hermione have had in the past...”

“Differences?!” she interrupted wrathfully. “Differences? You don’t understand at all! I was there, Shacklebolt. When Bellatrix tortured her in MY living room! I did nothing!” There was one moment there where Kingsley thought the former Lady Malfoy would burst into tears – something he was woefully unprepared for. However, she deftly schooled her expression again in one fell swoop, settling it back into the Ice Queen mask he was decidedly more familiar with. “She hates me – she won’t want my help.”

“Let her be the judge of that,” Kingsley contended. “I think you may be...”

“Absolutely not.” Narcissa interjected, then paused for another breath. “I will help” she declared, then immediately raised a hand to stop him from interrupting. “But she must never know.” Her eyes turned cold again. “I mean it, Shacklebolt. One word of this to her, and I walk out -- I don’t care if you send me to Azkaban.”

Narcissa’s eyes burned with such intensity he had no choice but to believe her.

“You’ve got yourself a deal.”

“Oh, gross! Don’t step there – Hagrid’s left some rotting slugs out!”

Narcissa laughed as Hermione energetically brushed the soles of her shoes onto the bristly green grass trying to clean off some of the disgusting slime she had unwittingly stepped on.

“Hermione, are you a witch or not?” She asked playfully, taking care not to make the same mistake Hermione had thirty seconds before. The brunette looked sheepish, but Narcissa waved it away – along with the offending slime, though that was done with a lazy wave of her wand.

“Thank you,” Hermione murmured appreciatively.

The two women had taken the opportunity given by the fair weather to take a long walk along the grounds. It was becoming a bit of a habit in the short Easter break – every day before supper, they would grade in the Teacher’s Lounge for a little while, and then move to the beautiful castle grounds until it was dinner time. It was a time for talking, for discussing their wards research, or for companionable silence.

They were quickly becoming Hermione’s favourite part of the day.
Hermione felt that they had reached a kind of understanding in the Astronomy Tower – well, at least she hoped. Narcissa certainly seemed comfortable with being a little more open, and Hermione was taking a step back, deciding not to push for the answers she so desperately craved before Narcissa was ready.

The Slytherin was full of secrets, and Hermione very quickly decided that was not necessarily a bad thing. There were so many things she knew about Narcissa, but there were many more she didn’t -- all of them secrets of all kinds. She longed to ask about all of them – about Narcissa helping her parents, about the letters Lucius supposedly sent her, about the surveillance she was constantly under, about whatever truth scared her so.

Those were the kind of secrets that obviously worried Narcissa a lot – the kind she felt guilty sharing, the kind Hermione would gladly wait for, because in the meantime, she would preoccupy herself with discovering all the other secrets Narcissa harboured.

Like her favourite colour – Hermione suspected the obvious answer of ‘green’ was too obvious to be accurate, and she had started to notice that Narcissa seemed to wear more and more deep blues and shimmering greys recently. Another would be her favourite scent – she could guess eucalyptus, but wouldn’t it be thrilling to find out if there were more? Yet another, perhaps, could be Narcissa’s favourite time of day – would she prefer the quietude of early mornings, or the warmth of the late afternoon sun, or even the silent solace of a starry sky?

Simple, perhaps, but what about other secrets, those that were more complex, more fascinating, more intimate? What was Narcissa’s fondest memory of childhood? What could be the funniest joke she ever heard? How had she felt when she first walked through the mighty doors of Hogwarts as a first-year? Who did she consider her heroes?

Those were only some of the multitude of secrets Narcissa still held, and Hermione vowed to discover them all. Narcissa had once been some sort of enigma for her to solve; now she was a woman whose very nature was an exhilarating riddle, and understanding her was so much more worthwhile than solving any puzzle. The best part about it all was that Narcissa seemed more and more receptive to being understood – that thrilled Hermione to no end.

Hermione thought deeply about all those secrets as they approached the Black Lake. She had secrets of her own – she could only hope Narcissa was as interested in figuring them out as she was.

“What a beautiful sunset.” Narcissa commented once they strolled by the calm shores of the lake. A large ripple near the middle of the massive body of water revealed the presence of the Giant Squid – its movement created a gentle cascade of little waves hitting the pebbles of the shore.

“It really is.” Hermione agreed. The purples and oranges in the sky looked even more sublimely beautiful when reflected in Narcissa’s eyes – it was as if they contained entire universes in their blue depths. She quickly looked down before Narcissa could notice her staring.

Looking at some of the round pebbles beneath their feet, Hermione was struck with an idea. It was childish, and perhaps a little stupid, but she felt comfortable enough around the Slytherin to have a little fun.

“Watch this!” She quipped happily, bending down and selecting the roundest, smoothest pebble she could see. Narcissa had raised a quizzical brow, but Hermione simply grinned, tossing the pebble in the air and catching it again with a challenge in her gaze.

“I am a champion stone-skipper.” She proudly proclaimed, immensely happy her silly declaration
made Narcissa smile.

“War hero, warding specialist, accomplished duellist, and now stone-skipper?” Narcissa chimed through a little laugh. “My, my, Ms. Granger. You truly are a woman of many talents.”

Hermione puffed up her chest and straightened her shoulders; she got into position at the very edge of the dark waters. She turned to Narcissa with a wink. “I have many skills.”

With that, she hurled the pebble, minding the angle and the speed of her turn. The sound of the little stone hitting the water – about nine times, if she counted correctly – was incredibly satisfying as it echoed through the entire surface.

“Ha!” the brunette exclaimed in childish, gleeful triumph. “And that’s how it’s do—”

She was interrupted as another pebble zoomed past her at incredible speed. Hermione nearly felt her jaw disconnect as the stone thrown by Narcissa skipped on the waters an astounding sixteen times before it finally sunk to the bottom of the lake.

“What in Merlin’s name!” She blurted, turning bewildered to face Narcissa, who stood looking very satisfied with herself a few paces behind, tossing another stone in the air and catching it repeatedly. “How did you do that?”

Narcissa smiled broadly. “The secret” she explained, cheerfully smug “is in the angle of the wrist.” With that, she whipped the stone at the water – Hermione counted nineteen skips this time.

“I can’t believe it” Hermione groaned, overplaying her defeat. “I’ve been dethroned!”

Narcissa laughed. “I suppose all those summers at Black Manor finally paid off” she commented. “I haven’t done this since I was a little girl.”

“Bullshit!” Hermione wheezed, and the cursing, along with the brunette’s overly dramatic tone, were more than enough to send Narcissa into a fit of giggles. “If this is you out of practice, maybe I never was the stone-skipping champion to begin with.”

“With a mere nine skips to your name, I’m inclined to agree.” Narcissa quipped, and Hermione’s heart swelled inexplicably with the knowledge that Narcissa had paid enough attention to her little dumb stunt to actually count the number of skips.

“Ouch, hurtful.” Hermione sighed dramatically. “And I thought I was teaching Teddy well. Maybe he needs a new teacher.”

“Hm, perhaps that is for the best. Stick to transfiguration – that is more your area of expertise.” Narcissa joked.

Hermione brought a hand to her chest in mock-hurt. “Rude! Who knew Narcissa Black could be such a cheeky little jerk?!”

Narcissa’s grin was blinding. “Anyone who knows even a little about your average Slytherin.”

“Touché. But you’re not your average Slytherin, are you?”

“Evidently not. You forget I am also a stone-skipping champion.”

Hermione raised her hands in surrender. “I concede defeat. You can take over Teddy’s instruction over at his party this Saturday,” she grinned. “Andromeda told me you were coming. We could go
together if you’d like.”

“That would be good... though I may have to stop by Diagon Alley first – I must pick up his gift.”

Hermione raised a brow. “Pick up? Could they not owl it?”

Narcissa shook her head. “I’m afraid not – it’s a new item, and so there are some restrictions on shipping.” She rolled her eyes. “Such an inconvenience for a broom.”

“Oh?” Hermione prompted. “A broom?”

“A Firebolt Ultimate – it just came out” Narcissa explained. Hermione didn’t have to know much about Quidditch to know that any Firebolt broom was a big deal – Harry and Ron had made sure she knew that little tid-bit. “It has a chestnut handle and bristles made of holly, which I personally found to be an odd choice considering that all previous models had been made with...”

Hermione knew full-well that Narcissa, much like herself, didn’t like Quidditch; that was no secret. She also knew that Narcissa had most likely been extremely thorough in her research – she wouldn’t buy a broom simply because it was said to be the best – she would find out exactly what made it the best, even if she could not care less about it. Because she cared about Teddy. Hermione had slowly come to discover how dedicated Narcissa was to little things that had no bearing in her life which could matter quite a lot in somebody else’s. Like getting Teddy a good broom. Like finding a way for William to communicate with his mother. Like helping her parents – she guessed – or even creating Black Manor.

And that was why hearing Narcissa ramble about brooms for the next several minutes was completely enrapturing.
“That seems... uh... like quite a broom, for an 11-year-old.” Hermione commented dumbly as she walked by Narcissa’s side in Diagon Alley.

“Oh?” Narcissa questioned, raising a worried brow. “You don’t think it’s too much, do you?”

“Not at all!” Hermione lied, desperately holding in a laugh. She had nearly fainted on the spot when the shopkeeper at Quality Quidditch had given Narcissa the total of her purchase. The Firebolt Ultimate cost more than the house her parents currently lived in, and she had just come to learn it had been specially designed for Seekers – speed above all else.

Hermione could tell that Narcissa had seen straight through her obvious deceit, but the blonde did not seem at all discouraged. No, Narcissa looked... smug.

“Perfect” she murmured to no one in particular. “I’m positive it’ll drive Drommie to insanity!”

Hermione could only laugh at that. “Why would you want to drive poor Andromeda insane? You already won the disagreement over the inheritance money.”

“Yes,” Narcissa confirmed with a glimmer in her eye. “Now I must bask in my victory and gloat.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “You Blacks have an odd way of gloating.”

Narcissa merely shrugged. Hermione had another question about Narcissa’s relentless spoiling if her grandnephew on the tip of her tongue; however, her train of thought was summarily interrupted by a booming, delighted voice calling from a few paces behind them.

“Madam Malfoy? Goodness gracious, I cannot believe my luck!”

Narcissa visibly stiffened upon hearing her old married name – Hermione only noticed because they were standing so close together, nearly shoulder to shoulder.

The two witches turned to see a rather tall, paunchy old wizard strutting in their direction. His hair and beard were more grey than their original hazel; he wore deep purple robes that looked quite expensive, judging by the fine silver embroidery found on his exposed waistcoat. He smiled widely as he approached them, greeting Narcissa with a formal bow.

“Lady Malfoy, I am deeply honoured to make your acquaintance” he said, still deep in his bow. Hermione was a little miffed he had not even acknowledged her presence.

“Lady Malfoy, I am deeply honoured to make your acquaintance” he said, still deep in his bow. Hermione was a little miffed he had not even acknowledged her presence.

“I go by Narcissa Black now” Narcissa corrected as if by rote – Hermione noted the corner of her mouth twitching in displeasure. “My deepest apologies, Sir, but I don’t believe we have been properly introduced.”

“Oh, I am terribly sorry, Lady Mal... Lady Black. Where are my manners! Allow me to introduce myself – I am Gareth Davies. I believe my boys are students of yours. Edgar has said a lot about you, and your wonderful lessons in Potions!”

“Oh, of course.” Narcissa responded, politely offering her hand in what was sure an antiquated Pureblooded greeting that Hermione had never seen her perform before. Davies resumed his bow as he took the proffered hand, pressing a kiss onto Narcissa’s knuckles. “Please to make your acquaintance.”
Hermione felt an odd spasm in her arm – she wanted to bat Davies’ face away from Narcissa – seeing his lips press another kiss to her hand made her blood boil for reasons she could not name.

The strong, visceral reaction surprised the young professor, but she had no time to analyse it, as Narcissa was introducing her to Mr. Davies.

“May I introduce you to Stuart’s Head of House, Mr. Davies. This is Hermione Granger, our incredibly talented Transfiguration Professor.”

Hermione spared Davies a stiff smile – something about him rubbed her the wrong way. He reciprocated in kind – there was bow, no hand-kissing, and his smile didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Of course” he responded, barely sparing Hermione a second glance. “Who does not know of the Brightest Witch of her generation?” He turned to face Narcissa rather quickly.

“Lady Malfoy...”

“Black, if you please” Narcissa interjected.

“Yes, Lady Black, of course...” Davies began again, looking a little put off at being interrupted, but Narcissa kept smiling at him, so he pressed on. “How fortuitous to happen upon you like this. I’ve been meaning to owl you about some important matters.”

“Is that so?” Narcissa inquired. Hermione felt her heart lurch uncomfortably in her chest – why was Narcissa smiling at him like that? “Are there any concerns regarding Edgar?”

Davies waved off her question with a booming laugh. “Not at all!” he replied heartily. “I was merely aiming to inquire about your interest in a possible business opportunity,” he explained.

“Oh, I’m afraid I am in a bit of a hurry” Narcissa evaded, suddenly looping her free arm into the crook of Hermione’s elbow. The pressure the brunette felt suddenly dissipated, and a fuzzy, comfortable heat settled in its place. “But do feel free to owl me at any time” the blonde reassured the wizard.

“Very well!” He beamed – his gaze never once swayed in Hermione’s direction. His eyes scanned the broom case Narcissa had been carried since they had picked it up at Quality Quidditch. “Ah! A Firebolt! Good choice, but do let me know if you’d be interested in trying out something new – my FeatherLight broom line has just come out – ergonomically designed for the modern witch, you see!” he quipped with a waggle of his bushy brows.

“I will certainly think about it” Narcissa said politely.

“Splendid, splendid!” Davies’ eyes glimmered “Cygnus would be chuffed! He and I were business partners back in the day.”

Hermione felt Narcissa flinch – just barely – at the mention of her late father’s name. How strange.

“Oh, I was not aware you and my father were acquainted.” She observed politely.

“Acquainted?” Davies laughed. “We were the best of pals, old Cygnus and I. Went to Hogwarts together – he was the best man at my wedding!”

Narcissa’s smile became stiff. “How wonderful.” Hermione could tell that Davies had no idea of how little Narcissa meant it. The Gryffindor, for her part, was not only more confused at the odd
exchange. “Now, Mr. Davies, my deepest apologies, but we have a prior engagement and it would not do to be tardy.”

Davies relented at last, taking one last formal bow and taking Narcissa’s hand once again, patting it softly before dropping another kiss that had Hermione inexplicably seeing red.

“Very well – I know better than to come between a witch and her shopping!” he snickered. “Look for my owl in a few days’ time!” he reminded her with a wave, letting the two witches continue on their way. “Goodbye, Lady Malfoy!”

Hermione felt herself being practically dragged away by Narcissa’s resolute hold on her elbow. She really wanted to say something – anything – to comment on the rather odd encounter that had just transpired, but to her surprise, Narcissa beat her to it once they turned into an alleyway past Flourish and Blotts.

“Merlin almighty” Narcissa hissed, finally releasing her hold and leaning onto the brick wall of the alleyway. “What a fucking pill!”

The expletive – and the way it seemed to seethe out of Narcissa in a burst of candid annoyance – sent Hermione into an uncontrollable fit of giggles right there on the street. Narcissa looked supremely embarrassed for a moment, but the feeling soon melted away as Hermione doubled over in laughter.

“Oh, Godric” Hermione gasped, holding onto her sides, which throbbed painfully due to the force of her laughter. “I didn’t know you could curse like that.”

Narcissa reddened, but smirked all the same. “Why ever not? I am a woman of many talents,” she retorted smugly. Hermione could only roll her eyes.

“I don’t doubt your capacity” she quipped with a knowing look. “I just thought that the ever-so-prim and proper Narcissa Black would be above such crude language.”

The blonde’s smirk widened considerably. “Perhaps,” she conceded. “But being improper can be rather... fun.”

“Indeed” Hermione laughed. “Everyone can use a ‘fuck’ every once in a while.” It took Hermione a second to process what had just come out of her mouth, but Narcissa was already laughing. “Ah! No, bollocks, I didn’t... Shit, I meant it’s good to curse every once in a while, not...” Hermione slapped her own forehead. “Merlin.”

“Quite right, Hermione, quite right.” Narcissa conceded, wiping tears of laughter from her blue eyes that sparkled in the afternoon sun. “In fact,” she winked “I believe you might be right on both counts.”

Hermione could only gape as Narcissa sauntered away.

Teddy’s eleventh birthday party, like most large, familiar gatherings did those days, took place at the Burrow. The cosy home and garden had been decorated – surprising no one – with a Quidditch theme. Harry had even pulled a few strings so that posters signed by some of his godson’s favourite players found their way among the delightful homemade decorations Molly and Andromeda had made so lovingly.
Hermione and Narcissa arrived together via side-along apparition – they popped into simultaneous existence at The Burrow’s apparition point still in the throes of laughter from their earlier exchange. Andromeda was the first to see them; she greeted the two giggleing witches with a raised brow, and her gaze dropped to where Hermione’s arm rested upon the small of Narcissa’s back.

“Merlin, what a cheery couple of witches you two are,” she commented, making Hermione instinctively withdraw her arm. “What is so funny?”

“Your sister, and her refined vulgarity” Hermione chortled, earning a playful slap from Narcissa. “Yeow!” she yelped. “Violence is decidedly not funny!”

Narcissa huffed, trying to sound haughty but failing rather miserably. “Then don’t do anything do deserve it.”

Hermione turned to Andromeda with a dramatic roll of her eyes. The eldest Black sister still looked at them as if they had descended from another planet.

“See the sort of abuse I have to tolerate, Andy?” The Gryffindor complained, walking up to greet Andromeda with a hug. “Where’s the birthday boy? Still with Harry?”

Andromeda nodded, then turned to answer Narcissa’s questioning look. “Teddy pays his respects to Remus and Nymphadora on his birthday, every year. He goes with Harry.” She explained kindly.

Narcissa at once looked deeply ashamed – Hermione noticed the vestiges of deep, all-consuming guilt clouding her blue gaze. She immediately returned to where Narcissa stood, looping their arms together and leading her towards the house.

“Come on – you’ve got to hide that present before he arrives.”

Narcissa shot the brunette a grateful glance. Andromeda still looked at them oddly, but her gaze narrowed once she noticed the unmistakable broom case her sister carried.

“Cissy,” she began, her tone admonishing. “That better not be a broom. Need I remind you, you gave him a broom last year! And a Firebolt, no less!”

Narcissa smirked. “Of course, Drommie, but they came out with a new one – what was I to do? Teddy should have up-to-date equipment.”

Andromeda groaned, but Hermione was already leading Narcissa away.

“She’s right” the brunette said once they were inside. “What will an eleven-year-old boy do with two professional-grade brooms?”

“Fine” Narcissa retorted, not looking even remotely bothered. “I suppose his godfather may have his hand-me-downs.”

Hermione giggled. The two witches found an inconspicuous spot behind a couch and left the broom there so that Teddy wouldn’t find it immediately.

“What in Merlin’s name are you two up to?”

The two turned to find a very pregnant Ginny Potter waddling into the living room and flopping waddling onto the nearest sofa.

“Hiya, Ginny!” Hermione greeted, excitedly rushing for a hug. She was unceremoniously shoved
“Godric, Hermione, please don’t touch me.” Ginny protested with a grimace. “I feel revolting today. Get this baby out of me already.”

“Aw, Gin. Come on, you’re nearly there, sort of. What are you having, twins?”

Ginny shot her a dirty look. “Merlin help me, don’t you dare even joke about it” she moaned, rubbing a hand over her swollen midsection. “I look humongous. And have you seen Lavender?? She hardly looks pregnant at all.” She then eyed Narcissa, deeply annoyed. “And don’t even get me started on Astoria. How is that fair?!!”

Hermione shrugged. “I suppose you’re lucky, Gin.”

Ginny made a rude gesture, but then looked a little green around the edges as she let out a hearty burp. “Galloping hippogriffs, I want this over with!”

“Is your nausea more acute than usual, Mrs. Potter?” Narcissa interjected from where she stood behind Hermione. The brunette could detect a little of a Healer’s clinical tone and gaze in the other witch.

Ginny sighed. “Only every day of this past week” she groaned unhappily.

Narcissa smiled. “There’s an old wives’ tale,” she began, moving to take a seat by Ginny. “The harder the pregnancy, the more powerful the little witch or wizard.”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “That’s what Mum keeps telling me.”

“Between us,” Narcissa continued in a conspiratorial tone and a wicked smirk, “if it is true, then Draco surely is taking his sweet time in taking over the world.”

That made Hermione and Ginny laugh uproariously. The redhead wiped a cheerful tear from her eye. “Merlin, it feels weirdly satisfying to know he was a pain even before birth.” She quipped, and then belatedly seemed to realise she was talking to his mother. “No offence,” she quickly added.

Narcissa waved her off with a grin. “None taken,” she reassured. “It was a difficult pregnancy, and a difficult birth.”

Ginny was immediately put at ease once more. “I’ll say! It was difficult enough that you learned your lesson and didn’t try to give him any siblings, right?” She quipped with a laugh and a pat to her belly. “Guess I didn’t learn that lesson!”

Hermione doubted very much that Ginny had noticed it, but she saw Narcissa’s easy-going expression fracture into supreme discomfort at the redhead’s quip. Narcissa was such an expert at schooling her features that it could not have lasted more than half a second, but it was enough for Hermione to see it, plain as day.

She wondered, then, why Narcissa and Lucius had never had any more children. Narcissa certainly seemed to have greatly enjoyed having siblings as a child, and Hermione knew – she could see it very clearly every day – how much Narcissa loved children. Even when Narcissa seemed miffed about being a grandmother at her age, she loved Scorpius with all her heart. She loved Teddy, despite only recently meeting him. And she loved every single one of her students.

“Ah, but pregnancy is always a most unexpected journey, and one we must enjoy” the Potions professor said to Ginny, breaking Hermione away from her musings.
“Ha!” Ginny croaked with a sarcastic laugh. “Kind of hard to enjoy anything when I feel this awful,” she moaned. “I just wish the nausea and heartburn weren’t so bad.”

“If I may,” Narcissa started, reaching into her robes and pulling out a small phial containing a bright orange liquid. “I would suggest you try this.”

Ginny raised an eyebrow. “What is it?”

“An Anti-Nausea Elixir of my own creation” Narcissa explained, uncorking the phial and handing it to Ginny, who took it eagerly. “Astoria suffers from terrible bouts of nausea as well.”

“A-ha!” Ginny exclaimed, then downing the entire phial in one swift gulp. “So that’s her bloody secret! Her mother-in-law is a Potions genius!”

The redhead’s features settled on relieved contentment as the potion did what it was supposed to do. “Merlin” she breathed out in sheer relief. “I feel better already.”

“Glad I could help.” Narcissa said kindly, though Hermione noted that her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes anymore.

“Hey, Gin, do you think Molly needs some help in the kitchen?” Hermione asked, as discreetly as she could.

“Ha! Probably. Feel free to help her out – I am excused because, y’know, I’m busy growing a human and all.”

“Great!” Hermione turned to Narcissa. “How about we make sure Molly doesn’t kill herself feeding and caring for all these people?”

Narcissa gave her an odd look, but stood to follow nonetheless. Before they left, she turned to Ginny one last time.

“Do let me know how the nausea goes, Mrs. Potter. Should you need any more of the elixir, you need but owl me.”

“You bet your butt I will!” Ginny promised as Hermione led Narcissa out.

Hermione dragged Narcissa by the hand, away from the living room. Instead of moving to the kitchen, she turned at the last minute before Molly could notice their approach, shoving Narcissa into the adjoining pantry a little more forcefully than she had intended.

“Pardon me,” Narcissa said, clearly amused as Hermione swiftly closed the pantry door behind them. “But I very much doubt that Molly needs any help in her pantry” she finished in the darkness.

“Eh, maybe not. Lumos.” Hermione agreed, lighting the tip of her wand. The spell’s soft glow revealed the overstuffed pantry to be much smaller than she had anticipated – Narcissa stood merely inches away, backed into a shelf filled with miscellaneous canned goods.

“You know, subterfuge does not see, to be a strong suit for you Gryffindors” Narcissa said pointedly. Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Excuse me? I’ll have you know three Gryffindors snuck into Gringotts right under everyone’s noses!”
“And rode a dragon through a glass ceiling on their way out” Narcissa retorted with a knowing look. Hermione let out a breath of defeat.

“Touché. If you want to actually hear about how good this Gryffindor is at subterfuge, ask Draco sometime.”

Narcissa waved her off with a laugh. “I shall take your word for it. What is the reason for the present subterfuge?”

Hermione straightened her shoulders. Now that she heard Narcissa joke and laugh so openly with her in this cramped pantry, she wondered if her worry had been misplaced, or worse, completely unnecessary. She felt rather silly.

“Um...” she began, the uncertainty washing over her. Would Narcissa think she was overstepping? “That was really nice, what you did for Ginny.”

Narcissa smiled. “Oh, it was nothing. I know first-hand how difficult a pregnancy can be – it can truly take its toll.”

Hermione nodded her agreement, ready to forget her initial worry, until she saw a change overcome Narcissa’s eyes. There. Her haze became wistful and distant; her smile faltered just enough for Hermione to notice.

“Narcissa...” she began once more, still unsure, but certain that there was something wrong. “Are you alright?”

The blonde’s gaze snapped up to meet Hermione’s in genuine surprise; her eyes were wide enough and unguarded enough for Hermione to confirm her suspicions.

“Yes,” Narcissa breathed, and Hermione was shocked to see how plainly she could tell that the Slytherin was lying to her. “Yes...” Narcissa continued, but there was something unspoken in their exchanged glances that made her hurry to amend her statement. “For the most part, yes.”

Hermione felt oddly triumphant, but the joy of being right was summarily eclipsed but the renewal of her worry. “For the most part?” she asked softly, reaching into the darkness and taking Narcissa’s hand in her own. “You seemed... I don’t know. Sad, I suppose, when Ginny said that thing... about having more children.”

Narcissa laughed, but it was mirthless, and the sound broke Hermione’s heart.

“Merlin” she breathed out. “I must truly be slipping if I can be so easily read.” Narcissa said, her voice tinged with a kind of sadness that Hermione couldn’t quite place. “What would my mother say?”

“Your mother isn’t here,” Hermione said resolutely, thinking about the unpleasant portrait that said such terrible things about her own daughter.

“Oh, no, I’m afraid she’ll always be with me in some capacity, wherever I go.” Narcissa finished sombrelly, and Hermione did not know what to say to that. There were a million questions she wanted to ask, but she sensed that right then and right there, in the Weasley’s pantry, was neither the time nor the place. Instead, she waited patiently.

Narcissa took a deep breath; she said nothing.

“You’re not ‘slipping’, ” Hermione found herself saying. “I think I just... I’ve just gotten to know
“Well. I suppose at this point, you do know me quite well,” she said, and the admission filled Hermione with happiness. “I can assure you, I am fine. I simply...” there was a flicker in Narcissa’s eyes. And Hermione instinctively knew she was trying to hide her feelings again. The Slytherin seemed to pause, as if remembering or realising she could trust Hermione with her emotions.

“Hey,” Hermione sought to reassure her further. “It’s OK. Was it what Ginny said, about more kids?”

Narcissa didn’t need to confirm it, her eyes said it all. Hermione wasn’t sure she should ask, if she should give a gentle push. Narcissa’s silence eventually proved too much for her to handle.

“Did...” she started, the stopped. Was there a more tactful way to ask this? If there was, she did not know it. “Did you and Lucius want more children?”

Narcissa’s smile this time was sad. “More children were not in the cards for me.” She said after a long pause, leaning into the shelf and making the cans there rattle as they were displaced. “Something my sisters and I inherited from our mother,” she continued cryptically, looking wistfully towards some sacks of flour and grain to Hermione’s side. “Her weak womb. It was nothing short of a miracle that Druella survived three births. None of us could go further than the one.”

Narcissa’s tone had grown beyond wistful and now bordered on pained. “More children were not in the cards for me.” She said after a long pause, leaning into the shelf and making the cans there rattle as they were displaced. “Something my sisters and I inherited from our mother,” she continued cryptically, looking wistfully towards some sacks of flour and grain to Hermione’s side. “Her weak womb. It was nothing short of a miracle that Druella survived three births. None of us could go further than the one.”

Narcissa’s tone had grown beyond wistful and now bordered on pained. “Well, Bella... not even that.” she said, the memories clearly bringing her considerable pain. Hermione gave the hand she held what she hoped was a comforting squeeze. Narcissa took a fortifying breath, finding the strength to continue.

“Andromeda wrote to me once she eloped. I was the first she told of her pregnancy. Ted—” her breath hitched, “Ted wrote me only once in her place. I thought she had died, but in the letter, he told me the birth had been rather difficult and that Andromeda would take some time to recover. She would not be able to conceive again.”

Hermione squeezed Narcissa’s hand just a tad tighter in sympathy,

“And then, on my sixth year, Rodolphus came to fetch me at Hogwarts, out of the blue.” Narcissa continued, her voice wavering. “He was frantic – I remember how he yelled at Headmaster Dumbledore to let me go. Bellatrix needed me. And I went with him to Lestrange Manor and... All I could hear were Bella’s screams. She was howling in pain, in utter agony, and there was nothing the Healers, much less I could do besides hold her as she bled. She lost Ophelia and was left barren – like my mother and Andromeda before her.”

Hermione felt Narcissa’s grasp tighten in her own, as if the blonde needed a tangible tether to fortify herself.

“When I fell pregnant with Draco... I was overjoyed, of course.” Narcissa kept speaking in a pained tone, the memories making it difficult for her to continue without waver. Her voice was tight with emotion she had grown unused to displaying. “But also terrified. It was... difficult, a terribly difficult pregnancy. I was on bed rest for most of it, and when the time came...”

An errant tear escaped Narcissa’s control; Hermione brushed it aside as tenderly as she could.

“To answer your question” Narcissa began again after a shuddering breath. “Yes. I always wanted
more children. I wanted Draco to know the joy of having siblings” she smiled sadly once again. “But, like my mother and my sisters, I was unable to.”

Hermione felt deeply saddened, but she did not know what to say. She knew nothing about having or losing or being unable to have children. She was the fun aunt to many, but that was completely different.

“I think that is part of the reason why I have always... envied Molly Weasley so much.” Narcissa said through a teary laugh. “I might have had the grandest home in England, but she was always so happy in the warmth of her big family.” She seemed to contemplate the idea for a little while. “I suppose, all things considered, that is a good thing to envy.”

Hermione smiled. Now she could understand better the degree to which Narcissa had spoiled Draco when he was younger – he was her treasure, the one and only child she could ever have. She understood now; it helped her see why Narcissa was so adamant in getting Teddy the very best of everything, in caring for Astoria, in making sure Andromeda accepted her rightful inheritance: Narcissa was fiercely protective of those she loved, her family especially, because it had so many times been in danger of being lost forever.

“Merlin, I apologise for this horrendous display.” Narcissa eventually said, adamantly wiping at her tears.

“Nothing horrendous about it,” Hermione assured her kindly. “Remember what I told you? Sometimes it’s food to have a good cry and let it all out.”

Narcissa responding grin was now devoid of any sadness, and it made Hermione feel warm and cosy inside.

“Quite true,” the blonde agreed. She seemed to ponder something for a while. “I don’t think anyone has seen me cry as much as you have,” she said, as if she had just realised it.

Hermione didn’t like that thought; her displeasure must have shown in her expression, because Narcissa delicately reached out to caress her cheek. “That’s a good thing, Hermione,” she declared emphatically, her thumb softly brushing over the brunette’s bottom lip pensively. “For Merlin knows what reason I... I somehow feel... at ease with you. I’ve spent a lifetime hiding my feelings – it turns out I am rather proficient at that. But with you, everything is... lighter, in some way.”

Hermione recognised a distinct pull – she had felt it that night at the Astronomy Tower, under the constellations they named together. It was an energy, a great force she could not name, that compelled her quite strongly to close the little remaining distance between them and capture Narcissa’s lips with her own. To her surprise, Narcissa’s azure gaze seemed to drift downwards; Hermione noticed with a start that it had dropped to her lips.

That should have been all the encouragement she needed, but the thought of covertly kissing Narcissa Black in Molly Weasley’s darkened pantry after such a charged conversation just seemed... entirely wrong. To Hermione’s relief, Narcissa’s gaze returned to meet her own, and Hermione took the opportunity to envelop the other witch in a tight hug.

“I’m glad” she said, enjoying the warmth of Narcissa’s body against her own and the faint, pleasant scent of eucalyptus she discovered at the base of the blonde’s neck. Without thinking, Hermione nuzzled at that spot. Relishing in the comforting scent and the feel of Narcissa’s arms tightening around her as she responded to the embrace. “I’m glad you trust me enough to share those feelings with me.” She took a half-step back to look at Narcissa directly – those blue eyes glimmered in the dark. “I’m here. For whatever you need me.”

“You’re welc—”

Hermione was interrupted by a sudden burst of light and the click of the pantry door opening abruptly. A wide-eyed Andromeda stood at the threshold, holding an empty mug and a bewildered expression.

“Oh!” She gasped, eyes widening even further. “Oh! I didn’t... Merlin, I—I mean, Molly needed some flour” she babbled, and then seemed to noticed her sister backed into a shelf of cans behind Hermione.

“Cissy?” She looked at Narcissa, then at Hermione, then back at Narcissa. “What are you...”

“Here’s the flour, Andy” Hermione interjected, grabbing a labelled container and unceremoniously shoving it into Andromeda’s arms before the other witch had time to process. She took Narcissa by hand and led her out, not giving Andromeda the chance to say anything futher.

“See you around, Andy!”

By the time the birthday boy arrived, Narcissa had recovered from the little episode in Molly’s pantry. Part of her felt incredibly foolish, but she had meant what she said—it was easier to let her emotions run free whenever Hermione was around. No matter how weak or guilty she felt when her walls crumbled to pieces, the young Gryffindor remained a steadfast, calming, comforting presence. Narcissa greatly appreciated it.

If only she were able to ignore the failure she felt whenever her walls did crumble. It was a terribly hard habit to break—her mother had made sure of it; whenever Narcissa’s Ice Queen mask faltered, it felt like a personal shortcoming.

Narcissa supposed that was why she had so much difficulty navigating her own emotions now. She had been taught not to feel, not to show her hand to the outside world. It was impossible, however, to hide only hatred, only sadness, or only despair. There was no such luxury—to hide one, one must hide them all. That was how she had been relentlessly trained, and she excelled to such a degree that her joy, her hope, and even her love had been buried along with the rest.

That is, until a certain Transfiguration professor had come along and unearthed them all at the same time. Narcissa was exceedingly grateful, but navigating those emotions, relearning how to let herself simply feel—that was a steep learning curve.

She was profoundly thankful for Hermione’s presence. Even then, surrounding by welcoming friends as they all sang a cacophonous rendition of ‘Happy Birthday’ to Teddy, Narcisa was thankful for the stolen glances Hermione directed her way, always asking, without needing words, if she was alright. It felt oddly liberating to have someone worry about her in that way.

There was someone else at the Burrow furtively stealing glances her way, and Narcissa had to wonder how out of practice Andromeda truly had to be, if a Gryffindor managed to be more discreet than she. Whereas Hermione’s glances had been comforting, Andromeda’s were... questioning, overtly and blatantly curious. Narcissa avoided her like the Dragon Pox.

Andromeda finally managed to corner her in the kitchen after Teddy had dragged his godfather out into the garden to try out his new broom. Andromeda had patiently waited until a sizeable crowd
had gathered outside to watch Teddy’s maiden flight.

“I should have known you would go overboard with his gift” Andromeda accused as she surprised Narcissa, who had been charming dishes to wash themselves. Narcissa could only grin at the accusation.

“I’m his aunt” she said simply. “Spoiling him is part of the job description.”

Andromeda laughed; Narcissa could see plainly that her sister was using the broom as a pretext.

“Is everything alright with you, Cissy?” The older Black finally asked after several moments.

“Of course,” Narcissa replied. “Everything is perfectly fine.” It wasn’t truly a lie, not really. Everything was better than it had been in years.

“OK,” Andromeda seemed relieved, but not quite ready to relent. “Nothing you wanted to tell me? No new... developments?”

Why did Andromeda need to phrase things so oddly?

“None at all,” Narcissa insisted.

“Really?” Andromeda prodded, brows raising nearly all the way up into her hairline. “Nothing special? I guess you and Hermione hugging in pantries is just a normal, everyday thing to you two?”

Narcissa froze, for once having a hard time reading her sister’s questioning gaze.

“Of course not.” She said. “We have developed... a friendly rapport.”

“I can see that” Andromeda quipped with widening grin. “For the record, I think it’ll do you some good, this... ‘friendly rapport’.”

Narcissa looked at her sister in confusion, but chose not to comment, mostly because she was inclined to agree. It did do her a world of good.

“Yes,” she admitted. “Hermione is...” she paused, uncertain with how much she could tell Andromeda when there was so preciously little she understood herself. “Hermione is pleasant to have around.” She finally said, hoping her gaze would convey more than her words. Thankfully, Andromeda seemed to understand.

“I’m glad, Cissy. You need someone like Hermione. Plus, I think I always suspected it.”

Narcissa had begun to nod, relieved with Andromeda’s understanding, but was stopped in her tracks at the end.

“What in Merlin’s name do you m—”

“Auntie Cissa!” Came Teddy’s excited yell from the kitchen window, startling them both. “Come see me fly! I can go so high!”

“Ah, yes, Teddy, in a moment,” Narcissa responded, giving him a slight wave as she watched him perform an impressive sharp turn on his new broom.

As soon as he was out of view, she turned abruptly back to face Andromeda. Her sister was already gone.
Chapter 35

Exams loomed on the horizon, inching ever closer. Hermione always had to begrudgingly admit year after year that she had enjoyed exams seasons much more as a student than she ever did as a teacher.

Everyone was just so whiny all the time!

She had to refuse at least three students already – it was all too familiar to her now, the scramble for a last-minute, last-ditch effort for a somewhat decent mark. Hermione prided herself in her teaching and in her fairness – she strived to give her students ample opportunity to show their talents, wherever they may lie – but the one thing she could not and would not ever tolerate was laziness.

Some students could be a tad too dramatic. One Slytherin girl had just left her office in tears, but what could Hermione do? Skiving lessons was never a good idea, and some students had to learn it the hard way at the end of term.

Presently, she was done dealing with morose students for the day – her office was now closed and she was looking forward to spending an evening talking about wards with Narcissa – Hermione could sense they were nearing a breakthrough, though she chose to remain cautiously optimistic. One never knew what those pesky wards could throw their way next.

She detoured to the castle kitchens out of nostalgia and in a playful mood, deciding to grab some scones just because. A couple of wandering Hufflepuffs were startled to see their stern Transfiguration Professor sneaking into the kitchens the same way they had done only moments before. They looked petrified at the prospect of getting a detention so close to exam time, but Hermione was feeling whimsical tonight.

“I won’t tell if you don’t.” She warned them with a glare, before disappearing through the wall with a basket of scones.

Hermione had almost made it to Narcissa’s office in the Dungeons when she heard raised voices coming from the Potions classroom – their angry tones made her instinctively reach for her wand. The basket of scones was immediately reduced to matchbox size and relegated to her robes; she tip-toed tentatively toward the door

“Lady Malfoy, I assure you, you are making a grave mistake! This is not the last you’ll see of me!”

“Mr. Cambria, I have nothing left to say to you” Hermione heard Narcissa seething from within. She was startled by the sharpness in the other woman’s voice—she had never heard her be so cutting, so vicious. “This matter is settled.”

“This is a great injustice, Lady Malfoy! Samuel is a talented wizard—think of the opportunities you’d be denying him!” The man inside roared, his anger clear. Hermione flinched as she approached the door ever so cautiously.

“Your son has failed to produce a single satisfactory result all year—he will not be accepted into NEWT-level Potions” Narcissa retorted, her voice like a sharp shard of broken glass. “My decision is final.”

“That is disgraceful, Lady Malfoy! You’re a disgrace to this school, a disgrace to the House of
Slytherin, a disgrace to our society! This is not the end of this, Lady Malfoy, mark my words!”

“Her name” Hermione warned in a low voice as she rounded the corner into the classroom, “is Black, not Malfoy. And she is a Professor of this school—a Professor whom you seem to be threatening.”

Hermione could now recognize the wizard who had been yelling—Edward Cambria, father of Samuel Cambria, a Slytherin pureblood and member of the late Slug Club. No wonder Edward was unhappy—this was probably the first time he realized his son was not as smart as he thought.

Narcissa stood stoically by her teacher’s desk, her eyes furious in a tempestuous grey. Her lips were pressed into a thin line of displeasure, and her hands were planted onto her desk in the defensive.

“Nothing of the sort,” Mr. Cambria retorted hotly. He was a tall, intimidating wizard, with very neat black hair and a trimmed beard. His eyes were hard-set and of a deep, angry blue that matched his tailored robes.

“Good,” Hermione commented, making it a point to keep her wand visible. “We would not want to escalate this to the Headmistress, would we?”

Cambria looked ready to explode into another diatribe, but seemed to contain himself. He turned a hateful look toward Narcissa.

“This isn’t over, Lady M—” Hermione cleared her throat loudly. “Lady Black. The School Board of Governors will hear about this!”

“Don’t worry, I will see to it that they do. I did keep all of your charming letters.” Narcissa threatened bitingly.

Cambria huffed and stormed out of the classroom, nearly colliding with Hermione on his way out. The brunette saw him off with an angry glare before turning back to Narcissa suddenly worried that her intervention had been unwelcome.

The Potions professor, however, shot her a grateful glance, and Hermione was immediately put at ease. She approached, finally sheathing her wand.

“Are you alright?” she asked, mindful of the remaining tension she could still read in Narcissa’s body language; it rolled from her shoulders in waves. “What in Godric’s name was that all about?”

Narcissa sunk into her chair with a sigh. “Apparently Lord Cambria’s son has not been performing as well as he ought to be in Potions for a future ministerial position. Somehow, that became my problem.”

Hermione scrunched up her nose in displeasure. “And he thought he could threaten you into giving Samuel a higher grade?” she seethed.

“Not at first. He initially thought I could be persuaded financially.”

There was something funny about someone thinking they could sway one of the richest women in Wizarding Britain financially, but Hermione overlooked it. She was getting angrier by the second. “That is completely unacceptable! The School Board of Governors should hear of this!”

To Hermione’s surprise, Narcissa laughed sarcastically. “Yes, the Board. Half of them have also written me hoping to address unexpected drops in performance.”
Hermione’s eyes widened in both shock and frustration. “But that’s illegal! A lot of these kids just got away without working because... Slughorn, y’know?”

Narcissa smiled gratefully. “Thank you. It’s no coincidence that the only students whose grades have dropped come from influential families.” She sighed. “I expect this to blow over eventually. These students will most likely use their family connections for work anyway.”

That thought didn’t sit well with Hermione. It made her feel like the past decade of reform and development didn’t matter as much; not if Pure-Bloods could still rely so heavily on their connections to get ahead.

“Still,” she continued her earlier train of thought, thoroughly displeased. “These parents need to learn their place. Cambria should talk to his son about his performance, not come here and threaten a member of staff.”

Narcissa merely shrugged. “I have ample experience dealing with men such as Lord Cambria.” she said, sounding resigned. “They are among some of the...”

“Rudest, most entitled and disrespectful arseholes on the planet” Hermione interrupted angrily. “He kept calling you Lady Malfoy!” She pointed out hotly, unsure why that particular fault made her so irrationally angry—hearing anyone refer to Narcissa by her old married name made her jaw clench in anger. “Mr. Davies at Diagon Alley kept doing the same thing!” she added, somewhat aware that her temper had begun to get the better of her, but unable to do anything to stop it. “What’s up with that? You aren’t married anymore!”

Narcissa stiffened and her eyes widened in surprise at Hermione’s sudden tirade, but her gaze quickly softened into uncertainty and caution.

“So you noticed,” she said simply, as if gauging Hermione’s reaction.

Hermione was still bewildered, still heavily affected by that sudden anger that she couldn’t quite comprehend.

“How could I not notice?” she cried. “They kept calling you Lady Malfoy! You've been divorced for nearly a decade!”

Narcissa’s blue eyes looked pained and resigned – that resignation only served to incense Hermione further, and the sheer force of her present wrath confused her a great deal.

“I suppose you wouldn’t understand, seeing that your understanding of Pure-Blood customs is extremely limited.” Narcissa said matter-of-factly. She heaved a deep, drawn-out sigh. The resignation in her eyes seemed to shift into defeat, and Hermione did not like that transition.

“You never wonder, Hermione, why I am so far removed from my old circles?” Narcissa asked.

Hermione was stumped by the question—she began to realize she had never truly given the matter much thought. She had assumed that, perhaps, Narcissa’s isolation from her previous acquaintances had been at least in part self-imposed.

“You changed your views... and they didn’t?”

Narcissa smiled, but it was the kind of smile adults gave to a naïve child who said something unwittingly stupid about a matter they couldn’t possibly understand. Hermione hated the feeling.

“Your... unbridled optimism in me is refreshing.” Narcissa mused, looking saddened. “Yes, that
had a little to do with it. But you must understand that most Slytherins would not be too... unforgiving about my changing allegiances. Many may see my defection as a good strategic decision.” She sighed deeply, her gaze looking somewhere beyond Hermione, beyond even the walls of her classroom. “No, to many of my former acquaintances, it was the divorce that came to be the last straw.”

Hermione felt like the wind had been taken out of her sails.

“What?” she croaked, because that didn’t make any sort of sense. Divorce wasn’t uncommon in the Wizarding World. How could people take Narcissa’s changing allegiance in stride, but not something as simple as a divorce?

Narcissa motioned for Hermione to take a seat, and the brunette begrudgingly did so, still feeling strangely amped up.

“This may come as a surprise to you, since you are unfamiliar with some of our more stringent Pure-Blood customs” she began to explain, her gaze unfocused, removed to some place miles and miles away. “But in Pure-Blood high society, divorce simply isn’t something that happens.”

Hermione sagged into her seat. “What?” she repeated, and the question came out with more bite than she had intended. Narcissa began to look rather uncomfortable.

“It... doesn’t happen. There’s a reason why Paola Zabini allegedly killed four husbands” she tried to joke, but it was quite obvious to Hermione that her heart wasn’t in it.

“When the divorce hit the papers... Merlin, it was a nightmare. Very few people judged me harshly after my acquittal, but after I divorced Lucius...”

Narcissa fiddled with a quill on her desk. Hermione longed to reach over the desktop and quieten her fidgeting hands with a comforting touch, but her own hands gripped the arms of her chair with unusual force. She did not like what she was hearing—it made her dislike Pure-Bloods and their backwards ideals far more than before.

“In a way,” Narcissa finally continued with a vacant look in her eyes, “some of those people will always see me as Lucius’ wife. Someone—something” she corrected with a grimace “that belongs to him, and always will.”

“That’s bullshit!” Hermione seethed. “How can they think that? You divorced ages ago!” she stood, the urge to pace some of her anger away too overwhelming to ignore. “He’s in bloody Azkaban, for Merlin’s sakes!”

Something in her tone made Narcissa stiffen, and Hermione felt ridiculous for how strongly she felt about the matter. “Sorry,” she was quick to add. “I just... I don’t understand the situation and I find it so unfair...” she sighed. “And I am a self-righteous Gryffindor. I can’t just let injustice pass by,” she tried to joke.

To Hermione’s relief, her attempt at humour coaxed a genuine smile from Narcissa.

“I’ve made my peace with it” Narcissa said. “I haven’t been entirely cut-off from my old circles. But whenever I do find the occasion to frequent them—or when the occasion finds me—it will always be as Narcissa Malfoy. They cannot see me as anything else.”

Hermione’s anger flared up again, but she did her best to control it. She had no reason to feel this invested. What did it matter to her anyway? Malfoy, Black... Narcissa was just Narcissa to her. Just Narcissa.
Although, a little voice made itself known, deep in the recesses of her mind, *it could very well matter to you if people saw her as married to someone else.*

Hermione summarily made the voice shut up.

“Why frequent them, then?” she asked instead. Narcissa made it seemed like she still chose to maintain some contact. “If they can’t accept you as you are—without the Malfoy name attached—then why keep in touch at all?”

Narcissa’s gaze turned severe; she looked pensively at the elegant feather of the quill she twirled in her fingers. She took a very long time to answer; for the longest time all Hermione could hear was the steady ticking of Narcissa’s grandfather clock echoing in the room.

“I can’t afford not to” she finally whispered, so softly Hermione wasn’t entirely convinced she had been meant to hear it. But then Narcissa looked at her, and those blue eyes shone with something akin to fear.

“You’re too young to understand” she breathed, “to really know how the Dark Lord first came to power. For years, there was no violence. No, for years he garnered the silent financial and political support of families like mine. There are still families like that out there now and I... I need to be aware of what goes on in those circles.”

Hermione was at a loss. “And that’s why Kingsley kept up his surveillance on you,” she found herself saying, like pieces of a puzzle were coming together in her head with deafening clicks.

Narcissa looked surprised for a moment, then her expression became guarded.

“Who told you?” she asked, her voice abnormally cold. “Potter?”

“No,” Hermione answered honestly—suddenly it was like she could not recognize the Narcissa sitting before her. “Kingsley himself told me. Harry had no idea.”

“I find that hard to believe, considering Mr. Potter’s position in the Ministry.”

Hermione bristled. “Harry wouldn’t lie to me” she said resolutely, with all of her conviction. “He thinks Kingsley may have Unspeakables watching you.”

To the Gryffindor’s surprise, Narcissa laughed—it was cold and heartless, and only made her more confused.

“Unspeakables” Narcissa whispered, shaking her head in equal parts disbelief and wonder. “I suppose our Minister of Magic does have a good head on his shoulders, after all.” Narcissa said coolly, standing slowly.

Hermione was stumped.

“How can you say something like that?” she hissed, feeling her emotions get the better of her once more and hating every second of it. How could Narcissa be so nonchalant about surveillance that had taken place for over a decade when she had done nothing wrong since the end of the war?

“It’s been ten years! You helped us win the War! You’ve helped so many people, for Merlin’s sakes, you’re making a Wizarding hospital with your own bloody money! You, you...” Hermione spluttered, stumbling over her words as they spilled out of her without control. “You helped *save my parents!*”
Somehow, Hermione had not seen Narcissa approach; she only felt the blonde’s presence once a cold hand gingerly lifted her chin, connecting their gazes.

“Would you not? Have me under surveillance?” Narcissa inquired, her expression unreadable.

“What?” Hermione gasped, taking a step backward; Narcissa responded by taking a step forward. “Of course not!”

“No?” Narcissa pressed; Hermione continued going backwards and Narcissa followed her movement until the brunette had backed straight into Narcissa’s closed office door.

“No,” Hermione repeated, resolute.

“No,” Narcissa echoed. Her hand lingered on Hermione’s chin for long moments before moving onto her cheek. “Then you are far too trusting,” she accused.

Hermione took hold of Narcissa’s wrist. “You’ve given me no reason not to be.” She insisted.

Narcissa’s hand froze upon her cheek, her thumb gently grazed Hermione’s bottom lip. “Have I not?” she murmured. Those blue eyes darkened nearly to grey—she looked at once lost and determined. “I can think of several”

Hermione maintained her defiant gaze on Narcissa’s; the blonde’s lips tugged into a slight smile, as if she were enjoying a challenge given.

“A Dark witch” she began solemnly, her blue eyes never straying from Hermione’s hazel gaze, “married to a known Death Eater, with a Death Eater sister and a Death Eater son... Who had the Dark Lord himself as her guest. A witch who until now maintains contact with a circle of Pure-Bloods with questionable morals?” she stepped impossible closer to Hermione; their faces mere inches apart. “A witch well-versed in the Dark Arts... who has everything to gain in biding her time and playing nice for as long as it suits her needs?”

Hermione felt flustered with Narcissa’s increased proximity, but she was a Gryffindor and thus refused to back down from a challenge. She straightened, coming even closer to Narcissa; they shared the same air, the same breaths as the connection of their gaze became electric.

“You forgot: a witch who still receives letters from said Death Eater husband. Ex-husband.”

Narcissa’s blue eyes widened in shock; her surprise was enough to make her take one step back. Hermione seized the opportunity to press forward, much like Narcissa had done earlier, and suddenly their balance had been reversed.

“How...” Narcissa began.

“Kingsley told me,” Hermione interrupted. Narcissa’s hand fell from her cheek, but the brunette held on to her wrist as Narcissa continued to step backward and she forward.

“You also forgot you’re a witch who chose her family above all” the Gryffindor pressed on, confident. “A witch who loves her family—old and new” she said pointedly. “A witch who has absolutely everything to lose should some other Pure-Blood supremacists came to power.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. Narcissa had been backed into her own desk, and the young professor was very much in the other witch’s space, scant inches away.

“And everyone knows” she continued, “that any good Slytherin will always hedge their bets in
their favour.” She finished more softly, raising her other hand to Narcissa’s pale cheek and letting her knuckles brush gently over the soft skin she found there. “Draco, Astoria, Scorpius. Andromeda and Teddy. You wouldn’t risk losing them, even if you did still believe all of that supremacists crock of shit.” Hermione smiled. “Which you don’t.”

Hermione felt Narcissa’s gasp of surprise more than she heard it. She felt triumphant, even more so when the corners of Narcissa’s lips tugged into a grin under her touch.

“Touché, Ms. Granger.” She conceded, looking thoroughly impressed.

She couldn’t help it—Hermione preened under the praise.

“Your reasoning is sound” Narcissa continued, raising an eyebrow “but remember this” she said, grasping Hermione’s chin once more and tilting it up. “There is always more you don’t know.”

Hermione ignored the warning. She was right about Narcissa—she knew it in her heart, and she could think of very, very few things the blonde could say or do to convince her otherwise.


“Lucius’ correspondence has decreased in frequency over the years. I receive a letter every other month now.” She said, and Hermione could sense, no, could feel her honesty.

“What do they say?”

Narcissa shrugged. “At first they were complaints about the divorce. Some choice words about my choices and my character. Now? He mostly asks about Draco. I don’t often reply.” She let go of Hermione and walked back behind her desk, pulling out a drawer and taking out a stack of letters. “The Ministry goes through all of my correspondence” her tone turned half-playful, half-exasperated. “The poor idiots think I don’t know.”

Hermione eyed the stack Narcissa had placed on the desk. All of them were of the standard-issue stationery given to prisoners in Azkaban. The Wizarding prison had undergone great changes over the years; Dementors still secured the perimeter, but were not used within its walls any longer. Prisoners had some small comforts such as letter writing and the Wizarding Wireless, plus some restricted visitations.

“Does he not write to Draco?”

Narcissa shook her head. “Draco made it very clear early on he did not wish to hear from his father ever again.” The Potions professor looked pained. Hermione couldn’t say she understood—Narcissa had at one point loved Lucius.

“It must be hard” she found herself thinking aloud. “After all you’ve lived through together.”

To Hermione’s surprise, Narcissa laughed. “It is not as hard as you think” she confessional. Her eyes hardened. “My devotion to Lucius waned shortly after the first war.”

Hermione wanted desperately to ask more, but also didn’t know if it was her place. This was just one more of the many secrets to Narcissa Black—Black, not Malfoy—that she would have to unveil little by little.

“Is... is this it?” Hermione asked instead. “The ‘truth’, or so you said?”

Narcissa looked intently at Hermione. Her expression was once again unreadable. Hermione
gathered enough strength to continue. “You said there was still much I didn’t know about you; that if I knew the whole truth, I wouldn’t be so kind or compassionate. Is this it?” She motioned to vaguely to the stack of letters from Lucius.

The blonde’s eyes became guarded once more; her responding smile held a heavy tinge of sadness.

“No,” she confessed. “Not even close.”
Chapter 36

“Lady Malfoy, Lady Malfoy! Dobby has news, Madam, news from Master!”

Narcissa spun in place, minding the sleeping infant who dozed peacefully in her arms. The frantic House Elf immediately noticed the young Master was not to be disturbed; his voice was remarkably less shrill – though just as frenzied – when he next spoke.

“Master Malfoy is returning, Madam! Dobby’s wards have just now warned him! Shall Dobby fetch Master’s house robes?”

“Where is he now, Dobby?” Narcissa asked in a soft whisper, holding tightly onto her son. Draco slept soundly, oblivious to his mother’s movement and worry.

Dobby shook his head energetically, filled with energy. “Master has just crossed the main gates, Dobby’s wards told him so, Madam. Shall Dobby...”

“Lay out our finest whisky, Dobby, if you please.” Narcissa commanded, lovingly yet swiftly placing Draco down into his plush crib. The little dragon mobile above him began to spin with a wordless charm. “Stay out of the way after that; keep an eye on Draco for me and don’t come down.”

Dobby nearly saluted her in his eagerness. “Yes, Madam, Dobby will see to it!” he squealed, nearly forgetting about the sleeping baby as he disappeared to fetch the whisky.

Narcissa steeled herself, hugging her robes more tightly around her thin frame as she spared her son one last loving glance before she willed her tired feet to move away from the nursery and into the dim corridor of the upper East Wing of Malfoy Manor.

Torches lit up as she made her way down the corridor, shuffling by and revealing generations of Malfoy portraits who spared her sympathetic looks as she passed them by. She heard their soft murmuring amongst themselves, in wonder as to why she risked leaving her chambers half-dead after bringing the Malfoy heir into the world; she resolutely tuned them out.

The air felt different at the top of the Manor’s grand staircase—it was colder, and more humid somehow. Narcissa felt the chill of the open emptiness of the house envelop her; it made her teeth clatter and her hands tremble. She regarded the marble staircase with trepidation and dread; her knuckles went white onto the banister with the sheer panicked force she used to hold on to it. The steps seemed to multiply, eternal and perilous.

For long, hopeless moments, Narcissa Malfoy hesitated at the top of her stairs, shrouded in the silence of the Manor, grounded by her fierce grip onto the banister. Her body felt not quite like her own; it felt weak and frail, and the little strength she had recovered after weeks of bed rest had all but waned in the short trek from the nursery to the staircase.

She chanced a glance back towards the nursery, short of breath and deafened by the thunderous pounding of her blood in her ears. Narcissa’s weakness despaired her – Draco slept not ten metres from where she stood, yet here she was, out of breath, nearly swaying with exhaustion, waverling in place and scarcely able to stand upright. The never-ending staircase mocked her with its interminable, winding, treacherous marble path – it stretched out in hundreds and thousands and millions of steps, daring her to move forward.

It was the soft, muted pop of a bottle being uncorked and the clinking of a glass onto a table that
spurred her first tentative step. Lucius was home, where he hadn’t been in weeks—at least not when Narcissa had been conscious.

She took that first step, then the next and the next, both hands grasping onto the banister like a lifeline, leaning as much of her weight as she could onto it in an undignified crawl down the menacing marble. Narcissa practically dragged herself downstairs, holding on for dear life, limbs aching and protesting the movement, burning with exertion. Her breath caught and released and was caught again at each reluctant step forward.

“Lucius” she called, her voice naught but a hoarse, muted, useless whisper, too weak to reach the parlour. “Lucius,” she tried again, in vain.

Her anguish led her to try and hurry her steps; a fatal miscalculation with nearly disastrous consequences. Narcissa’s body faltered onto the slippery marbled; her legs too unsteady to regain their footing at the misstep. She held on, just barely, onto the banister, but the fright of the moment ripped out a painful, startled yelp from her aching throat.

“Narcissa?” came Lucius’ worried voice from the parlour. Narcissa heard the sound of glass clinking onto a table once more. She released her grip of the banister—her lifeline—and sunk to the floor as slowly as she could, ending in an ungraceful heap onto the marble, unable to trust her trembling legs. Her hand clasped around her tender throat, the pain of her outburst reverberating through the layers of muscle.

“Narcissa!”

Lucius was out of the parlour; he had spotted her. His boots made dry staccatos onto the exquisite tile as he rushed to her side in alarm.

“What are you doing down here?! You ought to be resting!” he chided, though his voice was too grave with worry to carry the admonishment as he meant it.

Narcissa couldn’t reply; she was too overtaken by pain and relief all at once.

“Come along, let’s get you back upstairs.” Lucius said, bending down and effortlessly lifting Narcissa’s small frame off the ground in one swift move. He took one step up.

“No,” Narcissa whispered hoarsely, fighting the burn in her throat and grasping the front of his robes in a desperate, pleading grip, needing tangible evidence that he was there, truly there, with not a hair out of place. “Not upstairs. The parlour.”

Her husband gave her a look of protest, but she stopped whatever incoming protestations with a silent glare that shortly melted into a supplicative gaze.

Lucius shrugged, smiling slightly, then diligently and carefully turning back towards the parlour with his wife in his arms. He wordlessly lit up the fireplace, and the comforting glow of the dancing flames instantly filled the cold room, aided by another of his warming charms, doubtlessly the same one he had placed in the East Wing for Narcissa’s comfort. He gently laid Narcissa onto the nearest sofa; Narcissa took deep breaths, never releasing his robes, unwilling to let him go even for a second. Lucius obligingly knelt by her side, waiting.

“You shouldn’t exert yourself” he scolded, though his grey gaze was soft. He took one of Narcissa’s hands in his own and dropped a fierce, protective kiss onto it. “Healer Fairweather made me promise I’d keep you in bed until well after Easter.”

Narcissa rolled her eyes; Lucius let out a hearty chuckle. “Give me a moment, dear. I’ll arrange
for some tea” he said.

“Forget the tea” Narcissa croaked uncomfortably, her gaze pointedly traveling to the half-filled glass of whisky at the side-table. “Care to share, husband?”

He raised an eyebrow, but laughed all the same. “Healer Fairweather…”

“Isn’t here” Narcissa interrupted with a knowing gaze, her voice hoarse, but recovering.

Lucius chuckled, but reached over to the side-table and retrieved the glass, handing it over to Narcissa with a playful look of warning.

Narcissa ignored it, taking a hearty sip and choosing to overlook the burning the liquor supplied, welcoming that pain over the other she suffered. A little cough escaped her, and Lucius tenderly wiped at the tears that pooled in her eyes with a laugh.

“I think that’s enough, Lady Malfoy” he joked, prying the glass away from her tremulous fingers. “What are you doing down here, when you should be in bed?” His gaze suddenly took a turn to fear. “The baby…”

Narcissa reached a soothing hand to his arm. “The baby’s fine, Lucius. He’s sleeping.”

Her husband visibly relaxed. Now, in the light, Narcissa could finally see how weary he looked, and was reminded of how long it had been since she had seen him. His hair was longer now, growing far past his ears long after he had cropped it short before Draco’s birth. Dark circles rimmed his grey eyes that now looked sullen without any hint of their usual vibrancy, and his face was thinner, made to look even more so by the fine stubble covering his gaunt cheeks.

“Good, good” Lucius whispered, relieved. His eyes were contemplative. “Then why are you down here, my darling? You ought to be resting; you’re not strong enough to be out and about yet.”

Narcissa gritted her teeth. “You haven’t been home, Lucius. Nine weeks. Nine weeks I have gone without seeing my husband” she accused, aware she sounded bitter but choosing to ignore the indignity of emotion. She could see his jaw clenching, then pulled out his ace. “You haven’t seen your son in nine weeks.”

Lucius’ shoulders sagged, his guilt evident. “I come when I can” he defended weakly.

“Yes.” She agreed, “I’m sure Draco loves the stuffed dragons you leave for him; all six of them. I know I enjoy waking up to a rose or two on the pillow next to me, where you’re supposed to be.” Narcissa took a deep breath, aware she sounded too harsh. “Home is where you must be. Draco needs you,” she said honestly, and her voice lowered. “I need you.”

Her husband sighed. “It is not so easy, dearest” he said, sounding distressed. “The Dark Lord grows restless. There have been... new developments, developments that required the full attention of those devoted to His service.”

“What developments? Surely the Dark Lord must understand, you have obligations! Your child…”

“Narcissa” Lucius breathed out, weary. “The Dark Lord needs me.”

“Then give him your money! Your connections! Merlin knows that should be enough.”

“But it isn’t!” Lucius hissed, and almost immediately stopped himself, taking a moment to breathe
deeply. Narcissa felt his chest slowly expand under her hands; his robes were loose around his lean frame, confirming her suspicions that he had lost weight in their time apart.

“What is so important” she asked softly, “that requires you to be away from your wife and child?”

Lucius’ gaze found hers, and it was filled with dread and indecisiveness. “Does Bella know?” Narcissa asked.

“All of us fortunate enough to be in the Dark Lord’s inner circle know” Lucius answered. He rolled his eyes. “Of course Bellatrix knows.”

Narcissa smiled. “Then tell me.”

Lucius looked as if the weight of the entire world rested upon his shoulders; Narcissa seldom saw him this drained, this lifeless. The sheer fatigue of his movements and the uneasiness of his demeanour worried her greatly; what could the Dark Lord be demanding of him, of Bella?

“We have recently received information about a prophecy” Lucius spoke with a tremulousness in his voice that was utterly foreign to Narcissa, nothing like his usual self-assure tones.

“A prophecy? Who made it?” she couldn’t help but ask, intrigued.

“That is irrelevant” he retorted. “What matters is that the Dark Lord deems it important, and so does Albus Dumbledore. It concerns the birth of a child—a child who may come to destroy everything we have worked for.”

Narcissa furrowed her brow, sceptical. “A child?” She could not help but wonder how a child would present any sort of threat to Lord Voldemort himself—she had witnessed his furious, exhilarating power first-hand. But if both the Dark Lord and Albus Dumbledore, the two most powerful wizards of their time, trusted in the veracity of this prophecy, then it simply had to be true.

Lucius nodded gravely. “A boy, to be born at the end of July.”

Narcissa froze. Her mind instantly wandered to the well-hidden stack of letters from Andromeda she kept; the ones Andromeda had insisted she burn, but Narcissa could never bring herself to because she was too weak to do so. Several of them, detailing little details of no consequence, even to a Death Eater’s wife. Some of them, with information Andromeda most definitely should not have entrusted to Narcissa—even if she operated under the delusion Narcissa might still leave Lucius and Bella.

One letter in particular came to mind, exhilarated by the pregnancies of some of her friends—people Andromeda would be happy to help in their journey through expecting. Two new expectant mothers, due sometime as summer would draw to a close. Alice Longbottom. Lily Evans—no, Potter.

Narcissa had received that letter not three days ago.

Merlin, how could Andromeda have been so foolish. Narcissa felt panic rise in her throat. Andromeda! Blood-traitor and careless idiot! Entrusting her of all people with such information; it would now be Narcissa’s burden to bear. How could she justify not telling Lucius and Bella about it? How could she justify telling them? She inwardly cursed the adamant shred of loyalty she still carried for Andromeda, despite everything. If only she weren’t so weak.
“The Dark Lord wants us to gather all of our forces” Lucius continued, oblivious to her inner struggle. “He fears the Order may be emboldened by such a prediction. We must move, and we must move soon.”

“What does that mean?” Narcissa asked, with bated breath?

Lucius’ shoulders sagged. “It means, once this child is born—ideally before—we must neutralize the threat in the name of our Dark Lord. For the Greater Good.”

Narcissa’s blood ran cold; the hand that held onto Lucius’ robes tightened considerably, and the other tremulously reached up to stroke his gaunt features.

“Lucius, what does that mean?” She dared ask, her voice quaking as her hands were, a whisper lost to the crackling of the fire. Lucius furrowed his brows with a scoff.

“You know full well what it means.” He said.

The beat of her heart was deafening; Narcissa could feel it in her ears, her neck, and booming erratically from within her ribs.

“Lucius... You wouldn’t... You wouldn’t kill a child.” She meant it as a statement, but her voice carried the inflection of an incredulous question.

Lucius averted his gaze. He remained silent; Narcissa’s mouth went dry.

“What would you?”

Hermione left her Transfiguration classroom with a spring in her step; she had just administered her last practical examination – to her second-year class, which was always rather... eventful as they tried to transform mice into pincushions. She had been startled out of her wits when what seemed to be a hedgehog started scurrying about the classroom, which was understandable, as no second-year in the history of ever had ever performed a flawless animal transfiguration.

It turned out to be just a half-transformed little mouse. Hermione had been quick to fix the poor creature, and the student had received a passing grade – just barely.

While the end of the always chaotic practicals certainly contributed to the light-heartedness she felt at the moment, it wasn’t the only reason why the young professor nearly skipped down the stairs on her way to the Dungeons. No, Hermione had done quite a bit of self-reflection in the past few days, and she had come to quite a few conclusions regarding a certain Potions professor.

The secrets could very well drive Hermione insane. Narcissa was a naturally secretive person, as Hermione had come to find out, but there seemed to be an innate willingness to open up. Hermione didn’t think she was imagining it, not after so many deep, emotional conversations, not after so many inexplicably charged interactions that left her body and mind reeling with... with something she couldn’t quite identify.

What puzzled Hermione the most was the simple fact that Narcissa did seem to want to open up.
Hermione chose to cherish that feeling of trust, that mystifying bond they shared. She had come to realize that the reason Narcissa was still so secretive about so many things was simply fear. And Hermione would bet her life savings that such fear was not of disapproval, but quite the opposite – she was certain Narcissa felt undeserving of her acceptance.

Which was a load of crap, but Hermione was just too diplomatic to phrase it that way.

She had laid awake at night, thinking, pondering, ruminating those thoughts over and over again. About the letters. About her parents. About the surveillance. About a great many things Narcissa was not telling her, surely.

The more Hermione thought about it, the more at ease she felt.

So what that Narcissa still received letters from Lucius? They were divorced and he was in prison. End of story. So what if she didn’t want to tell Hermione how she had restored her parents’ memories? They were there and they were alright, no thanks to Hermione, but to Narcissa. So what about all the other things?

Sure, Narcissa had a dark past, Hermione had come to see that its darkness was a lot more grey than she had initially assumed. And she felt so incredibly privileged to be trusted enough for Narcissa to feel comfortable sharing more about it with her.

And if the Potions professor never got to share some of it, Hermione had decided she would be perfectly fine with it.

She refused to let any remaining darkness from Narcissa’s past to taint her future. Hermione would not allow it – because she wanted to be part of that future, in whatever capacity Narcissa would allow her.

And so she had decided it was time to share more, and to give Narcissa the opportunity to do the same, without pressure. It was Friday now, and Hermione wanted to spend the weekend working at that endeavour.

Hermione was halfway to the Dungeons when she spotted none other than Harry Potter himself, walking briskly through the castle.

“Oi!” she waved at him. “Harry!”

He turned at her greeting, breaking out into a grin. He jogged to where she was, encircling her in a bear hug for a ‘hello.’

“You cheeky little jerk, why didn’t you let me know you were coming?” She asked, ruffling his hair just because. He mock-glared at her, but made no attempt to rectify his mop of black locks— he knew full well it was a hopeless cause.

“I’m here on Ministry business” he said, and Hermione could detect a hint of worry in his voice. “I had to talk to McGonagall about a few... developments.”

Hermione eyed him carefully. “Developments?” she inquired, not liking the way he smiled nervously, the left corner of his mouth twitching. She knew Harry too well—that particular tick popped up whenever he tried to downplay something. “Anything you can tell me, or is it just for the Headmistress’ ears?”
Harry sighed deeply. “I suppose I can tell you—I'm pretty sure McGonagall is going to alert the staff anyway.”

Alert. She didn’t like that word. “Alert? What happened?”

His shoulders hunched slightly. “We’re keeping it hush-hush at the moment, but there has been a breakout in Azkaban.” Harry whispered, his eyes darting from side to side as if checking for danger nearby. His behaviour only served to worry Hermione more.

“A breakout!” she hissed. “Who...”


Hermione’s blood ran cold. “No” she said, hating the way that Harry’s grimace confirmed it. “Dementors? How many?”

“All of them” he murmured grimly, nodding when Hermione’s eyes widened in alarm. “I know. We’ve got a shit-show in our hands, ‘Mione.”

“All of them?? But... how is that possible?”

“That’s the problem—we don’t know. They were just gone this morning. No one saw anything. We have no idea where they went, or how they just... disappeared. There are no reports of any sightings either, nothing at all.”

Hermione supressed a shiver. “And warning McGonagall... is there any reason to think they might come here?”

Harry shook his head. “Not really—Hogwarts is merely the nearest significant magical hub they might be attracted to. It’s a precaution.”

Hermione could not hide her relief. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Harry laughed. “I don’t know, Miss Award-Winning Warding Engineer, I wonder what you could possibly do?” He teased as Hermione reddened. Harry sobered. “The Ministry is sending Isobel MacDougal up as the Warding Engineer to oversee some check-ups of the school wards.” He winked. “She’s good, but she isn’t you, so would you mind checking her work, Professor Granger?”

Hermione blushed, remembering how she had used Isobel’s name to avoid a certain portrait’s wrath. “Of course, she croaked.

Harry looked at his watch, eyes narrowing. “I’ve got a meeting with my team in five. Sorry! We should catch up over some butterbeers later, before I have a screaming newborn in the house!”

Hermione smiled. “You bet!”

Harry took off in the opposite direction, and Hermione had to force herself not to overthink the situation. Sure, there were hundreds—perhaps thousands—of Dementors on the loose, but Hogwarts was safe. It was the safest it had been in years—she was responsible for wards that kept hundreds and hundreds of students away from potential harm, and she would make damn sure those wards included Dementors as potential harm.

She still felt uneasy, but had to remind herself they were not teenagers anymore—and when they were, they had taken down one of the most powerful wizards in the history of Wizardkind.
Whatever new challenge lay ahead, they would tackle it head on.

Hermione did the best to forget the worry, or at least push it aside for a little while, and resumed her walk to Narcissa’s classroom.

Hermione made it to the Potions classroom just in time for class to be let out. Several upper-level students were busy turning in projects; Hermione could just spot Narcissa ducking into her private office as she walked in. She patiently waited for the students to clear out, hit with a warm feeling of nostalgia as she remembered turning in projects much in the same way.

She missed it a little.

The Potions classroom smelled of a delicate eucalyptus scent; the kind that Hermione had come to associate with Narcissa and her potion-making. It seemed to permeate the classroom more strongly than usual – Hermione assumed it had something to do with some of the projects now neatly arranged on the class benches. Thankfully Narcissa had taught her students how to cover the smells of the more foul Potions, Hermione thought. If only Slughorn had been more insightful.

She waited until the last students walked out to call for the blonde.

“Narcissa? All done here?”

“Almost!” she heard the other professor’s voice carrying through the half-open door. “Let me file these, then I’m all yours.”

Hermione smiled as she looked through the classroom. Despite still being in the Dungeons, Narcissa had done something to it to make it... lighter, airier, and far less stifling than it had been during her student years. She supposed Snape and Narcissa had different aesthetics.

“Hello,” Hermione heard from behind her. She turned, ignoring the butterflies in her stomach—she didn’t think they would go away anytime soon; they always attacked full force when she saw Narcissa for the first time, on any day.

The blonde wore a deep-blue set of robes with a magnificent silver trim; the colour brought out the lighter blues of her eyes beautifully, making them utterly mesmerizing. A white undershirt showed beneath the heavy robes, and upon Narcissa’s exposed collarbone rested the silver Time-Turner Hermione had gifted her.

Hermione felt her heart skip a beat and felt embarrassed. She had already acknowledged to herself the level of her attraction to Narcissa, but this was getting ridiculous. It only got worse when Narcissa’s lips tugged into a happy grin.

“Hi there,” Hermione responded, hoping her voice didn’t sound too husky. “I see you’re finished with practicals as well?”

Narcissa nodded. “Yes, finally.” She motioned towards the bubbling cauldrons placed on students’ work benches. “My seventh-years just turned in their projects; I have to say the results are already more promising than I expected.”

The blonde stopped, seemingly distracted with something. She looked quizzically at Hermione, and the brunette was about to say something when the Potions professor took resolute steps in her direction.

“Wha...” Hermione began, but then Narcissa leaned desperately close, and for one panicked moment Hermione thought the blonde was about to kiss her.
Instead, Narcissa leaned close to Hermione’s neck, inhaling softly. “A-ha.” She murmured, mere centimetres from Hermione’s skin and making it erupt in goose-bumps Hermione prayed she wouldn’t notice. “I was wondering what that delightful scent was. Seems to be you” she quipped, and Hermione felt herself blushing. Narcissa inhaled deeply once more, and Hermione thought she’d have an aneurysm.

“Lavender,” Narcissa declared, seemingly oblivious to Hermione’s predicament, still sampling the scent in deep breaths that made Hermione try to supress few gasps. “But also...” another inhalation “jasmine and... peony.”

Hermione let out a nervous laugh. “You know your flowers” she croaked, fighting her flush. Narcissa stepped back with a smile, and Hermione gave her an impressed look. “I think that’s nearly every ingredient of my perfume.”

Narcissa tapped her nose. “A good potion maker must always have a good sense of smell—anything off with a potion’s scent can be disastrous.”

Hermione laughed, a little more at ease. “That’s mightily impressive, I put it on very early this morning. And this room really smells of eucalyptus” she pointed out.

Narcissa raised a brow, puzzled. “Eucalyptus? I haven’t used it in any brews today—I need to be able to spot if my students are doing things correctly.”

“Really?” Hermione asked, genuinely puzzled. There was no way Narcissa couldn’t smell the eucalyptus, not if she had just broken down Hermione’s perfume by ingredient. Maybe the blonde had grown used to it? “Then how...”

“Ah! Professor Black!” called a student, bursting through the open door panting and red in the face. “Oh, hello, Professor Granger. Sorry to interrupt. Professor Black, I’m so sorry, but I accidentally forgot to submit my ingredient analysis! May I put it with my sample?”

“Your sample?” Narcissa asked, and Hermione was confused by how the woman suddenly stiffened in place, eyes widening in something akin to terror.

“Of course, Mr. Greyson” Narcissa said hoarsely, nodding to the young man, who hurriedly deposited a roll of parchment by a copper cauldron that bubbled away. The potion there was of a mother-of-pearl sheen; its smoke rose in dainty spirals. Hermione froze. She felt her heart pumping away furiously, and the butterflies in her stomach returned in a frenzy. A label hastily applied to the rim of the cauldron read, in clumsy capital letters: AMORTENTIA.
Hermione could only stare at Narcissa, eyes glued to the blonde’s. Suddenly, Narcissa whipped her wand out of her sleeve; it whizzed in the air in one frantic movement that summoned the cauldron’s lid onto it, covering the Amortentia.

Almost immediately, that strong scent of eucalyptus Hermione had identified earlier dissipated entirely. That scent which she had come to associate with Narcissa, it permeated the other witch’s robes and hair and skin as she toiled over her sophisticated brews. That scent which now comforted Hermione whenever she was near it; that scent which was so awfully common yet so perfectly fitting for Narcissa.

Hermione couldn’t say anything; all she could do was keep staring like an idiot, with the same thought swirling in her head.

Narcissa smelled her perfume. Narcissa had smelled her perfume without even coming close, which was impossible. Narcissa had smelled her perfume. Narcissa had smelled her perfume.

Hermione had to contain a smug grin and evidently did a rather poor job of it, because Narcissa Black was now flushed before her, cheeks tinted pink, and Hermione felt absolutely triumphant. She knew Narcissa was not indifferent, but now she knew Narcissa was not indifferent. That made all the difference in the world.

“So,” Hermione began again, very much aware her giddiness was not being very well contained, but finding herself unable to care. “All done with practicals, then?”

How amazing to be able to see it in Narcissa’s eyes—she knew Narcissa knew Hermione knew. If that made sense. Hermione couldn’t even fault the blonde for treading lightly; not now that she knew. Now that she knew, Hermione felt like she was able to give Narcissa all the time in the world.

“Yes,” Narcissa said, eyeing Hermione cautiously with a mix of trepidation and embarrassment. She paused, biting her bottom lip and seemingly in search for words. “Hermione, about the Amort...”

“You know, I rather fancy an outing to Black Manor.” Hermione interjected with a smile and what she hoped was a reassuring look. Narcissa’s eyes widened and she quirked a confused brow. Those blue depths looked to Hermione’s in question.

“An outing?” Narcissa asked, and how could Hermione miss the breathless quality of her voice now that she knew. She knew, she knew, she knew.

“Yes.” Hermione quipped—her joy was bursting from her chest. “You know, since we’ll have a weekend of respite before exams resume.”

Narcissa’s shoulders visibly relaxed, and her smile now seemed more genuine, less strained with uncertainty and potential guilt. It lit up her features beautifully. “I suppose we have the time.” She said, and it thrilled Hermione how they had seemed to tune into the same frequency, like they were silently acknowledging that now they both knew, but would play it by ear because now they could.

“Great!” Hermione exclaimed. “I believe I’ve concluded my final tweaks on my rune-tracking
“charm” she elaborated, delighting in how Narcissa’s azure gaze brightened considerably in expectation and excitement. “It’s why I came down here” she confessed. “I wanted to wait until exams were over, but honestly, I couldn’t.”

“I’m glad you didn’t!” Narcissa declared, looking outright giddy. “You... you think you can do it?”

Hermione held her arm out for Narcissa to take, feeling particularly confident. “Yes Ma’am. Let’s go dissect some wards!”

There was some slight hesitation in the way Narcissa reached out to loop her arm to Hermione’s, but any doubt it may have caused the brunette was summarily erased as with the way Narcissa not only held on tight, but also naturally gravitated closer.

Hermione couldn’t contain her shit-eating grin if she tried.

“We’ll have to go to the mausoleum again” Hermione said as the two witches took their time in strolling through the manicured gardens of Black Manor. Their arms were still linked, and there was an odd serenity in this unplanned walk through the grounds that Narissa truly cherished.

“Of course,” Narcissa replied. There was trepidation in her voice, she knew, but not nearly as much as there ought to be with such a destination in mind.

“Will you be alright?” Hermione pushed gently, brow quirked in question.

Narcissa smiled and patted Hermione’s arms reassuringly. “I’ll be perfectly fine.”

It was a gorgeous day. Springs always seemed longer at Black Manor; they had since she was a child. It was the gardens, Narcissa was sure of it—they were always in bloom, always colourful and perfectly maintained, flowers in alternating patterns and arrangements that made the whole thing look like an impressionist painting from a distance.

Lavender, jasmine, peonies.

Narcissa wished the floor would swallow her up—an entirely foreign emotion to her, who had been taught to carry her pride where the world could see it, above all else. She felt like an utter fool. How was she caught unawares by Amortentia? It was her own fault, too; she knew there was a cauldron of the stuff there—she had been the one to assign the ruddy thing.

She couldn’t have guessed Greyson would have left his cauldron open. She couldn’t have guessed Hermione Granger would show at her door when she did. She couldn’t have guessed she would smell lavender, jasmine, and peonies. She most certainly couldn’t have guessed Hermione would have smelled eucalyptus.

Narcissa groaned internally. That was a lie. She knew whatever she smelled would be associated to the pretty brunette on her arm; thinking otherwise was to be far too entrenched in the world of denial. Eucalyptus, for Merlin’s sakes. What was the surprise, really? She had followed Hermione’s gaze as it followed her through the past few months.

There was an intensity there that could not—indeed, it would not—go ignored for much longer.

It was terrifying.
In truth, Hermione’s gaze had become so intense over the past few weeks Narcissa nearly expected an interrogation to take place over the Amortentia. She fully expected Hermione to launch into observation mode, putting two and two together in a painfully obvious fashion.

And then... she didn’t. Hermione had brushed the revelation brought on by the tricky brew right off; she had not even acknowledged it. To what end, Narcissa wondered. What would possess the ever-curious Hermione Granger to let such a development pass her by with no acknowledgement whatsoever?

It hit her as Hermione babbled about the history of warding runes while they walked; as she felt the heat of the brunette’s arm entwined with her own as she met a calm, caring hazel gaze every now and then. The message was clearer than it would have been had Hermione said it outright.

She was giving Narcissa time.

That revelation shook Narcissa to her core as they walked. It brought on incomparable happiness and unspeakable guilt. Hermione had to be the most considerate, kind-hearted witch Narcissa had ever had the pleasure to know.

It was unfair to take advantage of such kindness; particularly when Narcissa knew in her heart she was most undeserving.

Though, she thought as Hermione flashed her a beaming grin at some humorous anecdote about wards gone wrong... Weren’t Slytherin’s notoriously greedy?

She could be greedy. Hermione had given her express permission, had she not?

The Black Family Mausoleum became visible after a short while. It looked decidedly less imposing—not to mention far less ominous—in broad daylight, but even then, Narcissa was grateful to feel Hermione’s hand take her own in a tight, comforting grasp.

“Alright,” the brunette began once they were inside, awkwardly shuffling her left arm into her robes and pulling out her wand, still unwilling to let go of Narcissa. “The spell is the same, but I’ve tweaked some of the wand movements,” she explained as she demonstrated, albeit a bit clumsily with her non-dominant arm.

Narcissa smiled, taking pity on the brunette and gently untangling herself from the Gryffindor. Hermione looked suitably reassured by her smile and gaze. “Alright,” Narcissa said, unsheathing her own wand. “It was Refugium Reperio, was it not?”

Hermione nodded with a grin, and, new movements in mind, the two witches set to work in scanning the building.

Narcissa was amazed at how the spell reacted to the myriad of wards placed on the old building. Hermione had told her before that the soft purple glow at the tip of her wand would grow brighter and brighter as they approached a warding origin point, but Narcissa now could see and feel the several tweaks Hermione had added to the spell since then.

Her wand still glowed softly in a purple hue, but it projected Runed characters in a fine silver smoke as well; they changed and rearranged themselves as Narcissa walked the perimeter, or disappeared completely depending on her location.

“It’s a diagnostic tweak” Hermione explained when she noticed Narcissa’s look of bewilderment as she performed the spell. “Gives a preliminary read on the Runes we find” she added bashfully.
“Remarkable” Narcissa said honestly, noting how Hermione flushed a deep red with her praise.

Despite the extraordinary strides Hermione had made in her adjustments to the spell, after a short time of scanning the crypt it was quite plain to Narcissa that Hermione was growing increasingly frustrated. Narcissa was well-versed in Ancient Runes—at least far more than your average wizard—but even she could not quite comprehend the ever-changing lines of smoke that her wand projected as she walked through the mausoleum. The tip of her wand brightened and dimmed depending on where she pointed it at, and from the corner of her eye she could see that Hermione was.

The sun began to set behind the intricate stained-glass windows, and soon the family crypt was awash in the glow of the usual green-flamed candles that came magically alight. Narcissa could see Hermione pacing at the far end of the mausoleum, a fair distance from where she was. The brunet’s exasperation was evident in her body language.

“She.” Narcissa heard Hermione’s voice echoing through the eerie chamber.

“Everything alright?” She called back, her voice reverberating on the stone walls until it reached Hermione. Narcissa could hear her sigh.

“Yes.” A pause. “No.”

Narcissa saw the purple glow of Hermione’s wand being extinguished in her peripheral vision and moved to do the same. She approached the young Gryffindor, who now looked forlorn.

“What seems to be the problem?” She asked gently. Hermione’s shoulders sagged in defeat.

“It’s not... It’s not working. I’m sorry.”

Narcissa tilted Hermione’s chin up. “Don’t apologise to me” she said resolutely. “You’re doing the best you can.”

Hermione smiled, but still looked defeated. “I really wanted it to work this time. I thought I knew what I was looking for.”

“You do.” Narcissa said, for some reason feeling as if she spoke of something far more important than the wards, far more important than Black Manor. “It’ll come to you, I’m sure. When you least expect it.”

Hermione sighed. “Would you mind a walk through the grounds? It’s dark, but I don’t know, maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“Of course.”

It was a beautiful night, even if the grounds of Black Manor looked particularly eerie with the fog that rolled in from the small lake to the North of the estate. The vast forested areas stretched through the dips and rises of hills far beyond where the eye could see, the leaves on the ancient trees rustling in sombre unison with the wind.

It was cold, especially for that time of the year. Before Narcissa could think twice about it, she wordlessly cast a warming charm around them. She received a grateful glance from Hermione in response. The young woman’s eyes were dark and thoughtful as they walked slowly down the gravel path that led to the main house.

Every now and then, Hermione would mutter another *Refugium Reperio* under her breath. Her
wand would flicker purple for a few seconds, then it would be snuffed out completely. She would mutter a curse and give up for a few moments before trying again.

They were nearly by the main gates again when Hermione groaned in frustration.

“What is it?” Narcissa inquired. Hermione looked like a student angry with a particularly problematic transfiguration formula; it would have been quite endearing if the brunette wasn’t truly so frustrated.

“It’s just...” she mumbled, “I know the spell is reading correctly. I guess we’re just not in the correct area to find the origin point we want.” She sighed, then turned to face Narcissa directly.

“Are there any other buildings around the mausoleum’s age in the property?”

Narcissa bit her lip. “No, at least to my knowledge there are none that are stand...”

Something caught her attention rather suddenly; a faint gimmer of gold she only saw in passing in the corner of her eye. It flickered just faintly enough for her to question even seeing it, but then it happened again. And again and again, rhythmically, like the beating of wings in flight.

“Narcissa?” Hermione questioned, looking in the same direction.

“A Flickering Pixie” Narcissa breathed out, finally identifying the little creature. It was so much smaller than she remembered; she hadn’t seen one of those since she was a little girl.

“Oh,” Hermione noted with a grin as the friendly little Doxie hovered nearer, its flight clumsy and glimmering with gold as its diminutive wings beat frantically, glowing brightly in the darkness as it drew closer, hovering around their heads. “It’s quite pretty, isn’t it?”

“Flickering Pixies,” Narcissa murmured, remembering. She felt the memory hit her violently, nearly yanking a gasp from her chest as it flooded her mind with the last time she had seen one of the little pests, as her cousin Sirius would have put it.

“Come to the creek with me and Sirius!” Regulus suggested happily. “We might even find some Flickering Pixies! They’re much more fun than sitting here all day.”

Narcissa hugged her knees tight against her chest. “How far into the woods are you going?” she asked uncertain. Regulus’ older brother was a bit of troublemaker – she didn’t want to do anything that might displease her parents, her mother especially.

“Not far” Regulus promised. “Just up to the old ruins by the creek; remember those?”

Walking through the trails with Regulus and Sirius. Her blue skirt; torn and muddied, but her dignity intact and pristine.

“Cissa, look! Flickering Pixies!” Regulus exclaimed.

“Please, Regulus, control yourself. They’re just pests, anyway.” Sirius scoffed.

Sirius showing them their grandfather’s wand, stolen in his sleep. A phantom pain of the slicing curse her cousin unwittingly attacked her with burned through her abdomen, making her scar throb; Narcissa brought her hand to it in an unconscious gesture.

“Narcissa?” Hermione asked again, looking worried. “Are you alright?”

That summer, a whole eternity ago. Deep, childish boredom, sitting by a pond surrounded by
enchanted magnolia with flowers that glittered like glass in the sunlight. Regulus and Sirius. The trails, the creek, the ruins.

The ruins.

“Narcissa?” Hermione tried one more time, her voice bordering on panicked.

“I know where there is an older edifice.” Narcissa said in one confident burst of breath, grasping onto Hermione’s arm. The brunette looked immeasurably confused, but there was the unmistakable glimmer of excitement in her brown eyes.

“Older than the mausoleum?” Hermione inquired, curiosity taking over. Narcissa let out a breathless laugh.

“I can’t believe I had forgotten it” she said excitedly, pulling Hermione by the hand as she followed the Flickering Pixie to one of the many hunting trails in the property. She scrunched her nose as they wound through it, remembering the day when she had discovered exactly what those hunting trails were used for—she had tactfully chosen not to comment when she and Hermione had come across those particular family records.

“I have no idea how old it is” she continued, taking the same steps she had taken as a child like she had done so every single day of her life. It was as if she somehow could remember every branch in the way, every stone, every root sticking out of the muddy ground; it was all exactly as it had always been. “But I remember... I remember now, my grandfather telling stories about how he used to play at the ruins as a child.”

“Ruins? What ruins?” Hermione followed willingly, but quirked a brow in question. Narcissa could only imagine how crazy she sounded and looked, so eager to trudge through this muddy trail after some glowing Doxie.

“I’m not sure what it was used for originally” Narcissa kept on, unbothered. “But I know it was one of the first edifices erected in the estate” that tid-bit caught Hermione’s attention, and Narcissa squeezed the hand she held in triumph. She could remember it now, clear as day, as if the trail itself had triggered her memory. “It eventually became a servants’ quarter, but it fell to ruin in the Middle Ages.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “It fell to ruin in the Middle Ages?” she exclaimed in disbelief. “And we are following a Flickering Pixie there?”

“Uh-hum” Narcissa muttered, grinning.

“How did you just remember this now?”

Narcissa shrugged her shoulders. She really had no answer. “I have no idea,” she confessed, laughing to herself. “Perhaps it was my previous traumatic experience.”

“Traumatic?”

“Yes,” the blonde confirmed with a resolute nod. “When we were children, my cousins and I took this very same trail following the creek” the sound of water became audible just as she recounted her memory, bubbling away by their side as she spoke, “up to the ruins. Sirius had stolen my grandfather’s wand and...”

“Ah. You told me. Obscure slicing curse, huh?”
Narcissa nodded. “Precisely. We were only children.”

“And the Flickering Pixies?”

Narcissa laughed. “They’re just pests.” She grinned. “But they nest near the ruins. That’s how I remembered. Regulus just loved them to pieces.”

Speaking of her younger cousin brought her considerable pain. To the bitter end, Regulus had been pure of heart; Narcissa firmly believed that. Had he been fortunate enough to have anyone other than Orion and Walburga for his parents, he would have most certainly followed Sirius to the Order of the Phoenix. Nothing would convince Narcissa otherwise. Regulus had always adored Sirius.

They kept following the Pixie down the trail until it met the little creek they had heard just a few minutes before. The trail ended in a sparse grove of trees, forming a little clearing right at the end of the trail. The Pixie that had guided them there hovered about in the air for a few moments before disappearing into the darkness completely.

“Looks like it’s the end of the road.” Narcissa vaguely heard Hermione comment, but she was too distracted squinting to try and make sense of the dark shapes and forms that hid away in the blackness of the trees. She felt Hermione rustle in her robes for her wand.

“No,” she said, lowering Hermione’s wand arm before the brunette could cast a *Lumos*. “Give them a minute.”

That earned her another questioning look from the other witch, but thankfully Hermione dropped it, holding tightly onto Narcissa’s arm in anticipation. A moment passed; long, stretched out over minutes of complete and utter silence. Narcissa grew impatient, but she dared not make a sound or move a muscle, and she could feel Hermione straining to do the same.

And then, suddenly, a glimmer, far deep into the grove. Then another, a few paces forward. Then another, a few feet to the right. Then another, and another, and another, and suddenly hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands of Flickering Pixies took flight, their wings beating rapidly in rhythmic golden flickers. They illuminated the grove with their rich, brilliant glow like thousands of floating candles.

Narcissa turned to Hermione only to see that the brunette was completely enthralled by the mass flight of the Pixies; their golden light reflected beautifully in the deep rich browns of her eyes. It was like the reflections of the pixies created vast universes, interminable and deep in Hermione’s eyes.

“Merlin!” the brunette exclaimed happily as hundreds of pixies hovered all around them. Narcissa smiled at the Gryffindor’s childlike wonder, but her gaze was averted when another mass of pixies took flight deeper into the grove, where the little creek went back into the thicket.

“Hermione,” she called the young woman’s attention. “Look.”

Hermione turned to where Narcissa indicated, and her chin dropped at sizeable stone structure the newest flight of Flickering Pixies had just revealed. It stood as a shadow of what it had once been, overrun by vines and moss.

“Godric’s girdles, is this... Is this it?” Hermione asked as she approached, letting go of Narcissa, eyes wide with wonder. She turned back to face Narcissa once more. “Is this really it.”

“Yes” Narcissa breathed out, throat suddenly dry. Hermione’s wild curls framed her fair
face ethereally with the glow of the pixies that surrounded them; her darkened brown eyes were now flecked with the gold of their wings, and her smile... Merlin, her smile.

Narcissa swallowed dryly. She was doomed.

“Come on, then! Let’s put this spell to good use!” Hermione called happily, entirely oblivious to the predicament Narcissa found herself in. All Narcissa could do was let herself be pulled by Hermione’s eagerness; they climbed up age-old stones that had been cut to lay the foundation of the ruins when they were first built.

Hermione was in awe; her hand trailed the few vine-covered walls that still stood, some only halfway up or even less. The moss had grown onto the stone of the floor roughly following the pattern in which they had been cut, creating several different shapes that entwined themselves as the moss took over.

“The magic is different here,” Hermione said, stepping carefully over a fallen column covered in fungi and more moss. “Can you feel it?”

“Yes,” Narcissa answered, taking note of that fact. She had never noticed it as a child, but then again, there was no Wizarding child in the land that was in-tune with their own magical signature. It took practice to recognize its interaction with the other magic that surrounded them.

The magic in the ruins did indeed feel different. It felt heavier, somehow, like they had walked into a room with different pressure or atmosphere. It was as if the air that surrounded them was slightly heavier, like the magical signature found there enveloped their own with a heavy blanket.

“This has to be it” Hermione murmured, enthralled by the history and magic surrounding them. “It’s got to be it.”

Narcissa smiled. “Will you do the honours, then?”

Hermione’s grin was blinding in the flickering lights. It was like Narcissa’s heart physically expanded at the sight. The brunette took her wand out of its holster, taking a deep, concentrating breath.

“Refugium Reperio!”

The purple glow was instantaneous. Swirls of smoke burst from the wand’s tip, creating intricate rune patterns in the air, ever-changing. The purple light intensified, and Hermione looked absolutely overwrought with glee at the result. She pointed her wand to the moss-riddled stone beneath their feet, and the runes written in smoke seemed to solidify as she hovered her wand over certain spots. Hermione stepped closer to the centre of the ruins, and the glow intensified even further.

“This is it!” She exclaimed, eyes meeting Narcissa’s. “This is it, I’m sure of it.” Her gaze turned a little bit smug; it was happy, cocky, and so beautifully jovial. “Are you ready for some phenomenal magic?”

Narcissa laughed, then raised a brow in challenge. “You promise a lot to a witch, Ms. Granger.” She joked, surprising herself with her own cheekiness. The startled yet happy look her response elicited in the brunette just made Narcissa flush.

“Well, lucky for you, Ms. Black,” Hermione quipped back, drawling out Narcissa’s name huskily. “I always deliver on my promises.”
With that, Hermione raised her wand high into the air; her brows furrowed in deep concentration before she brought it back down in a swift move.

“Decerno!”

There was an immediate rumble; a thunderous boom coming from the earth beneath the ruins. It shook the few walls that still stood; the stone platform began to quake with the strength of the movement and sound. Flickering Pixies flew in a frenzy, startled by the sound and the trembling of the ruins.

“Hold on!” Hermione called, leaning onto a wall. Narcissa nearly stumbled, but managed to hold onto a leaning column before she fell to the ground with the force of the quake. Hermione still stood, holding her wand in a white-knuckled grip as a ring of stones in the earth began to push upwards through a thousand years-worth of moss and vegetation. From where she stood, Narcissa could see they formed various runes—they had found the origin point, and apparently generated an earthquake in the process.

Narcissa was terrified; never had she seen such a spell. She feared the ruins would come down upon them with the strength of the quake, but one look at Hermione eased her worry considerably. The brunette did not look afraid at all. There was no fear or even uncertainty in her courageous Gryffindor gaze. There was only sheer triumph.

The trembling stopped, and Narcissa felt it safe to let go of the column she held onto for dear life. Hermione looked at the ring of stones, breathless and victorious. She turned her gaze towards Narcissa, full of mirth.

“Now, for the best part.”

Narcissa wanted to ask what in Merlin’s name Hermione meant by that, but she did not have the opportunity. Hermione performed an intricate movement with her wand, whipping it through the air in sharp turns and graceful loops before bellowing out another spell towards the stone circle.

“Aperio!”

There was another rumble, much lower, this time, but still enough for Narcissa to feel the earth shake slightly beneath her feet. To her astonishment, the ancient rune circle before them began to float; the individual stones that marked each rune began to spin very slowly as they hovered in the air. Hermione aimed another concentrated movement of her wand towards the floating arrangement, and suddenly each rune began to spin on its own, creating a mind-boggling gyrating display.

From one of the individually spinning stones came a strong burst of light; it startled Narcissa enough to make her take a step backward. It was a very bright blue, maybe even teal colour. While it was light, it also seemed to be smoke as it rolled around the other stones before shooting up towards the sky like some kind of ghostly firework. Narcissa followed its trajectory up into the dark night sky, expecting it to disappear.

It didn’t.

Instead, the ethereal projectile of light seemed to hit an invisible glass wall, thousands and thousands of feet above them. It hit that unseen barrier and instead of disintegrating or merely disappearing completely, it seemed to redistribute itself onto a non-existent pane of glass, covering it in light.
“What...” Narcissa began, but she was interrupted by another burst of light coming from another of the stones; it was bright lilac, this time, and soon the light shot into the air like the first, covering another area in the sky.

Before long the rest of the stones started shooting off light in the same fashion, in alternating colours and with different speeds, all tremendously fast and explosive, but always in the same patterns, creating shapes of ethereal bright smoke far above the Black estate. The shapes interlocked to one another like puzzle pieces—no, Narcissa wondered, like stained-glass, as if they were creating a massive dome that encompassed the entirety of the property.

Blues, purples, pinks gave way to deep reds and oranges and yellows. There was a burst of white, then an explosion of green, then a blast of teal, and so on and so forth, in a million dazzling colours like a firework display that now covered the night almost entirely, as far as the eye could see.

Narcissa had been too mesmerized by that impressive bit of magic to notice how Hermione laughed, exultant, victorious, and relieved all at once. Her laughter was free and infectious, and Narcissa found herself smiling despite her confusion.

“These are the wards!” Hermione bellowed happily over the considerable noise of the explosions and the continued rumbling of the earth, pointing up towards the hypnotizing display in the sky above them. “They’re interacting with one another! We found them!”

Hermione couldn’t remember a time when she had felt so desperately happy over anything. Perhaps her memory would serve her better some other time, but right then and there all she could process was the spectacular display of light that were the innumerable Black Family wards, finally exposed to her scrutiny. She had not considered the sheer quantity of wards all over the property—she knew there were many, but the overlapping shapes in the sky showed hundreds, perhaps even thousands more than she had anticipated.

It was absolutely mesmerizing; the sky was now so bright it was as if night had ceased to exist. The ruins, and indeed the entire estate, were now illuminated by multifaceted streams of colourful lights. There was smoke, there was light, there was the force of the explosions and there was wind, all creating one of the most extraordinary scenes Hermione had ever laid eyes upon.

And there was Narcissa, right in the middle of it. The wind had blown much of her hair out of its neat bun, eyes were wide as she looked up towards the sky that was now blanketed in colour and iridescent lights, mouth slightly parted in complete and utter awe. Hermione stopped looking at the display her spellcasting had produced and focused solely in how the multitude of lights reflected onto Narcissa’s blue eyes as the other witch gaped in amazement.

Her heart seemed to constrict in her chest, needing to commit to memory how stunning Narcissa looked at that exact moment in time, basked in colour and light.

The explosions slowed after several moments, and shortly after stopped completely. The runes stopped spinning, and the circular arrangement they were in slowed to a gentle stop. Narcissa’s chest heaved as she took deep, fortifying breaths, and Hermione was surprised to notice she was just as breathless. All the excitement and triumph of the moment washed over her, and she started laughing.

“You did it” she heard Narcissa breath out, completely bewildered, regarding her with awe as she stepped closer to where Hermione stood. “You did it.”
Hermione could only nod, still laughing breathlessly. Narcissa was much closer now, breaking out into a huge grin.

“You did it!”

Before she could react, Hermione felt Narcissa’s arms encircling here, and suddenly they were spinning in place, laughing at their triumph after so many months of painstaking work and numerous dead ends. Hermione was overtaken by the celebratory mood, and before she could think about what she was doing, Narcissa was in her arms, being lifted off the ground by the waist as they spun together.

“We did it!” Hermione laughed as Narcissa’s arms came to rest upon her shoulders after a happy, giddy yelp of surprise. The blonde had cheerful tears in her eyes, and her smile was brighter than all the lights that now covered the sky. “You can open the Ward now.” Hermione continued, a bit more sedately as she got lost in Narcissa’s eyes, slowing their triumphant twirl to a stop.

“You’re... you’re absolutely extraordinary, Hermione Granger.” Narcissa breathed out, grinning from ear to ear.

She had never seen Narcissa smile like this, she had never seen her cry of happiness like this; it was all more than a bit disarming. Hermione felt Narcissa’s grip on her shoulders tighten only slightly, and the way the blonde nipped at her bottom lip made Hermione’s brain go haywire.

*If there was ever a moment, it would be this one,* she thought in her euphoria, overwhelmed by the heat of Narcissa’s body against her own, her touch on her shoulders, and her smouldering blue gaze meeting her own. She could scarcely help herself from leaning the few inches that separated them, but she held on tight, unwilling to break the moment with some impetuous, irrational Gryffindor action.

Therefore, it surprised her greatly when she felt Narcissa’s hands move from her shoulders to her neck, tenderly caressing a path to her face. A bigger surprise was the Slytherin’s sudden intake of breath, as if she had gathered her own courage to do the unthinkable, erasing the distance between them to capture Hermione’s lips in a fierce kiss.
There was a moment—no more than a split second that split itself into an eternity of emotion—when Hermione was all but certain she had gone totally and completely blind.

She couldn’t see the glittering lights that had just moments ago covered the starry skies; she couldn’t see the glimmering golden wings of the Flickering Pixies; she couldn’t see the ruins or even the shadowy forest that surrounded them. She couldn’t even see Narcissa.

But she could feel Narcissa. Hermione felt her weight in her arms; she felt the witch’s muscles ripple with movement under her hands; and most importantly, Hermione felt the tentative softness of Narcissa’s plump lips moving tenderly against her own.

She wasn’t prepared for the onslaught of feeling, for the force with which she experienced Narcissa’s affectionate kiss, her warmth, or that faint eucalyptus scent that was Narcissa’s and Narcissa’s alone, infiltrating her senses much like an Elixir of Lunacy would, burrowing itself in her mind and making her go absolutely, unequivocally and irrevocably crazy for the witch she held in her arms.

While Hermione’s arms instinctively tightened around Narcissa’s waist, eager to feel, to hold, to possess, her legs did precisely the opposite, trembling with sensation. And so they buckled, just as Hermione had gathered enough presence of mind to kiss Narcissa back, fervently. Hermione tumbled backwards to the mossy ground, taking Narcissa with her.

The Gryffindor tried to break their gall, but they landed with a muted thud onto the mosses. Hermione had the air violently knocked out of her lungs; she gasped, forcing their kiss to break, and in that millisecond of pain Narcissa pulled away slightly, just enough for Hermione to see the worry reflected in her blue eyes.

Those worried eyes ignited a panic within her—Narcissa's lips parted once more to say something, but Hermione refused to give regret a chance to surface; at least not yet, not when she had ruined such a perfect moment.

Narcissa squeaked in surprise, eyes widening as Hermione lunged forward and upward, taking her lips in a fierce, desperate kiss, as if Hermione wanted—needed—to drink in her very essence from the source.

Hermione felt Narcissa stiffen in her arms; it lasted for only a moment, for Narcissa’s body began to melt against her own as the Slytherin kissed her back, possessed by a similar want, a similar need that drove her deeper and deeper into the kiss.

Narcissa tasted sweeter than anything Hermione had ever tasted. She tasted of red wine and tea, of chocolates opened in a bright Christmas morning. She tasted of berries freshly picked from a winding forest trail; she tasted like a warm cup of cocoa taken in with a pink sunset.

Hermione didn’t need to see Narcissa, not when she felt this much of her at once. Narcissa felt, tasted and smelled of complete and utter happiness; like the source of an unknown bliss that Hermione didn’t know she had been looking for her entire life.

Her vision was slow to return, much like the passage of the moment itself, the one in which Narcissa’s lips continued to move against her own eternally. Just as her eyes could see again, Hermione immediately closed them, because she was drunk, so drunk on the feeling of Narcissa’s
body pressed against her own that the ability to see now seemed utterly meaningless. What were
the lights and the skies and the Earth itself in comparison to the feel of Narcissa’s hands cradling
her cheeks, the feel of the slow, gentle caresses of her kiss?

Despite the eternity of that one moment, it had to inevitably come to an end. Narcissa pulled back
just enough to separate them; Hermione still felt the soft caresses of her breath upon her lips. It was
then, and only then, that Hermione made the conscious effort to open her eyes and see.

She was drowning in blue the moment she raised her lids. The azure of Narcissa’s timid gaze was
deep and endless like the skies, brilliant and tempestuous like the deepest oceans.

Hermione began to think that her carelessness over her vision had been perhaps a bit premature.
She saw Narcissa’s eyes, she saw her flushed cheeks, and she saw her parted lips. Hermione also
felt the witch’s breaths—they ghosted her lips, softly blew her hair, and pressed against her chest.
She was too lost in sensation to think of anything else.

Narcissa did not seem to have that problem.

“Merlin” she gasped, breath tickling Hermione’s cheeks. “I am terribly sorry. I... I don’t know
what came over me.”

Hermione laughed, because wasn’t that just the most Narcissa thing to say? She waved off the
apology.

“Hardly an inconvenience” she quipped, delighting in the way Narcissa’s cheeks flushed so deeply
in pink. “I... I should be the one apologizing, really. For... uh. The fall. I was caught off-guard.”

Narcissa’s cheeks pinked further, and she dropped her head to Hermione’s chest in embarrassment.
Hermione could not find it in herself to complain; instead, she cradled Narcissa’s head lovingly
against her, running her fingers through tendrils of soft blond hair. It took the other witch several
moments to speak again, but Hermione did not mind waiting when these moments felt so eternal.

“Still,” Narcissa continued, sighing in contentment as Hermione stroked her hair. “It was a bit...
impulsive on my part. I should have asked first.”

Hermione chuckled.

“I’m a Gryffindor—I know all about impulsiveness!” she jested, drawing a shy laugh from
Narcissa. “But if it’ll give you any peace of mind... Had you asked, my answer would have been:
‘yes, please’. Just so you know.”

Now Narcissa’s laugh was more genuine; it was louder, freer, and strong enough to make her body
quake with laughter against Hermione’s.

“I’m serious!” Hermione said. She sobered, hindsight putting the significance of the moment in
perspective “I’ve wanted to, for a good while” she confessed, feeling a considerable weight vacate
her chest. There was an almost imperceptible nod of Narcissa’s head.

“I know,” she whispered into Hermione’s collarbone. “At the Astronomy Tower... In Molly’s
pantry... Even in my own classroom.” She raised her head to look directly at Hermione. “I could
see it in your eyes.”

The admission made Hermione shiver; it was not at all unpleasant.
“Impressive,” she breathed out.

Narcissa’s lips tugged into a smile; Hermione could feel them against her skin.

“Well, you were not exactly subtle.”

Hermione knew she was meant to be the butt of some joke about Gryffindors lacking discretion, but she was too consumed with joy to care even a little.

“Subtlety is overrated. I’m glad I wasn’t.”

Narcissa stiffened under her touch.

“This...” Hermione could suddenly feel every drop of uncertainty in her tone. “This is rather unlike me. To be this impulsive. This... Oh, I don’t have the words. Whatever I say, it will undoubtedly convey a kind of regret I simply don’t possess.”

Hermione chose to latch onto that last part—the one with a distinct lack of regret.

“I’m glad you don’t.” She craned her neck to look at Narcissa. “You don’t... do you? Have any regrets?”

Narcissa laughed wryly.

“I’ve lived a lifetime of regrets, Hermione. Several of them include you in one way or another.”

Hermione frowned at the thought, but Narcissa dropped a comforting kiss to her neck.

“They are all of my own doing; I suspect I will never be truly free of them. But to answer your question... I don’t regret kissing you just now, even though there is a great part of me that feels as if I should.”

Hermione tightened her arms around the blonde. “Ignore it,” she declared. Narcissa chuckled.

“That is the plan,” she said, taking in a deep breath, as if she were trying to inhale Hermione’s essence. “I’ve told you this—I am a greedy, awfully selfish woman. I am used to taking what I want—particularly when I least deserve it.”

Narcissa propped herself up, elbows on either side of Hermione. Her gaze was clouded with a heat Hermione had never seen there before, and the Gryffindor at once realized that, the entire time she thought she had been able to read Narcissa, she was only reading what Narcissa allowed her to read. For the first time, the Slytherin’s gaze was an open book, and Hermione wanted to lose herself in it.

“Right now,” Narcissa continued, still breathless, “all I seem to want is you.”

Hermione shivered at Narcissa’s words and the breathless quality of her husky tone. She also felt herself grinning like an idiot, and the look must have been endearing to Narcissa, because the blonde smiled down at her tenderly.

“Lucky me.” Hermione quipped.

“We’ll see about that.” Narcissa retorted, worry lining her features. “Admittedly, I have absolutely no plan—I don’t quite know how to... take this from this point.”

Hermione’s grin widened. “Lucky for you, the girl you just snogged is the biggest know-it-all of
“the century!” That made Narcissa laugh, and Hermione felt happily smug. “I know exactly how to handle this.”

“Lucky me, indeed” Narcissa jabbed sarcastically, but her smile was blinding. “Tell me, oh Brightest Witch of Her Age... how shall we handle this?”

“Simple,” Hermione shrugged, unbothered. She had never been so certain of anything in her life. “Just like we have been ever since we began working together. We take it one day at a time.”

Narcissa smiled broadly.

“One day at a time, you say?”

“One day at a time.” Hermione confirmed. “I’ll just add, I don’t know, more wining and dining I suppose. I’ve been waiting for an opportunity to woo you properly.”

Narcissa’s smile faltered only slightly, but it was more than enough to light the fires of insecurity and uncertainty.

“I don’t want to push you,” Hermione quickly backtracked. “It’s just... I’ve come to really like you as a person, Narcissa. As a woman. Not like, like, but I do... I do fancy you, I suppose. Yeah. And I wouldn’t want to... I wouldn’t want for you to feel rushed or pressured in any way just because of how I feel, I just want you to know that...”

Hermione’s lips were silenced by Narcissa’s. That action did more to assuage Hermione’s doubts that any words could ever have. The kiss was brief, but no less sweet, and Hermione swooned with the way it felt like a promise.

“You talk far too much. Rambling is undignified” Narcissa chided jokingly, pulling away. Hermione could not stop grinning even if she tried.

Narcissa’s smirk held a hint of guilt and sadness that Hermione wanted to eradicate from the witch’s features.

“There are a thousand and one reasons to put an immediate stop to this. A thousand and one reasons why it should never begin in the first place. But... for Salazar’s sakes, Hermione, no one has ever gotten under my skin so much to make me completely ignore the voice of reason. I’m... I’m making a deliberate decision to be selfish.”

Hermione knew exactly how precious a gift she had just been given. She chose to show her unending gratitude with a chaste peck to Narcissa’s lips; a promise to echo Narcissa’s earlier one.

“Agree to disagree on that ‘voice of reason’” she quipped with a jesting waggle of her brows. “Be selfish all you like—you certainly won’t find me complaining!”

Narcissa laughed; it was music to the brunette’s ears.

“Perhaps not now, but I suspect there will be plenty to complain about” she retorted with a funny look.

“I disagree” Hermione said, and Narcissa rolled her eyes.

“I’m old enough to be your mother, Hermione.”

“So? Age is just a number.”
“I was married to a Death Eater.”

“Keyword being: was. As in past tense. As in no longer applicable.”

“My son—who is your age—was merciless to you in school.”

“And we’re great friends now. Next.”

Narcissa laughed, but her eyes were sad. “There’s... a great deal you don’t know. Too much you don’t know about me.”

Hermione huffed as she hugged the blonde tighter. “On that we agreed” she declared. “You are full of secrets, and I find that unacceptable—I plan on uncovering them all.”

“Hermione...” Narcissa tried, her tone a warning in itself, but Hermione silenced her with more resolute pressure from her arms. One of her hands found Narcissa’s face; she stroked the blonde’s cheek tenderly to stop her oncoming protestations.

“Secret number one: what is your favourite colour? I’ve been trying to figure it out” Hermione said resolutely, boring her gaze into Narcissa’s startled blue eyes. “And don’t you dare tell me ‘Slytherin-green’ because I know that is bull-crap.”

Narcissa laughed, heartily and freely.

“And what’s your favourite song? If you say anything by the Weird Sisters I’m sure I’ll just die. How about your favourite book? Or your favourite game as a child? What’s the worst Christmas gift you’ve ever been given? If you were a kitchen utensil, which one would you be and why?”

Narcissa’s shoulders trembled as laughed rattled through her body. Hermione continued, undeterred.

“You are a woman of many secrets, Narcissa. I plan on discovering all of the ones that matter to me.”

There were tears—happy tears, Hermione was pleased she could see the difference—brimming at Narcissa’s lids.

“Hermione Granger,” she breathed out, completely in awe. “You are extraordinary.”

Hermione preened. It made her happy to make Narcissa happy. She sobered up enough to make sure Narcissa knew how much she meant her next words.

“I see you, Narcissa. And I like what I see of you – I like what I know of you. That’s enough for me.”

Narcissa looked pensive for a few moments. “We’ll see for how long,” she finally said, but she smiled as she did so and Hermione felt confident enough to wipe some of the tears from her blue eyes.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Take it day by day, eh?”

“Of course,” Narcissa agreed, shivering.

Hermione chuckled, only now taking stock of their awkward position, prostrate on the old grounds. The back of her robes had grown damp with the dew on the mosses she lay on—the dampness and the cooler temperatures of the night made her realize how cold she was, despite the comforting
warmth of Narcissa’s body against her own.

The ward lights still shone colourfully in the night sky like a dome made of stained-glass, though they now looked hazy, as if the rolling fog had become impossibly denser.

Hermione shivered once more, amazed to see the condensation of her breath in the air—her shivering was strong enough to make her teeth clatter, and Narcissa seemed to notice.

“I’m sorry, I believe my warming charm has waned,” she apologised, rubbing Hermione’s arms. The brunette vaguely felt another of the comforting charms descending upon them—it warmed her from the outside, but it did nothing to banish the cold within.

“How strange,” Narcissa murmured, puzzled by the heat that was present but useless. Her gaze turned to Hermione’s in question, but she was stunned into silence by the sight of Hermione’s wide, frightened eyes. Narcissa followed the line of Hermione’s vision over the moss, panic growing in her chest.

Hermione was looking at the mosses and plants covering the rocks of the ruins that surrounded them. More specifically, the brunette stared in abject horror at the dew that began to freeze instantaneously.

“Oh, no.” Hermione heard Narcissa murmur weakly.

Hermione had no time to echo that sentiment. Before she could think about how their situation had gone south, the remaining Flickering Pixies disappeared completely; the ground below them froze; and a sensation of complete and utter hopelessness began to fester deep in her chest.

The domed glittering lights of the wards they had just unveiled were suddenly shrouded in a black, writhing mass, their brilliance extinguished by hundreds upon hundreds of Dementors.

Hermione had never seen so many of the foul creatures in one place; it was as if they had descended from the skies and sprouted from the earth all at once, their eerie cloaks of smoke billowing in the wind as they rapidly closed in around them.

A gasp was torn so deeply from Narcissa’s chest that Hermione felt it in her own. They were completely surrounded, enveloped in a blanket of the ghoulish fiends. Hermione felt Narcissa stiffen in fear in her arms, almost as if she had been petrified. The only difference was the strength of her shivers—they wracked her body against Hermione’s as the Dementors encircled them, swooping ever closer.

The Gryffindor thought fast, realising with a grimace that she did not have her wand in hand—it had most likely fallen from her grip when Narcissa kissed her. She could not locate it immediately, and a Dementor gliding closer only served to increase her panic tenfold. Hermione wanted to scream—another Dementor plummeted towards her, ripping remembrance and panic from her.

She had not felt that terrible sensation in years—that tearing from deep within, that violent tug of memories and feelings that made body and mind ache in absolute agony.

Another Dementor glided closer still, and Hermione could only watch with wide eyes and all-consuming terror as it targeted Narcissa. The blonde’s mouth parted as if to scream, but nothing but a whimper of utter agony came out as the Dementor drained her of memory and sensation.

Hermione planted a foot onto the mossy ground, trembling but determined, and pushed upwards with her hips in one swift move, reversing their positions so that she hovered over Narcissa, shielding her as best she could from the soul-sucking fiends.
Her hands grasped blindly, desperately searching for her wand and finding nothing but moss. Dementors now hovered above in one frightening mass of cold and anguish and misery, and Hermione could feel them feed with every breath that was forcefully ripped from her chest.

There were too many. Too many at once. Her eyes grew heavy and her mind fuzzy; black spots began to cloud the sides of her vision. With horror, she felt Narcissa become completely limp in her arms, consciousness slipping away.

The Gryffindor’s hand reached out into the dark one last time, a faint, desperate summoning spell echoing in her mind.

Her fingers suddenly grasped the comforting handle of her wand, curling around the vine wood with a determination she had thought lost. Her left arm tightened around Narcissa while her right shot forward and upward.

“Expec...

The memory of her parents’ return seemed to evaporate into a puff of smoke. Her first time through Hogwarts’ grand gates fizzled out of her view before she could even summon it properly.

One by one, each of the memories that had been so powerful and true to her Patronus faded away into nothingness. There were too many Dementors feeding on her happiness, doing so faster than she could summon them.

Hermione caught a glimpse of Narcissa’s long blonde hair, sprawled on the ground beneath them. She saw the smallest bit of the warding lights still shining in the sky, not a faint gleam beyond the Dementors. She saw Narcissa’s impossibly blue eyes fluttering closed and remembered the feel of her lips, the warmth of her body, the scent of eucalyptus.

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

Her wand burst into a beam of white light, summoning far more than her usual otter protector. A gaggle of the small critters burst through the air, swimming happy circles of bright light around the soul-sucking wraiths, driving them away with their powerful brilliance and overwhelming warmth. Heat finally returned to Hermione’s chest, and she took a breath as if she had been trapped underwater, inhaling lungfuls of warmth to banish the anguishing frost left behind by the Dementors.

Hermione Narcissa jolt back into wakefulness beneath her. Blue eyes darted around, consumed first by fright, then sheet and utter relied. She opened her mouth to say something, but the swathes of writhing hooded monsters lurking beyond the edges of Hermione’s Patronus silenced her.

“We need to get out of here,” Hermione hissed, struggling to maintain her concentration in keeping the small army of otters bright and vibrant against the starving Dementors. She could feel the dark creatures chipping at her memory’s resolve, overpowering it with their strength in sheer numbers. She gritted her teeth.

“Can you apparate us out?” she groaned under the pressure. A couple of her otters began to fade; she saw them disappear from the corner of her eye. “Narcissa?”

The Slytherin’s eyes snapped to Hermione’s. Fear was painfully evident in them, all-consuming and paralysing. Hermione nudged her, acutely aware that another of her otters had succumbed to the Dementors.

“Narcissa!” she cried. There was no way to apparate them while maintaining her Patronus—not
with the absurd number of the foul creatures.

Hermione’s panicked hiss snapped Narcissa out of her paralysing stupor. The blonde shook her head forcefully, desperately trying to ignore the revolting, writhing mass of Dementors that continued to close in despite the power of Hermione’s Patronus.

“Apparate. Yes. Yes!” She hissed, reaching for her wand. She grasped it, and in the blink of an eye there was the familiar tug and crack of apparition.

To Hermione’s horror, they remained where they were.

“It won’t work!” Narcissa cried, and the hopelessness of the statement crumbled Hermione’s resolve even further; her Patronus waned dangerously, and their cocoon of warmth and safety grew smaller by the second.

At any other time, Hermione’s brain would have liked to stop and analyse why Apparation seemed to no longer be an option. She did not doubt Narcissa’s ability.

Her Gryffindor brain, however, was in overdrive. There had to be a way out, any way out. She looked at Narcissa in complete terror, unable to think of a way to convey that she was out of ideas. This was how Hermione Granger and Narcissa Black would go.

To her surprise, all the fear she had seen before evaporated from Narcissa’s bright blue eyes. A resolute, furious determination took its place. Beads of sweat had formed upon Narcissa’s brow, and Hermione could tell the woman was gritting her teeth by the hard set of her jaw.

“Hold tight onto me!” Narcissa hissed through her teeth Hermione did not need to be told twice—her arms tightened around Narcissa like a vice as her Patronus grew weaker still. There were now only two otters shielding them from the soul-sucking beasts.

Hermione felt Narcissa’s hand wind itself between them; the blonde reached deep within her robes. Her hand re-emerged clasping the silver locket she always wore around her neck in a white-knuckled grip.

Narcissa struggled to loop the locket’s chain around the both of them; once it was done, her eyes snapped back to Hermione’s in a gaze that said please trust me.

Hermione could only gulp in fear; the last of her otters evaporated and the mass of Dementors shot towards them in a frenzy. Narcissa held her tight, screaming an unknown spell into the night.

“Remetrium!”

Hermione felt the familiar pull of a portkey, spinning the two into nothingness.
They landed with a violent, painful thud onto hardwood floors that creaked loudly upon their harsh impact. Hermione felt the weight of her own body knock the air out of Narcissa’s lungs, and her elbows throbbed with pain as they hit the floor—she immediately knew she would be sporting two new bruises as souvenirs.

“Narcissa? Are you alright?” Hermione called out worriedly, scrambling away at the sound of the blonde wheezing in pain.

Her sudden movement seemed to bring Narcissa considerable pain; her eyes were tightly shut and Hermione could see the hard set of her jaw. Narcissa’s arms lay at her sides, hands balled into fists with so much force they trembled.

“Narcissa?” Hermione tried again, kneeling by the blonde’s side, growing increasingly worried and desperate by the lack of response.

“Narcissa? Please answer me.” she attempted a soothing touch to the Slytherin’s shoulder, but was surprised to see the other woman flinch away, recoiling from her touch.

Hermione began to panic, unsure of how to proceed. She could see movement behind Narcissa’s shuttered lids, and the blonde’s breaths came in increasingly shorter bursts and puffs that hissed past her gritted teeth.

“Narcissa?” Hermione spoke once more, deliberately making her voice and tone as gentle and even as she possibly could. She leaned over the Slytherin’s trembling body and softly held her head in her hands.

Narcissa’s blue eyes snapped open, wide and confused, clouded with abject panic.

“Narcissa.” Hermione said softly, urging the blonde to look at her. “Cissy,” she tried, and there was a flash of something, perhaps recognition, in that frightened blue gaze. “Focus on the sound of my voice,” the brunette continued, thumbs grazing gentle circles on Narcissa’s cheeks in a manner that she hoped was soothing.

“You’re safe. I’m safe. There are no Dementors here.” There was a flinch at the mention of the soul-sucking beasts, but it was nowhere nearly as violent as Narcissa’s initial recoil, so Hermione chose to count it as a victory, or at least a step in the right direction.

“‘You’re safe. I’m safe. There are no Dementors here.’ There was a flinch at the mention of the soul-sucking beasts, but it was nowhere nearly as violent as Narcissa’s initial recoil, so Hermione chose to count it as a victory, or at least a step in the right direction.

“‘You’re with me. We’re both safe and sound—you got us out of there and it was amazing. I’m proud of you; what you did was very brave.’”

Narcissa’s trembling was slowly beginning to subside; her breathing began to even out as Hermione continued speaking in soft, hushed tones. Hermione dropped a reassuring kiss to Narcissa’s forehead, then another to her cheek, all the while whispering as gently as she possibly could.

After several minutes, Narcissa began to take deeper, longer, and overall more controlled breathes. Her body stilled, and her azure gaze fixed itself onto Hermione’s. The brunette returned the gaze with what she hoped was a reassuring smile.

“Hi there,” she said, once Narcissa was no longer shivering and her breaths were evened out completely.
To Hermione’s relief, Narcissa smiled back—it was tentative and full of something that looked to be embarrassment, but it was a smile, and most importantly, it was a response.

“Are you alright?”

Narcissa gave a slight nod in response, closing her eyes and turning her face away, her embarrassment now painfully evident. Hermione waited patiently for her to really answer her question.

“Yes.”

The answer was a whisper so low Hermione strained to hear it. She kept caressing Narcissa’s cheek, gently rubbing away the pool of tears that had gathered under Narcissa’s eyes.

“I’m glad,” she finally said, letting out a sigh of relief she had not known she was holding. “You had me worried for a second there.”

That was possibly the understatement of the century—Narcissa’s unresponsiveness had nearly made Hermione forget about the ordeal with the Dementors. Nearly.

“I’m sorry,” Narcissa breathed out, still not looking directly at Hermione. “This... this hasn’t happened in years.”

Hermione immediately waved off the apology; it was completely unnecessary. “Don’t apologise. I’m just glad you’re alright. When was the last time this happened?”

She immediately realised that had been the wrong thing to say; Narcissa’s entire body stiffened with a sudden ripple of shock and guilt.

“I...” Narcissa began then paused, swallowing uncomfortably. “I would prefer not to speak of it.”

“Of course!” Hermione quickly backtracked, mentally kicking herself for her lack of tact. “Didn’t mean to... uh... No worries, I mean, it’s totally up to you if.... you know what, I totally underst— oh, um... Don’t worry about it. Yeah. Don’t worry about it.”

By the grace of some unknown force of fate, Narcissa seemed to find Hermione’s rambling thoroughly amusing. The blonde smiled a little more broadly, enough to overpower the pain hidden in her eyes. Hermione felt completely fine in making a fool out of herself if that was the effect.

“Not your fault. The memory simply...” Narcissa drifted, gaze moving somewhere far beyond Hermione, to some distant, unseeing horizon. “Remembering just brings me pain and sorrow.”

The admission tugged at Hermione’s very core. “I’m sorry,” she said, not knowing how to proceed from there. Narcissa moved to sit up, and Hermione leaned back to give her enough space. The creaking of the floorboards diverted her attention to the room they found themselves in.

“Where are we?” she asked, standing and offering her hand to Narcissa.

“Charles House, in the cellar specifically.” Narcissa answered, shooting the young professor a grateful glance as she took her hand and stood. Hermione’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Charles House?” she shuddered, dreading another encounter with Druella’s upsetting portrait. “How? Was the locket a Portkey? I’ve never heard that spell before.”

“It was a Portkey of sorts,” Narcissa confirmed, bending down to retrieve the locket from where it
had clattered onto the hardwood floors. The chain had snapped in their less-than-graceful arrival, and its single decorative obsidian shard emitted a faint green glow. Narcissa smiled at the question in Hermione’s eyes.

“I created the Remettrium charm as a safety precaution when Draco was born. I wanted to have the ability to take him somewhere safe no matter what. It works under most Anti-Apparition charms and wards.”

Hermione tried to wrap her head around that impressive bit of magic. She had no idea how someone would create a charm-activated Portkey that could bypass wards specifically designed to stop general instantaneous magical transport.

“How in Merlin’s name did you manage such a thing? That is seriously impressive.”

It was more than impressive. Hermione shuddered at the thought of Death Eaters in the possession of such knowledge and ability during the war. Thankfully Narcissa had only wanted to keep her son safe.

There’s too much you don’t know about me. Narcissa’s words echoed briefly in her mind, and Hermione resolutely ignored them.

Narcissa looked sheepish for a moment.

“I...” she began, looking suddenly uncomfortable. “The Remettrium charm uses... a different sort of magic.”

Hermione was only more confused; her mind raced through all nefarious sorts of Dark Magic that might exist in the world to make such a charm possible. She couldn’t come up with an answer. Narcissa seemed to sense her utter puzzlement. She looked even more uncomfortable as she rushed to explain.

“While the word of a Wizard activates the charm, the enchantment itself was placed upon the locket by a House-Elf.”

Hermione was certain her jaw had disconnected from its hingers; it was likely lying somewhere on the floor. Whatever she had expected from Narcissa, it certainly had not been that.

“How...” she started, unable to even phrase the question—or questions, since there were many in her head, given by how the Pure-blood families she knew treated their House-Elves.

“Dobby.” Narcissa said simply, as if that explained anything at all.

It didn’t. It only left Hermione with several more questions. She quickly ran through everything she knew about Dobby—remembering how Harry recounted the Elf’s time at Malfoy Manor, and how he suffered needlessly at the hand of his masters, how awful were his punishments—such as ironing his fingers. She remembered S.P.E.W. and the horrific customs she had encountered as she researched the House-Elves' history of servitude. Finally, she remembered the macabre decorations adorning the walls at Grimmauld Place, once upon a time.

“Why...” she tried, unsure and partly unwilling to ask. Hermione had never stopped to consider the part Narcissa had to play in Dobby’s life. If her husband and her aunt were so brutally inhumane, what would have stopped Narcissa from doing the very same, given her upbringing. It was a hard pill to swallow.

“Why would Dobby do it?” she finally asked, then grimaced, aware her tone had become
defensive, wishing she had not opened that can of worms. Dobby had been Narcissa’s servant for a
good part of his life—he could not deny her anything she asked of him. That was how a witch
could get her hands on such magic.

Narcissa looked every bit as distressed as Hermione felt; she seemed to be trying hard to read and
gauge the Gryffindor’s mood without any success.

“I... I was worried, when Draco was born, you see. Things... things had begun to get violent.
Terribly violent. I was intrigued when Dobby told me about a charm that could...”

Hermione whirled her head in Narcissa’s direction so fast she interrupted what the other witch was
saying. Narcissa huffed, seeming both frustrated and desperate. “You... you wouldn’t understand.
Draco was just a baby. Things were getting so unforgivably vicious, and I just wanted... I just
needed a way to protect my son no matter what.” Her voice trailed off into a harsh whisper, an
exhale of sheer frustration.

“Dobby... Dobby offered to help?” Hermione asked, incredulous. “You. Dobby offered to
help you. Didn’t you...” she snapped her mouth shut, choosing not to finish that sentence.

Narcissa’s discomfort seemed to reach new heights.

“I...I know what you must think” she sighed. “I know Dobby’s time at Malfoy Manor was quite
frankly terrible. But you must understand Hermione... If I could have released him from Lucius, I
would have.”

For the second time in mere moments, Hermione was stunned into silence. The statement lit up
some happiness inside of her, but it also stoked curiosity. Narcissa seemed to sense the latter.

“Not all my family were like Orion and Walburga,” she said simply, somehow knowing it would
be enough, at least for the time being.

Hermione made a conscious choice to curb her curiosity. She had faith and Narcissa, and she was
resolute about not letting the woman’s past cloud their future. Because Hermione wanted to have a
future that was theirs.

“That’s... that’s good. I’m glad you had the locket on you,” she relented. She still wanted to
perhaps ask Dobby a thing or two about it, but she would let it go for the time being.

“I always do,” Narcissa said, looking relieved and thankful at the same time. She repaired the
snapped chain with a flick of her wand and put it around her neck. The locket came to rest low on
her chest, below the Time-Turner she also wore. “But I wonder why I couldn’t Apparate us out.”

“You’re... you’re certain it wasn’t... panic?” Hermione asked. She didn’t doubt Narcissa’s ability,
but one had to admit that spell-casting while under attack by a horde of hundreds of Dementors was
bound to be... stressful.

Narcissa looked mildly offended.

“I’m positive. I felt the spell work. Then it... didn’t.”

“Alright,” Hermione relented, still unhappy with the significance of such a thing. “Maybe my
ward-revealing spell triggered something, though that is unlikely.”

Hermione let out a distressed sigh. “I suppose this warrants more research. Back to Black Library it
is,” she lamented. Never in her life had she ever thought she’d be unhappy to return to a library.
“Not with Dementors on the property” Narcissa declared emphatically, shuddering. “We must notify the Ministry at once.”

Hermione grimaced, thinking of what Harry had told her earlier that very day. It seemed like a distant memory now. It was just her luck to find exactly what he was looking for at the worst possible moment.

“They left—well, they disappeared from Azkaban this morning.” she said. She doubted that Harry had meant for her to share that information with just anyone, but it now seemed so trivial after their narrow escape. “Harry mentioned it to me this afternoon—all of the Dementors in Azkaban just disappeared overnight.”

Narcissa’s face blanched to an unnatural pale colour.

“All of them?” she hissed, eyes wide with terror. “And the Ministry has not seen fit to warn the populace?!”

Hermione shrugged. “They most likely did not want to cause a panic,” she defended weakly. After seeing just how frightening Azkaban’s full horde could be, she was inclined to think there was more than enough reason to panic.

“Too many secrets have been kept in the dark to prevent panic,” Narcissa retorted bitingly. “One would think the Ministry had learned their lesson after so many catastrophic failures.”

Hermione could not argue with that logic.

“Well, now we have to tell Harry where the Dementors went.” Hermione furrowed her brow, a thought just now occurring to her. “Where exactly is Black Manor?”

“How is that rel...” Narcissa cut herself off, evidently beginning to think along the same lines as Hermione. Her expression belied abject horror. “The property is in Cambridgeshire,” she said gravely.

“Cambridge?!” Hermione yipped, not liking the implication. Her mental map of Great Britain helped her draw some terrifying conclusions, and Narcissa seemed to follow that exact same train of thought. She looked sombrely to the Gryffindor before her.

“When did you say the Dementors disappeared?”

Hermione swallowed dryly. Azkaban was located far up North, past Scotland, somewhere in the desolate, frigid waters of the North Sea. Harry had been expecting the dark creatures to come to Hogwarts by that afternoon, when in reality they had moved much farther south in a matter of hours. Dementors moving that fast anywhere was a terrifying prospect.

“This morning.”

Narcissa looked solemn. “We must alert the Ministry; this matter is much more urgent than we could possibly imagine.”

Hermione nodded an enthusiastic agreement. “Yes,” she said, remembering where they were. “Let’s do it now! We’re in London, aren’t we? I can get an audience with the Minister in no time!”

“Hermione, be reasonable. The Ministry is closed for the evening, the Minister won’t be there. We must owl the DMLE; they’ll notify them.”
Hermione huffed. “Absolutely not, we can’t wait that long.” An idea occurred to her. “You can apparate us out of this house, right?”

Narcissa quirked a confused brow. “Yes. Where?”

Hermione took a deep breath, aware Narcissa would not like it one bit.

“Grimmauld Place.”

A very confused Harry Potter opened the door to greet them after Hermione’s insistent knocks. Hermione had half-expected him to still be out in the field due to the Dementor breakout, but he had clearly just gotten home after a late night at work—he still wore his Auror uniform under his robes.

“Mione?” he greeted them, puzzled as his curious emerald gaze darted from his friend to Narcissa and back again. “Ms. Black? To what do I owe this visit?”

Narcissa looked supremely uncomfortable, but Hermione had no time to address it; her words came out in one quick, breathless gasp.

“The Dementors, Harry! They’re at Black Manor—all of them!”

Harry’s eyes widened almost comically behind his spectacles. He spared a glance toward Narcissa in question, but the blonde could only nod to confirm Hermione’s breathless statement.

“Shit, are you alright!?” he hissed, though looking simultaneously relieved when Hermione nodded. “Come in, quick. I need to alert my unit—they’re all in Scotland.” He took a coin out of his pocket—one emblazoned with the DMLE insignia—and murmured something into it. It glowed for a moment, and he put it back in his pocket, turning to Narcissa/ “Where is Black Manor?”

“Cambridgeshire,” Hermione answered for Narcissa, who looked a little uneasy as they stepped into her cousin’s childhood home.

“Cambridge!” Harry repeated with an angry hiss, hurriedly buttoning his Auror’s coat. “That’s practically our backyard! Can you apparate me there, or at least close by? I can get the rest of my unit to come once I’m there.”

“Give me something to make a Potkey,” Narcissa interjected before Hermione could voice her resounding yes. “Ms. Granger has already overexerted herself with Dementors, and I’m not keen on seeing them again anytime soon.”

Harry ran to rummage through the cabinets in the foyer, and Hermione bristled as she turned to face Narcissa.

“I’m perfectly fine,” she said.

Narcissa simply quirked a brow. “For now. Don’t forget you performed a multi-corporeal Patronus under extreme stress. That kind of spell-casting can take its toll.”

Hermione felt oddly defensive. She didn’t know why it sounded like Narcissa was putting her abilities in question.

“I can handle my Patronus. I’ve been through worse,” she retorted, a little more brusquely than she
intended.

“Of course you can,” Narcissa said, and Hermione did not like her dismissive tone, “up until a thousand or so Dementors extinguish it completely. Better to be safe than sorry.”

“I was protecting you!” Hermione defended hotly. Harry had just returned, looking at them oddly.

“Uh...” he tried timidly.

“And were it not for the sheer luck of having my locket, we would both be dead!” Narcissa retorted, her voice ice to Hermione’s fire.

“Maybe we could have lasted longer if you could cast a Patronus!” Hermione hissed. She regretted the words as soon as they left her lips—the look of utter betrayal in Narcissa’s eyes completely destroyed her inside.

The Slytherin physically took a step back, and Hermione inwardly cursed herself and her damn mouth.

“I don’t want you back there.” Narcissa whispered, her voice hoarse and pleading. Hermione was thrown for a loop—she had expected rightful anger, not fear. “Please,” the blonde pressed on. “Please do not go back there.”

Hermione was speechless. Narcissa averted her gaze, and Harry stood rather awkwardly between the two witches.

“Uh...” he tried again, holding out an empty inkwell for Narcissa. “Will this suffice for a Portkey?”

“Yes,” Narcissa whispered, very deliberately keeping her eyes downcast so as not to meet Hermione’s gaze even by accident. She took the inkwell from Harry’s hand and muttered an incantation, waving her wand in distinct and complex patterns. The silence became heavy with the sudden, palpable tension.

The inkwell began to glow when she was done, and she handed it to Harry.

“Thirty seconds, Mr. Potter.”

Harry nodded, murmuring a ‘thank you.’ He turned back to Hermione, smiling awkwardly. “It’s probably best like this, ‘Mione—better not to get any civilians involved, you see. Thank you so much for the tip-off!”

The newly-made Portkey began to glow more brightly, and Harry hurried to speak before it popped him away.

“Feel free to say for a bit, have some dinner. Ginny made some shepherd’s pie, and if I do say so myself, it is bloody deli-”

The young Auror disappeared with a loud pop and a burst of blue light. The two witches stood facing one another, still shrouded in tense silence. Hermione felt wretchedly idiotic, and Narcissa refused to look in her direction.

“Narcissa...” she began, apology primed and ready and most certainly not enough to make up for her blunder.
“There is nothing” Narcissa cut her off, eyes brimming with tears and jaw painfully clenched, “nothing on this earth that terrifies me more than those creatures.”

When she finally did turn to look at Hermione, the young professor wished to be swallowed to the deepest, darkest depths of the earth. Blue eyes brimmed with tears, with anger and disappointment, but most of all they were consumed by fear.

Hermione tried hard to come up with a response, but for once her remarkable brain failed her completely. Her mind’s scrambling for a response was interrupted by a waddling Ginny Potter, who cut through the palpable tension with an annoyed grunt.

“I suppose I have you two to thank for my husband skipping out on his dinner” She accused, bemoaning the fact with no real bite. Her look and tone, however, brokered no argument.

“Come eat. It’s getting cold.”

Hermione wanted to scream out of guilt and frustration. The guilt came from her disgraceful display earlier in the entrance hall of Grimmauld Place. Her regret had been instantaneous, but that was not enough—she couldn’t take her words back.

The young professor felt like the biggest insensitive bastard on the planet. How had the euphoria of discovering the ever-elusive wards and the incomparable bliss of feeling Narcissa’s lips on hers come to deteriorate so quickly.

Her frustration had a different source, though Hermione supposed that being left to stew in it was the very least that she deserved. The frustration came from Narcissa and Ginny, and Ginny’s admittedly delicious shepherd’s pie.

Hermione watched the two eat and make small talk as if they did so every other week, or like they were old friends that had happened upon one another by chance at Diagon Alley or something. Presently, Narcissa bounced an increasingly sleepy James Potter on her knee as she ate her serving of pie with otherworldly elegance.

It was almost frightening, the way the Slytherin could switch her emotions on and off with such practiced ease. Now that Hermione had been privileged enough to see Narcissa’s raw emotion, this Narcissa was like some strange caricature of the woman Hermione had fallen for. The Ice Queen had nothing on Narcissa’s airs of practiced affability.

“My, what an energetic little one,” Narcissa commented as James fought his hardest to stay awake. “Isn’t it far past your bedtime, young man?”

“No!” The young boy protested, even if his eyes were halfway closed already.

“Merlin help me if this next one is as hard to put to bed as their older brother,” Ginny quipped, rubbing her swollen stomach. Narcissa laughed and Hermione forced herself to chuckle. How could they just sit there when there were Dementors on the loose? How could Ginny sit and laugh and eat with Narcissa when her husband had gone out to face the creatures head-on? How could Narcissa talk and laugh so freely and easily when Hermione felt her guilt eating her up from inside?

Hermione glanced at the clock the Potter’s kept in their dining room. It was one Harry had commissioned after the Weasley’s family clock. Harry’s hand was sitting squarely on WORK.
“I still worry.” Ginny said suddenly, noticing where Hermione’s gaze rested. Hermione looked down, moving her dinner around her plate. Ginny continued, her expression kind.

“After all, he is an Auror. There’s always some danger.” She took a deep breath, rubbing her tummy subconsciously. “But as long as his hand does not move to DANGER, I’ve made a conscious decision to keep calm and carry on.”

Hermione nodded glumly, unable to argue with her friend’s logic, but still feeling like sitting and enjoying dinner was the last thing they should be doing. Part of her felt like she should be out there with Harry—and Ron, who would undoubtedly be called from his post in Wales for an operation of this magnitude. It was at times like these—and times like these happened so rarely nowadays—when Hermione missed her DMLE job, despite the havoc it wreaked on her life.

“Now,” Ginny quipped with a smile that Hermione could now see didn’t quite reach her eyes despite her best efforts. “I believe this little man should go to bed. You guys are welcome to help yourselves with dessert.”

Narcissa handed a sleepy James back to his mother with a smile Hermione could see was just a tad forced, tugging her lips upwards in an unnatural fashion. Before she left, Ginny turned back to Hermione, eyes shining with determination and hope.

“Feel free to wait for Harry. You can use any of the guestrooms if you’d like to spend the night.” Her voice grew thick—not with sadness or worry, but with a resolute strength Hermione deeply admired.

“He will be back.” Ginny said, and Hermione could not doubt her. “He always comes back.”

Hermione was back to wallowing in misery and guilt. It exhausted her; her body felt like it had been tightly strung and then loosened, as if she were a rubber band stretched just a tad too far to ever come back to its original shape. She barely heard Narcissa when she spoke, but what the Slytherin said surprised her.

“She is a strong witch, Ms. Potter. Much like her mother.”

The brunette turned to face Narcissa in question, but she was startled by the pained look in her blue eyes. Narcissa did not look at her directly, and Hermione sighed deeply, feeling utterly exhausted and saddened by the turn their night had taken.

“She might just be one of the strongest women I know,” she said, echoing Narcissa’s earlier sentiment.

Narcissa nodded pensively. “Yes. She takes after Molly in that way. Mr. Potter is a fortunate wizard to have such a witch by his side.”

The silence grew heavy. The Potters’ clock ticked on by, steady and deafening. Harry’s pointed did not leave WORK.

“Narcissa,” Hermione began, feeling broken down and tired and woefully unprepared to continue dealing with the silence that had become utterly unbearable between them. “I... I am so sorry for what I said earlier.” Hermione felt herself shrink with shame. “It was uncalled for, and... I want you to know I didn’t truly mean it.”

Hermione hated the way her words did not seem to register. The few moments it took for Narcissa to speak again felt interminable.
“Well,” Narcissa finally murmured, her voice soft in a way that Hermione did not like—it only made her feel worse. “Though your delivery might have left a bit to be desired in terms of tact, you were not exactly wrong.”

Hermione gripped her fork with a little more strength than necessary.

“Please don’t say that. I didn’t mean to go off on you like that. It was inexcusable. You’re a powerful, talented witch.”

The Slytherin chuckled mirthlessly. “Your apology is accepted, but it doesn’t change some unpleasant truths.” She sighed, setting down her silverware and leaning back into her chair, looking defeated. “You were right. I could have been more helpful.”

Hermione shook her head; the room seemed to spin in place as she did, but she resolutely ignored the feeling.

“You were more than enough help” she declared with all of her conviction. “If it weren’t for you, we... we wouldn’t be here.”

The brunette noticed the shudder of fear that made Narcissa flinch into her seat. She felt just emboldened enough to continue speaking.

“Again, I’m very sorry. You got us out of there, and I’m thankful for that. “I’m sorry I sometimes say things without thinking them through.” Hermione furrowed her brow. “Merlin, I don’t know in which point in my life I suddenly became Ron.”

Her little quip had the desired effect of cutting through a bit of the tension; Narcissa chuckled, and her eyes immediately softened as she finally directed her gaze to Hermione’s. Once blue met brown, however, worry etched itself in Narcissa’s face.

“Hermione, she whispered, moving quickly to stand, stepping toward Hermione with a look of caution. “Are you alright?”

Hermione tried to follow Narcissa’s movement with her eyes, but that made the room spin again. She suddenly felt unbalanced in her chair; she tried to blink the dizziness away.

“I’m fine,” she lied as Narcissa approached. Even as her vision began to blur, she could tell that the other witch was not buying it at all.

“Gryffindors,” she heard Narcissa mutter with exasperation before the world went black.

Hermione woke to a throbbing headache of the kind she usually only experienced when she had a few too many Butterbeers the night before.

The room she found herself in was mercifully dark; her eyes adjusted easily to the dim light coming from a lamp sitting on the nightstand by her bedside.

This was not her room in her Hogwarts quarters. Blinking away some of her confusion and sitting up in bed against some rather fluffy pillows, she began to recognize one of the guest rooms in Grimmauld Place.

Hermione sensed movement by her side; she turned to find Ginny at the door, holding a tray of
phials and water and tea.

“Oh, goodness, you’re finally awake.” The redhead said with a kind smile. “You’ve been out for hours.”

“Hours?” Hermione whispered, her voice hoarse. “What time is it?”

Ginny placed the tray on the nightstand, urging Hermione to drink some water—the brunette complied, realising how thirsty she was.

“Quarter past four in the morning,” Ginny said, chuckling as Hermione choked on her drink. She uncorked one of the few phials on the tray and handed it to Hermione with a look. “Here, Narcissa gave me very specific instructions to give you this as soon as you woke up. It’s for the headache you supposedly have.”

Hermione downed the bright orange liquid without question. Its effects were instantaneous; her headache had begun to recede by the time she placed the phial back on the tray.

“Where is Narcissa?” she asked, unable to ignore the worry in her heart. “What about Harry? Did the Ministry...”

“Harry is fine, and the Ministry has been alerted to the Dementors thanks to you and Narcissa. From what I understand, there are several Auror divisions in Black Manor as we speak; Ron’s is one of them.”

The worry Hermione felt expanded as she noted how Ginny had pointedly ignored her first—and most urgent—question.

“And Narcissa?”

Ginny’s expression did nothing to assuage her apprehension. The redhead looked like she knew something that would make Hermione unhappy—or worse, angry.

“Gin?”

Her friend sighed and raised a hand, as if to interrupt Hermione’s protestations before they could even begin.

“Before you say anything and go storming out of here in a hurry, Harry went with her, and he’ll make sure everything is done as it should be. Narcissa was worried about you because you may have overexerted yourself with some multi-corporeal Patronus or some such thing, so she...”

“Ginny!” Hermione hissed anxiously. “Spit it out! Where is she?”

Ginny let out a breath of resignation.

“She’s at the Ministry. She was taken in for questioning.”

Narcissa felt drained. Her body felt physically empty; she was so utterly exhausted that she could not even find it in herself to be angry at the hapless Ministry worker that had been tasked with taking her statement. There was no space left in her body or mind to feel anything other than extreme exhaustion.
The righteous Mr. Potter, however, was in full form. He had refused to leave her side from the moment Unspeakables showed at his doorstep, looking for her. He had barely returned to his own home—again—but he immediately turned back to accompany her to the Ministry.

It wasn’t that Narcissa didn’t appreciate the support—she absolutely did—but she had to wonder how little Potter understood of his own Ministry to think there was anything he could do for her.

“Mr. Potter, sir” the young Ministry clerk tried to appease the Saviour of the Wizarding World for the third or fourth time. Narcissa nearly pitied him—he did not look a day out of Hogwarts. “As I’ve already told you, this is merely a matter of procedure...”

“Procedure!” Potter barked; the clerk gave it another shot, clearly running out of ideas.

“You see, because of Mrs. Malfoy’s affiliations...”

“Her name is Black!” Potter nearly bellowed, his patience growing thin by the minute. The clerk shrunk in his seat. “And her affiliation is to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry—perhaps you’ve heard of it?!?”

The young wizard paled considerably; he shuffled the papers in front of him in a vain attempt to look somewhat professional. The air in the small waiting room they occupied seemed thick with Potter’s impatience.

“Yes,” the clerk shot a frightened, apologetic look towards Narcissa; she did not deign respond to it. “Ms. Black, I am truly sorry to keep you here for so long, but you must understand...”

“I will take it from here, Richards. Go home.”

The young Richards looked simultaneously relieved and terrified when the Minister of Magic himself stepped into the dinky room, filling it with his commanding presence and grave voice. Richards bolted out of room, squeaking with relief.

Potter squared his shoulders as he straightened behind Narcissa’s chair, not at all intimidated by the Minister.

“Harry. Take a seat?” Kingsley offered politely, sounding tired.

“I prefer to stand, Minister.”

Kingsley breathed in deeply, taking a seat himself, facing Narcissa. “Very well.” He produced a few papers from his robes, and with a snap of his fingers a House-Elf appeared, delivering a tray of tea and biscuits before popping away once more.

“My sincerest apologies for taking up so much of your time, Madam Black.” Kingsley began after neither Harry nor Narcissa moved to take any of the offered refreshments. “I understand you’ve been through a rather upsetting ordeal this evening. If you would be willing to answer a few more questions, we’ll do our best to get you home as soon as we can.”

Narcissa didn’t meet his gaze for a long time. She kept her mask of cold indifference despite her exhaustion. She wanted nothing more than to recede into the relative safety of her Animagus form and sink into her plush, heavy blankets.

Narcissa felt Potter shift uncomfortably behind her. It was truly a wonder that after a solid decade of working for the Ministry Potter still lacked the finesse required to navigate through the Ministry’s political sphere. Kingsley, on the other hand, was much more practiced; he looked at
her impassively, as if they had all the time in the world.

When she did speak, Narcissa made sure to keep her voice even and cold.

“I suppose I must be a very important witch indeed,” she said, making sure to maintain an inflection that just bordered on civil as she crossed her legs, leaning back into her chair and feigning disinterest, “to have the Ministry of Magic himself interrogating me.”

Another beat passed before Kingsley responded.

“This matter required some special attention.”

Narcissa had a retort ready, but Potter interrupted with a scoff.

“Yeah, right! I wonder if Ms. Black being a civilian under surveillance had anything to do with this!” he said biting.

Narcissa could appreciate Mr. Potter’s defence—misplaced as it was—but Salazar help her, someone ought to teach those Gryffindors a bit of tact.

Kingsley shot the Chosen One a look of warning.

“Ms. Black’s surveillance status is not a concern of yours, Harry.” He said gravely. “I trust that you have not told Ms. Black of the operation status in Black Manor?”

Harry clenched his jaw, but made no retort. When he replied, his tone was only bordering on respectful.

“No, sir. I was ordered not to.” He responded bitterly.

That intrigued Narcissa. She had wanted to ask—it was obvious Potter was hiding something from the moment he returned to Grimmauld Place after Hermione passed out, looking haggard. Part of her admired the young Auror for maintaining the secrecy.

Kingsley sighed again, looking older than he had for years; granted, it had been a few years since Narcissa had last seen him in person.

“Ms. Black, I won’t mince words with you. This morning, there was a report of a security breach in Azkaban.”

Narcissa made no reply; Kingsley took his opportunity to continue.

“The breach consisted of a massive breakout of Dementors from the grounds. There are now no Dementors on site. Somehow those Dementors travelled across the country in less than a day and got to Black Manor.”

“Yes, who would have known those vile creatures would have such impeccable timing.” She quipped hotly. “Get to the point, Minister, if you are so eager to not waste any more of my time.”

Kingsley gave a wry smile; it showed his tiredness more than anything else.

“Ms. Black... would the Ministry have any reason to believe you could have summoned the Dementors to Black Manor directly?”

“Kingsley, that it bang out of order!” Harry barked. The Minister shot him another look.
“Answer the question, Madam Black.”

Narcissa smirked haughtily, her only defence in hiding a deep-seated fear. “Why, yes, of course. I always wondered why my sister went insane” she retorted bitingly. “I thought I would give it a go myself.”

Potter hissed behind her, Kingsley’s eyes were set in stone. Narcissa met them head on, refusing to give him a chance to push even an inch further.

The Minister relented under her icy glare.

“Very well.” He said. “Now, before I tell you more about the operation, I want to assure you that...”

There was a commotion from outside that interrupted the Minister; it sounded as if someone had been shoved against the wall. There were angry grunts and more shoving.

The three occupants stood, wands in hand—Harry instinctively stepped in front of Narcissa, wand at the ready and pointing at the door. An Auror could be heard yelling.

The door burst open to a harried Hermione Granger—Richards could be heard berating her from further down the corridor. Her eyes were wide with anger, but the emotion evaporated as her gaze connected with Narcissa’s from across the room.

“Hermione.” Narcissa let the name out of her chest in a haggard breath; it even surprised Harry and Kingsley, who turned to her with questioning looks.

Hermione marched into the room, ignoring the wands still pointed at her out of shock.

“Are you alright?” she asked, side-stepping Harry and putting her hands on Narcissa’s shoulders. Narcissa hadn’t realised how untethered she felt until the brunette’s touch grounded her back to the world.

Her body seemed to waver, as if her exhaustion had caught up with her in the span of a second; had Hermione’s arms not been there to catch her in a desperate embrace, Narcissa was sure she would have fallen to the floor in one ungraceful heap. Tears she was not aware she had been holding started to burn in her eyes as Hermione hugged her tightly, as if she were the sole force holding Narcissa together.

“Are you alright?” Hermione whispered, to her and only her. Narcissa could not even process the looks of utter bewilderment the two others in the room sported.

“I’m tired,” she murmured, feeling the heat of her tears marking wet trails down her cheeks. Being in someone else’s arms had never brought her this much comfort. She had never felt so safe. “I’m so tired.”

Hermione rubbed her shoulders soothingly. She turned them both around so she could face Kingsley and Harry, while shielding Narcissa and her tears away from their prying eyes.

“We are leaving. Right now.” Hermione declared, her tone brokered no argument.

Kingsley stood; Hermione’s gaze dared him to defy her.

“Perhaps we should all get some rest.” He said somberly. “I can tell you the situation at Black Manor has been stabilised. I would also like to ask you two to please not speak to the papers about
this incident. There is a lot we still need to discuss.”

Narcissa couldn’t register anything but the soft pull of Hermione leading her away. She did hear the brunette retort:

“We won’t.”

Arriving to her beloved castle was a blur. She was vaguely aware it was morning as gentle rays of sunshine peeked through her window. Narcissa could tell they had made it all the way down to the Dungeons, through her classroom and into her private quarters.

It was as if her body was moving without her consciousness attached to it; her only point of reference to the world around her was Hermione’s gentle touch, guiding her through the castle until they reached her quarters.

Her chambers were dark; her thick curtains had been pulled before she left that morning that now seemed to be somewhere far in the past. There was a mere slit letting a solitary beam of sunlight through, illuminating a golden path to her bed.

Narcissa felt Hermione gently lower her onto the plush mattress. It dipped under her weight, almost nearly as welcoming and comfortable as Hermione’s early embrace.

Hermione cleared her throat; Narcissa was too tired to detect the worry in her voice.

“Would you like me to let you rest?” she asked, uncertain.

Narcissa’s body seemed to respond for her, sagging into the mattress with the release of an exhausted breath. Hermione seemed to take it as a message to leave, and she began to slip away.

Narcissa’s hand moved of its own accord, pulling on the brunette’s robe sleeve.

“Please stay.”
Chapter 40

There was a single ray of sunlight beaming directly onto Hermione’s face. She tried her very best to ignore the abominable brightness that dared disturb her slumber, moving away to try and avoid the offending beam by shuffling along her pillow. However, as she tried to do so, she became aware of a considerable, comfortable weight upon her chest.

The vents of the previous night flooded back to her memory all at once, in rapid snapshots of occurrences and developments that seemed to have taken place a lifetime ago. The Amortentia mishap that filled her with hope. The total euphoria and amazement of finding the Black Family wards, all thanks to some Flickering Pixie that had triggered Narcissa’s memory. Narcissa leaning forward in her arms, taking the plunge and kissing Hermione in a way that made her legs weak—literally.

And then Dementors, so many of them, in every direction. Narcissa’s locket, imbued with Dobby’s magic, saving their lives.

Hermione remembered what she had said at Grimmauld Place, in the heat of the moment—the guild she had felt returned full-force. It was just weaker than her anger—just barely. She was furious with the Ministry and with Kingsley in particular for detaining Narcissa for questioning as if she were a criminal, not a victim.

She sighed deeply, working the cricks out of her stiff neck slowly so as not to disturb the sleeping Narcissa.

The Gryffindor glanced down to where Narcissa’s head rested upon her chest. Long strands of blond hair cascaded over her chest and shoulders in a blanket of gold. Narcissa slept soundly, her breaths deep and slow against Hermione’s body.

Hermione resisted the nearly overwhelming desire to caress Narcissa’s cheek, enthralled as she was by the other witch’s peaceful features. She settled for softly running her fingers through those silky strands of gold instead.

She had seen so many facets of Narcissa. There was the indomitable Ice Queen mask that most of the world knew. There was the soft, easy-going Narcissa who made playful remarks and skipped stones on water with astounding skill. There was the grieving sister, consumed with guilt over her own grief. There was the doting aunt and grandmother, the poised Professor, and the excitable bookworm that rivalled even Hermione herself. There was the powerful witch and the defenceless, unloved child; there was the ruthless lady of wizarding high society, and there was the vulnerable, broken woman who broke into tears in Hermione’s arms.

Even while knowing all those sides of Narcissa—and Hermione knew exactly how much of a privilege that was—Hermione could swear the witch sleeping against her would never, ever cease to surprise her.

It was the case even now: Hermione had never seen Narcissa so peaceful, so vulnerable and open as she was at this very moment, sleeping in her embrace. Disturbing such peace would be tantamount to sin.

Her blood boiled as she thought of Narcissa at the Ministry without her. She was glad Harry had been there, but he didn’t know—like Hermione hadn’t until they landed at Charles House after their miraculous escape—how terrified Narcissa was of Dementors.
Eveń if she were not so terrified; even if Narcissa could produce the most powerful Patronus any
witch or wizard could witness, Hermione refused to believe there was any reason why Narcissa
would want anything to do with the monstrous creatures, much less summon them to Black Manor
somehow.

That being said—Hermione furrowed her brown, deep in thought—there had to be a reason why
the Dementors were so far from Azkaban, precisely where they ended up. Most importantly was
the question: how on earth did the harrowing ghouls travel so fast? Could Dementors
somehow Apparate? That certainly made for a terrifying prospect. Could they be summoned? If so,
by whom, or by what?

Hermione shuddered. Her know-it-all brain did not like not knowing.

Her shudder caused Narcissa to shift in her sleep; a tired mewl escaped her lips as her lids fluttered,
not quite waking yet.

The Gryffindor felt her heart melt. How precious it was to be where she was right at this blissful
moment, especially considering the utter chaos they had been through.

Merlin, she thought. She hadn’t gone through such an eventful night since she was a teenager.

Narcissa gave out a deep sigh—Hermione could tell she was close to awakening. She gently
caressed the arm Narcissa had wound around her waist as they slept.

Blue eyes snapped open to meet her gaze. For a moment the shock in them was so intense
Hermione thought Narcissa would leap out of the bed with fright; she felt the Slytherin’s body go
g rigid where she lay. Narcissa’s jaw clenched momentarily as fear and confusion took over.

It was over like a brief gust of wind as recognition dawned in those blue oceanic depths. Hermione
felt absolute relief once Narcissa’s body relaxed against her own again.

“You stayed,” was the blonde’s first greeting. It was followed by a tinge of pink in her cheeks, and
the sight made Hermione feel warm on the inside.

“Oh course I did,” she said, unable to stop her grin. “You asked me to.”

Narcissa’s cheeks pinked further. It was absolutely adorable.

“Thank you,” she said, trying to get her flush under control.

There was silence, but it was the comfortable kind; the kind that made one wish it would stretch
out forever.

“How are you feeling?” Narcissa asked after a few long, contemplative moments.

“Me?” Hermione asked. “I should be the one asking you.” The memory of Narcissa breaking down
in her arms was still fresh in her mind.

“I was not the one who passed out at the dinner table.” Narcissa quipped, shaking her head. Her
smile was so jovial Hermione nearly forgot to be embarrassed. Nearly. “Such awful table
manners.”

“I’m...I feel fine, thank you.” Hermione finally complied. Her Gryffindor pride had been a little
wounded she had not, in fact, been able to spring right back into action after her multi-corporeal
Patronus.
Now that Hermione came to think of it, it had been many years since she last had to cast a Patronus to actually defend herself from Dementors. The charm had become second-nature for communication purposes, but using it for its actual defensive purpose could be mentally and physically taxing. She had forgotten exactly how taxing it could be.

“But how about you?” she asked, unable to mask the worry in her tone. Something had clicked between her and Narcissa the moment she burst into that interrogation room; Narcissa had never looked so simultaneously broken yet relieved.

The Slytherin exhaled deeply; her body sagged pleasantly against Hermione’s.

“I’m alright now,” she said, pausing for a moment. “Yesterday was... tiring.” She finished with another sigh, fingers absent-mindedly drawing lazy patterns upon Hermione’s side.

Hermione felt her breath hitch at the unexpected—but not unwelcome—touch. She had not expected the surge of heat it suddenly elicited.

“Yes,” she breathed out, trying to keep her tone even, because now was decidedly not the time to think about how beautiful Narcissa looked in the morning light, how mesmerizing her eyes were as they reflected the rays of sun, or how her own body tingled and thrummed with something indescribable at the sight of Narcissa in bed, in her arms.

Curse her overactive brain.

“Yes,” she said again, clearing her throat. “Quite uh... an eventful night.”

“Indeed,” Narcissa sighed, looking oblivious to Hermione’s inner turmoil. She sighed again. “I suppose we must return to the Ministry.”

Hermione frowned. “Not a chance,” she hissed, narrowing her eyes just thinking about Kingsley interrogating Narcissa again. He would have to get through one seriously pissed-off Gryffindor first. “If he wants to put you through some inane line of questioning again, he can come to us. In fact, I’m certain he will, if the matter is so urgent.”

Narcissa smiled wryly. “Don’t be too upset with him. Despite the massive inconveniences he’s caused me, at the very least our Minister is more thorough than any that came before him.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. They had been through this dance before—Narcissa listing the reasons why she could not be trusted, and Hermione pointing out the exact opposite.

“Misplaced suspicion is not the same as being thorough or cautious. It’s paranoia.”

Narcissa propped herself up on her elbows, her gaze now level with Hermione’s. She began to speak, but for a moment it was like she had forgotten what to say. Her hand came to rest upon Hermione’s cheek, caressing it softly in gentle, tender touches. Hermione forgot how to breathe for a few short seconds.

“Hermione,” Narcissa whispered, as if she had just snapped out of a trance. “Do you think Lady Avery or Lady Crabbe receive letters from their husbands?”

Hermione had to physically shake her confusion away, so blindsided she was by the question. This was not where she expected their conversation to go.

“What are you talking about?” She had to ask, failing to see what sort of point Narcissa was obviously trying to make.
“The other Death Eater wives,” Narcissa clarified. Hermione shuddered at the designation—it made it sound like some kind of club or television programme. “Do you think any of them receive letters from their husbands in prison?”

Hermione gaped, still confused.

“I don’t see why not,” she finally said, only now beginning to think about it. There were several Pure-blooded witches around with Death Eater husbands in jail; she knew a few of them by name, but never bothered to keep tabs on them. She had been too busy rounding up their outlaw husbands in her time at the DMLE.

She knew of a few in passing. For example, Amanda Yaxley had devoted all of her time and considerable money to non-profits curating pieces of magical history around Europe. Emma Crabbe was still very much a socialite—last Hermione heard she had invested in some wizarding fashion or some such thing.

She had never found much reason to keep tabs on those women—their husbands were the real threat. Most of them were just along for the ride with their Death Eater spouses—many of them married off as soon as they graduated.

They were an odd sort of enemy to have. Conceited, entitled, and irrevocably prejudiced, but they were not—as far as anyone knew, as far as it had been proven—criminals like their husbands. They were like enemies... once removed.

“They do. Now tell me, do you think any of those women is under Ministry surveillance?”

Hermione was prepared to answer, to say that was completely and totally irrelevant, but then...

“You’re not the only one being watched,” she gasped out, realization dawning. She immediately wanted to rebuke it.

“But it’s completely different!” She started, not giving Narcissa the chance to interject. “They... they still communicate with their husbands willingly! You, you divorced Lucius! And you’ve changed, you’ve changed so much and you’re doing so much, and they...”

“They haven’t?” Narcissa interrupted with a quirked brow and a knowing smile. “I fail to see how what they are doing at present differs so greatly from what I doing myself.”

“Of course it’s different!” Hermione cried, understanding Narcissa’s logic and now grasping at straws to find evidence against it. “You’ve built bloody hospital, Narcissa, for Merlin’s sakes!”

“Amanda Yaxley has curated some of the biggest collections of wizarding art and historical artefacts—it is open to the public. Emma Crabbe provides clothing and supplies to wizarding orphanages. And I believe it is Letitia McNair, among others, who funds magical exchange programs for young wizarding graduates. So on and so forth.”

“So they’re ‘philanthropists.’ Doesn’t mean they’ve changed!”

Narcissa smiled tenderly, stroking Hermione’s cheek.

“Give me proof they haven’t.” She quipped knowingly. “For all we know, Lady McNair may also be in bed with a Muggleborn at this very moment.”

Hermione snorted with laughter, involuntarily. She still didn’t want to concede, out of sheer petulance, but the thought was undeniable funny.
“It’s still different.” She insisted, holding onto Narcissa’s wrist and stilling her motion. “You’re divorced.”

Narcissa laughed sarcastically. “Yes, and that has worked out so well—even the Ministry, the institution that finalized my divorce, still addresses me by my married name.”

“It is different to me,” Hermione sighed, feeling deflated. It was so easy to forget about all the moving pieces when she wasn’t in the thick of it. The nostalgia for all the action and intrigue hit her again, despite her better judgement. “I know you.” she defended weakly. “And I know how much you have changed.”

Narcissa’s smile widened. Unexpectedly, she leaned over and pressed a gentle kiss to the corner of Hermione’s mouth.

“Your faith in my supposed virtues will never cease to amaze me,” she said, her tone cryptic. Hermione had a difficult time hearing—her blood had started thundering in her ears the moment Narcissa’s lips made contact.

“But,” Narcissa continued, beginning to pull back. “It does not erase some rather unpleasant truths.”

Hermione stopped Narcissa from pulling back, encircling her more firmly with her arms. The Slytherin did not protest; she merely continued speaking in a defeated voice.

“For example, my family. Look at who my sister was—the Dark Lord’s right hand. Then there’s the matter of the Dark Lord himself—who was a... guest in my own home, where heinous, absolutely heinous crimes were committed. In my home. In my presence.”

Narcissa sighed deeply, deflating.

“I may not like it—I hate it, in fact—but I understand the Minister’s logic for the surveillance.”

Hermione shook her head. “There may have been some logic to begin with, but it’s been ten years. There’s no reason to keep it up any longer.”

Narcissa shot her a challenging glance.

“Would you still think so if you did not know me as you do now? Better yet—would you so vehemently defend Amanda Yaxley, or Lady McNair, or any of the others?”

Hermione opened her mouth to say yes, absolutely, because it was only fair and she would always and forever advocate for fairness and justice no matter what. But she stopped herself before the words could come out, coming to realize something about herself that she did not like at all.

The ugly truth was that she most likely would not have questioned it. She would have thought the surveillance fair and just—if not for Narcissa, at least for the other Death Eater wives who had not, in fact, switched sides, even if at the last possible second. The undeniable truth was that she could not help but harbour an intense dislike for the high-and-mighty, conceited Purebloods. There would always be an instant distrust.

It was shocking, not to mention highly unpleasant, to have her own prejudice pointed out so starkly. She hesitated to go as far as to compare it to the deep hatred Purebloods—some of them—harboured towards those of lesser birth, as they said.

“I guess not,” Hermione finally responded, hating how the admission made her feel inside.
“Have any of them changed?” She asked, the question gnawing at her from within and the curiosity taking the best of her. “Yaxley, Crabbe... McNair?”

Narcissa snorted with laughter, rather ungracefully and rather unlike her usual poised self. “Most assuredly not.”

Hermione waggled her brows, unable to stop herself from joining in on the laughter.

“Even if they had,” she piped in, her tone as haughty as she could possibly make it, “I very much doubt any of them would have gotten to the point of sharing a bed with a Muggleborn.”

Narcissa giggled, openly giggled—it was such an adorable sound Hermione was smitten all over again.

“They would never,” the blonde declared, her mock-haughtiness coming across much better than Hermione’s ever could. “Only I am allowed such pleasure.”

It was something about Narcissa’s eyes—it always was, with the way they reflected the light so beautifully, looking like tempestuous skies and deep oceans all at once. It was the way their gaze locked onto Hermione’s; how they held so much promise and... and want.

Hermione allowed herself to drown in those deep blue pools. How was it possible that they looked as if Narcissa was also drowning?

“Narcissa?” she breathed out, suddenly aware that her throat had gone dry and her voice had grown husky.

“Yes?” Narcissa drawled, mirth twinkling in her eyes like she already knew what the Gryffindor wanted to ask.

Hermione swallowed, willing some of her famed courage back into her veins. Her other hand came to rest upon Narcissa’s cheek, holding her tenderly.

“I... I would like to kiss you again.”

Narcissa’s smile widened, her cheeks pinked, and her eyes seemed to glimmer with hidden anticipation and desire. Hermione had never seen anything that beautiful.

The Slytherin pulled back only slightly, only enough to send the brunette a look of playful defiance.

“Why don’t you, then?”

Hermione leaned forward tentatively, tilting Narcissa’s chin upwards and capturing her lips in a tender kiss.

She didn’t quite know what to expect this time. This time, kissing Narcissa was not an unknown sensation, but it was still something new and utterly breath-taking.

It wasn’t earth-shattering like their first. Those emotions and many of their uncertainties had already been released along with the powerful warding magic back at Black Manor. But it was just as beautiful and intense, only in a vastly different way.

For starters, Hermione was not overtaken by shock and total euphoria—even if she were, this time the risk of falling backwards was neutralized by Narcissa’s bed. She could take her time to
thoroughly concentrate on the blissful sensation of Narcissa’s lips moving against her own; she could relish in the feeling of Narcissa’s arms tightening around her. This time, they could... languish, it felt like.

There was no explosion; the heat of the kiss was more gradual and controlled, at least initially, like embers being steadily blown into a roaring fire. It went slowly, torturously so as that heat began to build up, coursing through every inch of Hermione’s body.

There was a soft gasp; Narcissa pulled back a little, hands still grasping at Hermione’s robes at the waist. Their ragged gasps filled the space between them and Hermione saw a hungry version of her gaze being reflected onto Narcissa’s dilated pupils.

The magnificent sight only spurred her on further; Hermione quickly sat up, bringing a startled Narcissa up with her.

This kiss was all fervour and raw desire. It was hunger and thirst in one frantic continuum of emotion and sensation that they had somehow ignited.

Hermione drank in Narcissa’s moans and shivered when Narcissa devoured her breathless gasps. They were burning, but by Merlin, they were burning together and Hermione was all but certain they would be reduced to ashes once it was all over and done.

The end came much sooner than expected, with decisive knocks sounding at the door of Narcissa’s adjacent office.

The two witches jumped apart, scrambling off the bed. Hermione noted with a mixture of smugness and horror that Narcissa’s lips were pink and swollen, her eyes glimmered, and her hair...

She looked like she had been thoroughly ravaged, and Hermione was certain she was in a similar state of dishevelment.

It was remarkable to see Narcissa school her features so easily. From one second to the other, her expression changed from eager and breathless to perfectly calm and collected—albeit with cheeks still slightly red.

Hermione set their hair and robes right with one decisive flick of her wand. Better not risk it—for all they knew it could be Kingsley himself at the other side of that door.

She watched as Narcissa stoically walked to her door. The blonde had her wand on hand—Hermione couldn’t decide whether she was relieved by Narcissa’s presence of mind or whether she was unhappy with the necessity of having such foresight.

Narcissa opened the door in one smooth movement. Minerva McGonagall stood, eyes widening in surprise as they immediately spotted Hermione standing by the door of Narcissa’s personal quarters.

“Headmistress,” Narcissa said politely. “Good morning.”

Minerva raised an eyebrow. “Afternoon, Ms. Black.” She looked pointedly at Hermione, the very picture of confusion. She straightened—a feat in itself, considering her usual ramrod straight posture.

“The Minister of Magic is here. He wishes to speak to both of you, regarding the disappearance of Azkaban’s guard of Dementors.”
Minerva directed an odd look to Hermione. It was oddly reminiscent of her school days, the brunette realized—it was exactly the kind of look she, Harry, and Ron received whenever she thought something along the lines of ‘Why is it that whenever something happens, it is always you three?’

“We’ll be up in a minute.” Hermione said quickly.

“Actually,” Narcissa interrupted Minerva’s incoming response. “The Minister is welcome to have this discussion in my offices,” she said. Her tone and serious gaze made it perfectly clear—the Minister would not be seeing her otherwise.

“Very well,” Minerva replied, clearly oblivious to what had truly happened the night before, which Hermione did not like. News about the massive breakout was bound to come out. Minerva had to know at the very least that the Dementors did not pose a serious threat to the school—at least not when they were all the way in Cambridgeshire. She should know about it—not only because she was Hogwarts’ Headmistress, but because she was a friend and long-time ally to the Minister.

Minerva levelled the two women with a look that said ‘this can’t be good, can it?’ . Hermione could only respond with a gaze of confirmation before Minerva excused herself with a poorly concealed grimace.

Narcissa saw Minerva out with a polite smile, but when she turned to face Hermione once more, her features were grave.

“Minerva has not been informed about Black Manor.”

Hermione nodded, not liking the implication.

“Harry told her about the breakout, but they haven’t updated her. I don’t know what Kingsley’s up to,” she said, her frustration evident. “But the Ministry clearly does not want people knowing about how quickly those Dementors are moving, and I don’t like that at all.”

Narcissa sighed. “I suppose we must wait to hear what he has to say.”

Hermione merely frowned.

Kingsley arrived not five minutes after the Headmistress had left, accompanied by Harry and two other wizards in tow. Hermione did not recognize them, but they wore uniforms not unlike Harry’s Auror robes, though they were of a deep, shimmering black colour as opposed to grey. They were emblazoned with an insignia Hermione had not seen before.

Narcissa welcomed them into her small private sitting room politely, but coolly.

“Minister. Mr. Potter.” Her eyes narrowed as she looked the two unknown wizards over. Her tone became biting, with no effort to be civil. “Officers.”

Hermione whipped her head back to take another look at the grouchy-looking wizards.

“ Officers?” she asked out loud, aware that she was being tactless but not caring in the slightest. If Kingsley had brought some kind of Auror reinforcements with him, what exactly did he expect to do?
“Yes,” Narcissa quipped, faking an exceedingly cheerful tone. “I believe these two gentlemen are the Unspeakables tasked with my surveillance?” she directed her question—her statement, really—to Kingsley with a knowing look.

Hermione felt her jaw unhinge, Harry let out a bark that was equal parts laughter and shock, and Kingsley clenched his teeth.

“Yes,” he hissed in confirmation. “Agents Willow and Birch have been in charge of monitoring you for the past few years.”

Hermione wanted to snort at the codenames, but her blood was boiling. What was Kingsley playing at, bringing Unspeakables with him?

Narcissa merely leaned back in her chair. “So nice to put faces to names” she said sarcastically. Her look turned to ice as she regarded Kingsley intensely.

“Shall we get this over with, Minister?”

Kingsley straightened in his seat. Willow and Birch stood by the door, looking impassive as always. Harry looked to the Minister, who nodded as if to give his permission.

“Ms. Black,” Harry began, looking a little nervous. “We would like to update you on the status of Black Manor.” He took one long breath. “After you alerted us to the invasion, several Auror teams were displaced to the location. We managed to detain a handful of the Dementors.”

“A handful?!?” Hermione interrupted, eyes wide. “There were hundreds!”

Harry grimaced. “We were unable to secure the rest.”

Hermione felt Narcissa stiffen next to her. “How?”

The Boy-Who-Lived visibly sagged in his seat. “I have no idea. One minute they were there, and then... they weren’t.”

Hermione felt the blood rush away from her face. “Like... like they apparated?”

Harry merely shrugged. It began to make sense why the Ministry hadn’t said anything—they didn’t know what the hell was happening either. Hermione turned to Narcissa, who hadn’t spoken; she could see the tension in the blonde’s jaw and wished she could reach over and take her hand to offer some comfort.

But she couldn’t; not with Kingsley and Harry present, and certainly not with Unspeakables in charge of monitoring Narcissa in the room.

“We did manage to secure a few Dementors,” Harry began again, his tone deflated. “But as you know, it’s not as if we can... interrogate those Dementors.”

Hermione nodded.

“Ms. Black,” Kingsley spoke, his analytical gaze never leaving Narcissa’s features. “You said you and Ms. Granger were doing research on some old wards in the property?”

“Yes.” Narcissa confirmed in a disinterested whisper. Hermione, however, could still feel the tension rolling from Narcissa in waves.

“And am I to understand you were not able to Apparate out of the property once those wards had
“What is going on?” Hermione interrupted. “What do the wards have to do with the Dementors?”

Kingsley finally turned to look at Hermione. His eyes were set in stone. “We believe the Dementors were attracted by a surge of magical energy coming from the property. Luckily, the entire perimeter is safeguarded against Muggles—another of the Blacks’ tricks—so no one besides you and our Aurors saw the warding lights.”

Hermione sucked in a breath. Had they diverted the Dementors’ journey somehow? Was it really sheer coincidence they happened to show up where they were?

“As soon as the Auror squads arrived, they began to retreat” Harry began again, brows furrowed.

“None of our Aurors could Apparate out of the property once they arrived via their modified PortKeys” Kingsley explained. His eyes narrowed. “How were you two able to leave the premises?”

Hermione turned to Narcissa, gauging whether the Slytherin wanted to answer the question.

Narcissa reached into her robes, taking out the locket that had saved their lives the night before. Hermione couldn’t believe it had been a matter of hours—it felt like an eternity ago.

“A modified PortKey. It was created by a House-Elf.” She explained succinctly.

Harry’s eyes widened, evidently guessing as to which House-Elf had created such a thing.

“Very well. I will ask you more about that at a later time. The main reason I wanted to speak to you was to tell you that, as of today,” Kingsley’s gaze turned pointedly to Hermione—a mixture of warning and pleading that the brunette could not quite decipher. “The Ministry will cease its surveillance of your person.”

Hermione wanted to jump, but the atmosphere in the space was too tense. Finally!

“Thank you.” Narcissa said simply. It didn’t sound like she believed a word of it, especially with the way she eyed the two agents that still stood stoically by her door.

“The other thing would be to alert you of the current situation at Black Manor.”

That caught Narcissa’s attention; her gaze snapped back to the Minister.

“What do you mean?” Hermione interjected, confused. “The Dementors disappeared, you caught a few. What else is there?”

Harry looked rather uncomfortable all of a sudden. He was the one to speak.

“In the ensuing skirmish... well” he raised his eyes to Narcissa in a clear apology. “I’m so sorry, Ms. Black. I’m afraid a significant portion of the Manor was destroyed.”

Hermione only heard Narcissa’s gasp by her side.
“Excuse me,” Narcissa said to the clerk at the St. Mungo’s Archival Offices. She as a mean-looking old witch who was actually rather kind and sweet, as the newest addition to the Potions Research and Development Department had come to find out—she was just hard of hearing.

“Excuse me?” Narcissa repeated a little more loudly, discreetly moving the stacks of files she held so that they woman would notice them in her peripheral vision eventually. “Excuse me, Mrs. Hickins?”

“Oh! Narcissa, darling, didn’t see ya there,” the woman exclaimed, her usual frown stretching into a wide grin once she caught sight of the blonde. She pushed a little tin of sweets towards Narcissa. “Lemon drop, dear?”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hickins,” Narcissa replied politely, already cognizant of the fact that the quickest way to the Head Archivist’s good graces was by the acceptance of any offered treats and casual, polite conversation. “Could you pull some of these files for me, if it is not too much trouble?”

“No trouble at all, darling. That’s what I’m here for,” Mrs. Hickins quipped happily, toddling on as she took Narcissa’s stack and looked it over on the way to the shelves. She spared another glance to the researcher by her desk.

“My, my, Narcissa, you look rather thin, dear. Have you been eating? Are you sleeping alright?”

“Yes, Mrs. Hickins, I have been” Narcissa said through a forced smile.

“Always hard at work, aren’t ya, sweetie?” the old witch babbled on, absent-mindedly waving her wand. The shelves at the end of her small nook in the Archival Offices began to shuffle and rotate in place; assorted pieces of parchment and index cards hovered about, zipping through the air in several directions.

“You know me,” Narcissa quipped, holding in her anticipation as the archivist looked as if she had found what she had been looking for. “Always working.”

“You are just like my son, my Edmund,” Mrs. Hickins laughed. “Maybe you’d like to meet him, someday? I’m sure you two would get along mightily fine.” She said suggestively—it wasn’t the first time.
“Thank you, Mrs. Hickins—I’m sure your son is quite lovely, but I am not looking to meet anything at the moment” Narcissa said, as politely as she possibly could.

“Oh, I would imagine so! Though I must say, you’ve been handling the divorce remarkably well!” She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, “between you and me, I don’t think my Edmund would mind a divorced witch—I’m sure he’d be willing to overlook that little detail!”

Narcissa gritted her teeth, hiding the action of distaste behind another forced smile. She counted from one fifty, backwards and in French in her head in a concentrated effort to not sound too acerbic when she next spoke.

“I’ll certainly keep that in mind,” she said sweetly, looking over at the papers summoned from the shelves by the lazy movements of Mrs. Hickins ‘ wand.

“Have you found them?” Narcissa asked, begging for a deviation in their conversation.

“Oh, yeas, give me one moment, darling, and I’ll check them out for you.”

Mrs. Hickins bent over her desk to look over the files. Her brows furrowed.

“Oh dear, I don’t think you have the clearance required to check out the originals...” she tutted looking through the parchment, then winked, “but there’s nothing that says you can’t have some slightly redacted copies! You know how these rules go, dear, can never be too careful. In fact, I think it was my Edmund who once said...”

Vingt, dix-neuf, dix-huit, dix-sept...

“Thank you ever so much, Mrs. Hickins.” Narcissa interrupted. Quinze, quatorze, treize... She tugged her smile a little wider to make it believable as she delicately grabbed the newly-created copies.

“Don’t mention it, darling,” Mrs. Hickins said, winking again. “Do give that date with Edmund some more thought, will you, dearest? Oh, and don’t forget to eat—do take another lemon drop, you look far too thin to be healthy!”

Quatre, trois, deux... un.

“Certainly, Mrs. Hickins.”

It had been no surprise to Narcissa, receiving heavily redacted files. Part of her was surprised the Head Archivist had given them to her at all.

But it had gone better than she had expected. Now she could finally have the details—beyond what had been in the papers, beyond what a certain sister had told her years and years ago.

The files were incredibly thorough, but ultimately not as helpful as she had hoped. They had no information that Narcissa did not already know, save for some questionable Ministry procedures that were certainly not her problem, nor worth her attention. They were more useful to tell her what had not worked, as opposed to what had.

She did not need the names that had been redacted—she knew them far too well. After all, how many people were there in the world who had utterly and completely lost their minds in such a
terrible, cruel way?

The first file was for a wizard, twenty-seven years of age at the time of admission to the permanent wing of St. Mungo's Spell Damage Ward. Symptoms had included dementia, hysterics, phantom pains, and severe memory loss. The cause—what a surprise—an unnaturally long exposure to the Cruciatus. Actual duration of said exposure? Unknown.

Unknown to the Ministry, perhaps. Narcissa knew it neared a full day of unstoppable torture.

The second file was for a witch, twenty-five years of age, under similar circumstances. Of course, no one but Narcissa knew that, compared to her unnamed husband, this woman had gotten off lightly.

She shuddered when she thought of Frank and Alice Longbottom and the agony they had suffered at the hands of her sister and Rodolphus. They had been a few years her seniors at Hogwarts; Frank had been in Bella’s year, Alice one grade below, in Andromeda’s.

Narcissa also thought of James and Lily Potter, and how their fate, despite utterly tragic, was much preferable to the one befallen Frank and Alice

With a deep, long-suffering sigh of uncertainty, Narcissa gathered her files and got to work.

She had offered to meet with him at a public location for his convenience—and peace of mind, but was not surprised when he wrote back saying he would prefer to not be seen with her.

What did surprise her, however, was his suggestion to meet her at home. As in, her home. As in, Malfoy Manor.

Narcissa had replied to his owl politely, saying that he was welcome to come, but that she would understand if he chose not to meet with her at all.

She dismissed the thought. All she wanted was to be welcoming, but there was very little she could do in that front at Malfoy Manor.

Despite her worries, Neville Longbottom was at the Manor gates, promptly at their scheduled time. He eyed everything from the Manor gardens to the foyer with intense, barely concealed disdain.

“I got your owl.” He said brusquely and foregoing all pleasantries as Narcissa led him to the nearest sitting room. She could not fault him.

“Mr. Longbottom. Perhaps you would like to take a seat?”

He did so with an impatient huff.

“Would you care for some tea, Mr. Longbottom?”

“No, thank you. I would like to get to the point as quickly as possible, Mrs. Malfoy.” He grimaced, then corrected himself before Narcissa could do it for him. “Sorry—Ms. Black. Congratulations, by the way. On the divorce.”

“Thank you,” Narcissa replied, shocked at the young man’s plainly visible sincerity. “Though I do believe more timely congratulations are in order for yourself—I understand I have the pleasure of speaking with Hogwarts’ newest staff addition? Herbology, is it not?”
“Yes, yes, Herbology.” Neville said, his surprise evident—it was enough to cut through a bit of the tension.

“Congratulations, then. A noble discipline—I wish you the very best of luck in your academic endeavours.”

“Thank you...” he looked puzzled. “I didn’t think someone like you would care much for Herbology.”

Narcissa smiled—she hoped it came across as friendly and nor sarcastic.

“Oh, Herbology is one of the most important disciplines to be learned. Potions and Healing would be absolutely nothing without it.”

The young man sagged into his seat, eyeing Narcissa with curiosity and a sort of unabashed interest Narcissa was surprised to see in his gaze. She sensed that the time for small-talk was coming to a close.

“Potions and Healing” he repeated as if he wanted to test the words out on his tongue. “That’s what you do now, isn’t it?”

Narcissa crossed her legs, leaning back into her seat and meeting his gaze directly. It was odd to see how much he looked like Frank.

“Yes,” she confirmed. “It is, in fact, part of the reason why I wanted to speak with you.”

The young wizard looked conflicted, and once again, Narcissa thought she couldn’t blame him for the uncertainty. She had no idea how she’d react were she in his shoes, but she could guess she wouldn’t be so calm.

“I...” he began, then stopped abruptly, evidently searching for words that escaped him. It took him several long, pensive moments before he could speak again.

“I almost didn’t respond to your letter,” he finally admitted. The statement did not surprise Narcissa in the least; what did surprise her was the intense shame with which he had said it. Shame made no sense whatsoever, not coming from this young man.

“I’ve been trying hard to put things in perspective, Mrs. Malfoy,” he groaned at the slip and once again corrected himself. “Sorry, Ms. Black. I’ve been trying to... understand the whys and the hows of several things.”

Narcissa nodded, uncertain with what the Longbottom boy wanted to convey.

“It’s not easy,” he confessed with a wry smile. “I’ll admit that my first instinct when I received your letter was to tear it to pieces, then burn those pieces.”

He looked at her like a child who had just been scolded—it puzzled Narcissa to no end.

“I guess what I’m really trying to say is... I wanted nothing to do with you. I didn’t want to hear what you had to say because what in Merlin’s name would someone like you have to say to someone like me?”

Narcissa said nothing. Longbottom was right. There was absolutely nothing she could say to him—and yet there were so many things she really should.
“I did tear your letter to pieces,” he said after a few contemplative moments. “But my wife... Well, let’s just say she has a knack for knowing what people need.” Neville raised his gaze to meet hers directly. “She said that this may be something we both need. Closure and atonement. And, maybe, some hope.”

Narcissa found it in herself to smile. “Your wife is a remarkable witch, Mr. Longbottom.” she said, meaning every word. “She’s a rather intriguing woman, with a rather peculiar intuition.”

It was the truth. Narcissa remembered quite a lot about Luna Lovegood. The young woman was possibly the oddest witch Narcissa had ever met—particularly under the rather unfortunate circumstances their few but memorable encounters had taken place.

Not that she would ever mention that to the Longbottom boy.

“Thank you,” he said, looking at her a little oddly. He sighed deeply, as if he were about to take a plunge into dark, deep waters.

“I don’t know why you’re doing this, Ms. Black,” he finally breathed out. “I don’t know what you need out of it, though I’m sure Luna would have a good guess or two.”

Neville straightened in his seat, his eyes filled with a conviction he tried to hide without much success. He looked so much more like his father than Narcissa had even realized; it was like seeing a memory of Frank Longbottom materialize itself in her sitting room.

“All I know,” he continued, his voice carrying the same conviction that Narcissa saw in his defiant gaze, “is that I’ve got nothing to lose in hearing what you have to say.”

It was then that Narcissa saw something beyond all that conviction in his eyes. It was a kind of plea, an implied, desperate question that Longbottom yearned to have answered. Can I trust you?

There was another exhale. The young wizard narrowed his eyes and steeled himself as if preparing for a blow. His voice was resolute when he next spoke.

“Tell me about my parents.”

It was gone.

Hermione could not believe her eyes as Kingsley and Harry transported them via Portkey to take a look at the state of Black Manor.

She had gasped with horror once they had popped into existence on the spot where there once stood a great, magnificent fountain overlooking the impeccably manicured gardens of the well-maintained estate.

The fountain and gardens were no more. The ornate wrought iron gates at the property’s entrance were bent out of shape, half-molten and contorted in odd, sickening angles.

The main house... It seemed impossible that it was still standing. The front of the building had crumbled to dust. The remaining windows were shattered and a portion of the West Wing had all but collapsed to the ground.

Several Aurors and other Ministry officials milled about, performing diagnostic spells or taking
notes as they surveyed the damage. A few wizards—all of them wearing Ministry badges, Hermione was relieved to note—were taking pictures of the nearly collapsed structure.

Narcissa stood, completely impassive and utterly silent by Hermione’s side. Harry and Kingsley did not speak, choosing instead to give the two witches a few moments to process the scene before them.

“How...” Hermione started, but was unable to continue.

“What is the extent of the damage?” Narcissa asked, her voice stoic and business-like. It lacked any emotion whatsoever, which threw Hermione so badly she found herself openly staring at the blonde.

“What you see before you,” Harry said, looking miserable. “I am so very sorry, Ms. Black.”

“So none of the outbuildings or annexes were affected?” she inquired, barreling through Harry’s apology so quickly even the young Auror looked surprised at her abruptness.

“No,” Kingsley was the one to answer, as Harry seemed to have been stunned into silence. “Some ruins by the creek bed were effectively pulverized, but no functional edifices have been damaged beyond the main house.”

“Good.” Narcissa’s answer was curt; her jaw was set so strongly Hermione could practically feel the tension.

“How did this happen?” the brunette asked incredulously. “How do Dementors cause this much damage?”

Narcissa’s lips pressed into a thin line. Harry looked rather uncomfortable.

“This wasn’t just a gaggle of Dementors,” answered a voice from behind Hermione. The young Gryffindor turned to see a rather tall, slender witch with curly black hair and inquisitive dark eyes that peered from behind large, square-framed glasses. She wore Auror robes similar to Harry’s, but with an additional insignia that designated a particular Research Department within the Ministry.

“Hi,” she said bashfully, perhaps a embarrassed for interrupting the conversation. She raised her hand to Hermione in greeting. “You probably don’t remember me, but we went to Hogwarts together—I was in Ravenclaw. I’m...”

“Isobel MacDougal,” Hermione finished for her, dazed and blushing up to the roots of her hair. She realized how bloody lucky she had been when using Isobel’s identity to escape Druella’s wrath—the Black matriarch clearly was never very chummy with the MacDougals, for there was no earthly way Hermione could have passed for Isobel otherwise. They really looked nothing alike.

Isobel smiled, looking beyond pleased Hermione had remembered her name.

“Yup! That’s me! I’m the Warding Specialist with Auror Potter’s team for this operation,” she blushed, and her voice became shy. “Of course, I’m not as good as the legendary Hermione Granger, but I do my best. Let me just say, I am a huge fan of your work! Particularly your research on alternate geometrical parameters in Warding Charms!”

“Oh, uh, thank you. I’m sure you’re more than up to par,” Hermione quipped awkwardly, hoping she was being polite. She was still having difficulty processing.

Isobel looked absolutely ecstatic at the praise. “Oh, thank you so much! Can I just say, your
research absolutely *changed the game* when it comes to security wards? The ambient extensions and geometrical constraints you published are wicked brilliant—my specialty thesis was on that *amazing* piece of work you had on the interdimensional application of Warding Charms following Mortcombe’s Law. I would so love to pick your brain sometime, if you wouldn’t mind, of...”

“If we are finished with this riveting school reunion,” Narcissa suddenly interjected, her voice as cold as Hermione had ever heard it, which startled her—it made Isobel flinch and squeak in surprise, “I would like to know more about how my family estate has been nearly destroyed.”

Hermione was shocked at the abrupt change in tone and demeanour, but not as much as Isobel, who squeaked once more at Narcissa’s tone, eyes widening comically behind her tortoise-shell squared spectacles.

“Oh, of course, of course! My apologies, Mrs. Malfoy, I...”

*Black.* Narcissa corrected icily. “As in *Black Manor.* As in the place you are currently assigned to oversee.”

Isobel was red as a tomato. “Yes! I’m so sorry, Ms. Black. It won’t happen again.” She turned back to Hermione as if seeking permission to continue speaking. Kingsley was the one to give it.

“Tell Ms. Black about the warding spells, Miss MacDougal.”

“Yes, of course, of course,” Isobel stuttered, shrinking under Narcissa’s steely gaze.

“There were previously undetected warding provisions placed upon the ruins by the creek. The reveal of the Rune Circle—wicked sort of magic, by the way, absolutely brilliant—was what set it off.”

“Warding provisions?” Hermione wondered aloud, incredulous. “Impossible. I’ve been researching these wards—dissecting them, really, for months. All warding provisions on this property were removed in the 1930s.”

“What exactly are warding provisions?” Narcissa asked, sounding rather impatient. “And how have they destroyed my property?”

Hermione turned to face Narcissa, but Isobel launched into an explanation before she had the chance.

“They’re like a fail-safe measure in case the original wards don’t work as intended or are broken into,” she said very quickly, looking to Hermione much like her students did when they wanted confirmation that they were on the right track with their spell-work. Hermine could only nod.

“They’re not very common,” Isobel continued, confidence bolstered by Hermione’s acknowledgement. “In general, they’re a last resort, used to destroy everything within the wards that have been compromised.”

“Compromised?” Narcissa asked, narrowing her eyes. Isobel swallowed.

“Yeah,” she kept on, clearly intimidated by the witch eyeing her through a stoic gaze. “They were outlawed by the Ministry in the early twentieth century—mostly due to Dark Wizards using them to destroy evidence whenever the Ministry performed raids. It wouldn’t surprise me if a family like the Blacks managed to keep a few,” she said, then her eyes widened as she squirmed under Narcissa’s glare. “I mean no offence, Madam Black,” she added quickly.
“Compromised.” Narcissa repeated, brow furrowed. “How could we have missed such provisions?”

“We didn’t,” Hermione said, her brain running through all of the painstaking research and testing she and Narcissa had done over months of hard work. “We didn’t, I’m sure of it,” she repeated adamantly.

“They are notoriously tricky to spot,” Isobel said, sounding sympathetic. “You just happened to trigger them when you revealed the Rune Circle.”

“No,” Hermione interjected again, desperately sifting through every possible scenario in her brain, going over hundreds of mental diagrams and calculations in the span of a few seconds. It couldn’t be—had she missed something, something this crucial? Had she neglected a key piece of information, had she overlooked any signs? The possibility filled her with intense dread to such a point she felt her stomach turn with unease.

Could she have caused this destruction?

“It can’t be,” she said breathlessly, feeling the fear and anxiety gripping at her chest. “It can’t, I... I... I would have seen it, I would have found it!” she insisted, turning a desperate look toward Narcissa, who remained impassive.

Isobel looked sympathetic, overtly so; Harry and Kingsley said nothing, and merely exchanged a look Hermione did not like in the least.

“Don’t beat yourself up about it, Hermione.” Isobel said kindly, raising a hand to Hermione’s shoulder. “These wards are just too bloody complex. No one would have found them either.”

“No, no!” Hermione gasped, shaking the hand off her shoulder and looking desperately from Isobel to Narcissa, panicking that such an oversight on her part could have caused such a massive setback to something Narcissa had been working on for so long.

“I... I would have spotted it! The... The magical imprints would... The charm’s arithmantic composition, or even the runes would have... would have...”

She felt another hand on her shoulder, a much more welcoming pressure than Isobel’s had been. Narcissa looked at her with... not the kind of sympathy Isobel had sported in her gaze, but something else entirely.

It was understanding.

“It’s alright, Hermione.” She whispered softly, her tone starkly different than it had been merely moments before. “This was not your fault.”

Hermione felt like crying for some unfathomable reason. Her mind kept racing through all of the research she had done, desperately trying to find a link, a connection, even the flimsiest explanation and failing. It was as if her thoughts were scrambled in her head, swirling in her mind just out of view, just out of reach.

“It’s alright, I promise.”

The Gryffindor took a deep breath, steeling herself against the paranoia before it could set in. She was Hermione Granger, Brightest Witch of her Age—she was not infallible.
It was a bitter pill to swallow.

“We’re very sorry, Ms. Black,” Harry spoke as if he had personally destroyed the Manor himself. “Please, let us know if there is anything we can do to help you rebuild the Manor.”

“Thank you, Mr. Potter,” Narcissa said, her eyes never leaving Hermione’s. “But I’m afraid this is beyond the Ministry’s help.”

“How so?” Hermione asked, alarmed by the finality of that statement.

Narcissa sighed. “The Ward has already been excessively delayed,” she said simply. “Add in a Dementor attack and all of this destruction... There won’t be many investors and sponsors willing to back this venture—I suspect even St. Mungo’s might want to reconsider.”

Hermione felt her jaw unhinge. “So... this is it? This is the end of all that work?” she cried angrily, feeling even worse about the hand she had potentially played in the destruction of the Manor. “This can’t be it,” she hissed. “We have to rebuild it, Narcissa!”

“Oh, it will certainly be rebuilt, ”Narcissa assured her, though she smiled sadly. “But I have my doubts I’ll be able to make it into a hospital without backing. Perhaps it’ll become a private rehabilitation facility.”

“That doesn’t make any sense!” Hermione cried. “Is it just money? We’ll get the money from somewhere!” she said, thinking out loud. How expensive was this venture? She knew Narcissa was a woman of considerable wealth, but how much of that wealth had been sunk into what was now not much more than a pile of rubble?

Narcissa sighed once more. “Money itself is not the problem—at least not entirely. For a Wizarding hospital to open with the proper permits and functionality, there must be sponsorships and partnerships and investments from several companies and individuals—think apothecaries, healers, researchers, etc. St. Mungo’s doesn’t have the budget all on its own” her gaze narrowed towards Kingsley. “Especially if there is absolutely zero government funding to maintain the project long-term.”

Kingsley bristled, but Narcissa continued speaking, without giving him a chance to interrupt.

“Plus, I doubt the news of a Dementor attack of this scale will stay off the papers for much longer. That will surely drive away anyone with potential interest in this venture.”

“But... but the press doesn’t know.” Hermione argued weakly.

“It is only a matter of time,” Kingsley said, his voice grave and thoroughly displeased. “News of the breakout in Azkaban will be in the morning papers. And there is very little we can do to justify the displacement of so many Auror units without transparency.”

Hermione frowned, not liking what she was hearing.

“So that’s it?” She turned back to Narcissa. “None of this is your fault!”

“Even so,” Narcissa said kindly, “there are not many in the Wizarding World who are eager to follow a business venture from someone like me. All of our current investors were painstakingly convinced to support this project by Mr. Longbottom—they are not terribly fond of me.” She sighed, defeated. “If they drop out, St. Mungo’s will have no choice but to do so as well—they don’t have the budget to keep it going in the long-term.”
“That’s not fair!” Hermione hissed. She wanted to say something, say that they were talking about a hospital that would fulfil a great need in the Wizarding community, not some frivolous business venture like brooms ergonomically designed for the modern witch. However, she was not naïve enough to make such a statement—there was business and money everywhere. In that regard, Wizards were not as different from Muggles as they liked to think.

“Ms. Black, if I may...” Kingsley interjected pensively. “I believe that if you would be willing to provide certain services to the Ministry, we could come to a... mutually advantageous arrangement.”

Narcissa turned to face the Minister slowly, raising a perfectly sculpted brow in question.

“I’m listening.”

Harry looked guilty; Hermione was more confused than ever before.

“MacDougal, you’re dismissed.” Kingsley said curtly. Isobel quickly made herself scarce, waving a shy goodbye that Hermione awkwardly returned. Kingsley directed himself to them once more.

“Let’s talk in my office, shall we?”

Hermione found herself sitting in Kingsley’s office far sooner than she had anticipated after her last visit.

The past two days had been so oddly eventful she caught herself wondering how on earth she and Narcissa would be able to return to Hogwarts in time to grade and administer more exams.

Judging by Narcissa’s impassive features, Kingsley’s challenging gaze, and the slowly setting sun visible from the Minister’s office window, they would not be returning any time soon.

Bummer.

Hermione sipped at the tea that Kingsley had offered as soon as they arrived to his office. She had forgotten that her last meal had been that unbearably tense dinner at Grimmauld Place. Harry himself munched discreetly at a biscuit, looking rather awkward standing in full Auror garb behind the Minister as he ate.

Narcissa’s tea and biscuits sat untouched in front of her. The glaring between the Slytherin and the Minister had yet to let up several minutes after their arrival.

“Ms. Black,” Kingsley finally relented when it became clear that Narcissa wouldn’t. “I want to first apologize for this unfortunate situation.”

“Minister,” Narcissa drawled, her voice deceptively sweet. “I know you are quite the expert on wasting my time... but could you please refrain from doing so, just this once?” She crossed her legs and elegantly leaned into her seat, the action somehow driving her point home. “I have had a rather tiring couple of days.”

“Oh course, Ms. Black,” Kingsley said, smiling wryly.

“What is this ‘mutually advantageous agreement’ you speak of?”

Kingsley leaned over his desk, summoning a swath of parchment from a nearby cabinet.
“The Ministry has gathered intelligence on a few individuals of interest...” he began, spreading the files over his desk. “I assume you recognize some of these names?”

Narcissa sniffed haughtily, and Hermione eyed the papers with interest. She could recognize some prominent Pureblooded family names—some whose family Heads were imprisoned in a now Dementor-less Azkaban.

“Individuals of interest,” Narcissa drawled, her sarcasm evident. “You mean people kept under surveillance, despite their innocence being proved at trial?”

“People who would stand to gain something from removing Dementors from Azkaban, Ms. Black. People of questionable allegiance.” Kingsley retorted, eyeing the blonde in front of him knowingly.

“Regardless of their allegiance, Minister, what part to they have to play in this... arrangement?”

“Absolutely none.” Kingsley said. “It is you, Ms. Black, who would have a part to play with them.”

“I see.” Narcissa said, eyes narrowing in evident anger. “You want me to do your dirty work for you. You want me to spy on them.”

“What?” Hermione interjected, feeling like she had missed some crucial detail—she had no idea what was going on.

Harry sighed. “Ms. Black, the truth is, we’re grasping at straws,” he said. “We don’t know who is behind the breakout, but former Death-Eater families are the only lead we have.” He said it as if the admission pained him.

“What!” Hermione barked, turning to look at Harry in confusion as the realization hit her. “Tell me that’s not it.” The Auror was pointedly silent. “Harry!!”

“Looking for new investors and sponsors creates a legitimate reason for you to frequent those circles again, Ms. Black,” Kingsley explained.

“This is insanity!” Hermione exclaimed, not believing what she was hearing and the turn the conversation had taken.

“Think of it this way,” Kingsley continued, giving Hermione a look. “Ms. Black has been snubbed by the Ministry and now needs new investors—I would imagine there would be people willing to accommodate this need. And, by reinserting herself in those circles, we would be privy to any illicit transactions that take place, or any chatter over the Dementor breakout. I would think there might be a witch or two in that midst that would be willing to sponsor the Ward as an... apology of sorts due to the breakout.”

Hermione could not wrap her head around it. Apology? Terribly sorry our potential covert breakout destroyed your mansion... here’s some money to rebuild it. In what world did that make sense?

It clearly made some sense to Narcissa.

“What do I get in return?” She asked, her voice as cold as her gaze.

“I would personally guarantee public funds and security for the Ward upon completion. We would make sure to keep it running long-term.”
Narcissa’s lips pressed into a thin line.

“And if I refuse?”

Kingsley steepled his hands onto his desk, meeting Narcissa’s icy gaze in a deliberate challenge.

“The Ministry could make things harder.”

“Kingsley!” Harry barked from behind the Minister. “That was not the agreement!”

Hermione seethed in her seat, but Narcissa raised a hand, stopping her and Harry from speaking up further. She stood, elegantly, and Hermione was quick to follow.

“I will think about it.” She said venomously, stepping out with Hermione hot on her heels after a last glare to the Minister, for good measure.

“I cannot believe Kingsley had the gall to drag you into this!” Hermione hissed as they apparated onto the castle grounds, arm in arm for Side-Along. They walked briskly to the castle, though Narcissa remained silent for long moments as they approached.

“I mean, you’re a civilian! And what was that earlier about zero government funding? I thought the Ministry would be all over creating another Wizarding hospital.” She wondered aloud, still angry and admittedly confused about the whole situation.

“You thought wrong,” Narcissa quipped, her mind clearly elsewhere. Hermione subconsciously followed her through the darkened corridors as Narcissa made her way to the Dungeons.

“I don’t get it,” Hermione finally admitted. “Why send you? Your estate was just attacked by Dementors—randomly or not, we still don’t know. Why would that make you a good person to spy on people?”

“Probably because of my past connections to them,” Narcissa said, brows furrowed. “Was the MacDougal girl right?”

Hermione shook her head, confused by the sudden redirection. “Isobel? About what?”

“The warding provisions” Narcissa said, sounding impatient. “Are you sure you didn’t miss them?”

Hermione felt herself shrink in place. “I... I was. Now, I... I don’t know.” She admitted guiltily. “Narcissa, if I had anything to do with...”

“Spare me,” Narcissa said brusquely, but with no malice. Her hand rested under Hermione’s chin. “Forget what MacDougal said. Do you think you could have missed them?”

“I...” Hermione began, still thrown for a loop at the turn their conversation had taken, particularly with Narcissa’s steely blue gaze boring so deeply into hers. Something about the conviction in Narcissa’s eyes brought back some of her confidence. “I went over those wards with a fine-toothed comb. I didn’t see any signs of warding provisions.”

The statement was rewarded with a gentle kiss to her cheek.

“I believe you.”
“I just... I just don’t understand. I know there were no warding provisions, but the effects... they certainly look like warding provisions. I guess it’s lucky the Minister was there to stop it before it destroyed the entire main house,” Hermione said, still with a tinge of guilt.

“Would revealing the wards usually trigger such warding provisions” Narcissa asked, raising a hand to Hermione’s lips before the brunette began rambling. “Provided they exist in the first place?”

Hermione smiled, gently removing Narcissa’s hand so she could speak. “Not usually. I suppose different magical imprints could potentially trigger them, but that is exceedingly rare.”

“So... let’s imagine there were warding provisions you somehow missed in your very thorough research... a different magical imprint could potentially trigger them?”

“Correct,” Hermione confirmed glumly, confidence in her research and abilities plummeting.

“Hermione,” Narcissa whispered, sounding exasperated for some reason. “What was the first thing I did to you in your first visit to Black Manor?”

Hermione eyed Narcissa quizzically for a few moments. Narcissa raised an eyebrow, bringing their hands together. The mirroring silver scars on their palms jolted her memory.

“You bound me by blood to the Black estate!” Hermione yelped, realization dawning.

Narcissa smiled. “Meaning...”

“My magical imprint would be the same as any Black that set up the wards OR the provisions!” Hermione completed, thoughts running a mile a minute in her head. “Isobel doesn’t know that.”

Narcissa nodded solemnly. Hermione came to an unsettling conclusion, doubtlessly the same one Narcissa had.

They were being played.
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

HAHA OK I'M BACK. Apologies for this lil filler of a chapter, but holy moly, this brain needed to be unclogged and BY GOD IT HAS BEEN UNCLOGGED BY FANDOM DRAINo.

Thanks for reading. And for your endless patience. And for silly prompts that get the gears turning again.

Hermione woke from a brief, fitful sleep feeling a coil of anxiety tightening deep into her chest. She could feel the weight of sleep clinging to her heavy lids, but the rest of her body was buzzing, thrumming, nearly rattling in place as that anxious, nervous coil wound itself tighter and tighter within her.

It always began with her jaw. The muscles clenched of their own accord, gritting her teeth together with such strength as to cause pain. The pain radiated from her jaw down to her neck, then travel all the way down to shoulders that were too stiff with anxiety and nerves, trembling as muscles contracted out of her control.

Hermione couldn’t remember with any precision the last time she had slept so terribly or woken in such an anxious state. It gave her flashbacks to a time when the only respite she got came from a nearly deadly combination of Ogden’s Finest and an extra-potent dose of home-brewed Dreamless Draught.

The Professor sighed, resigning herself to suffer through the day. There were exams to administer, papers to grade—her professorial duties had to go on, no matter what was going on in the world around her. It felt odd—in good and bad ways—to not be in the thick of it any longer. She idly wondered how Minerva and Flitwick and all the other Professors felt when she, Harry and Ron were in school, when their world and community were so troubled.

The sun began to rise from behind her periwinkle curtains, bathing her room in a soft blue light. The birds began to chirp outside and Hermione still had not come to terms with how differently her day would go after her incredibly eventful weekend. In fact, she doubted she would come to terms with anything anytime soon, especially with the sinister implication of the warding provisions allegedly found in Black Manor.

Hermione groaned. Black Manor, now in utter ruin, and Narcissa, teetering on the precipice of becoming a pawn for the Ministry for only Merlin knew what.

It was an unsavoury conundrum, and one that Hermione wanted to thoroughly discuss with the Potions Professor as soon as she had the chance. After that, she would personally knock some sense into Kingsley, with her fists if not with her wand, and Godric be damned.

What hurt her most was the betrayal she felt. Kingsley had been her mentor—her friend, someone she deeply admired as an Auror, as a member of the Order, and as Minister. Why was he being so utterly paranoid?
Because it was paranoia—there was no other name for such a thing: surveillance of innocent individuals, manipulation, blackmail? Who was this person? Where was Kingsley the Order member, the friend, the voice of reason and logic?

Kingsley’s actions made Hermione immeasurably angry—his nonchalance at the destruction of Black Manor, taking the opportunity to use Narcissa... It filled Hermione with rage. She wanted to scream to condemn the injustice of it all from the highest rooftops, and she would, too, if only...

If only Narcissa hadn’t been confoundingly accepting of the situation.

“Don’t fret so much,” she had told Hermione before they parted ways the night before, worried and dissatisfied with their recent conclusions and sinister realizations. “The Minister is merely being pragmatic.”

“Pragmatic?” Hermione had interjected incredulously, hissing with all the force of her disbelief. “He’s completely lost the plot!”

Narcissa startled. “You mustn’t take it personally,” she said with a knowing look. “I certainly don’t, despite the inconvenience the Ministry causes me.”

“It’s more than an inconvenience!” Hermione nearly shouted, her voice echoing through the darkened corridors. “They want to use you!”

Narcissa’s responding look was as empty as her tone when she replied. “Merely politics.”

Hermione physically shook her head as she left her private quarters. How would she be able to concentrate on anything after such an eventful weekend was truly beyond her—she would have to figure out a way as she went. She still had exams to administer, so many papers to grade, and then there was always the furore of the last day’s goodbyes to students who would be away all summer...

It was enough to electrify the atmosphere of the castle, as Hermione remembered from her days as a student, as she experienced every year as a Professor. However, as she approached the Great Hall, the atmosphere bubbled with a different energy, an excitement and commotion that were quite different from the usual buzz that signalled the coming end of term.

Students talked amongst themselves in hushed, worried whispers. The rapid, careless flipping of newspaper pages in the hundreds, maybe thousands, permeated the room, creating a cacophony of trepidation Hermione had not seen nor heard since she had been a student herself. It was eerily reminiscent of the days when the looming threat of Voldemort’s return was imbued in every conversation throughout the castle.

She then remembered what Kingsley had said, about the grim inevitability of having the news from the Dementor breakout spread like wildfire despite the Ministry’s best efforts for secrecy. No doubt the main papers already had something to print, creating that vein of panic in the Great Hall.

Hermione made her way to the Staff table much more somber than she had been already. Neville greeted her with a forced smile, one that was partially concealed by the pages of the newspaper he held. An old picture of Azkaban—and its army of Demenors—was visible in the back page displayed to Hermione.

“Morning, ’Mione.”

“Morning.”
She sat and they both remained in an uncomfortable silence for several moments. Hermione had no idea how much he knew, nor how much she could tell him if his knowledge of the true extent of the situation was lacking. It was a rather unpleasant feeling of secrecy she wasn’t sure was even warranted.

Hermione was the one to break the silence when her thoughts were completely derailed once Neville put his newspaper down.

“Good Godric, is that The Daily Prophet ?!”

Neville turned the paper for her to see, smiling wryly. “Indeed it is.”

“Merlin. I thought they had gone under, hadn’t they?”

“I thought so too,” Neville confirmed, flipping the pages idly. “But apparently they have just been in the back shelf of the stands, relegated to the gossip tabloids.”

Hermione shook her head. “What are they saying?”

“What aren’t they saying, more like,” Neville added sourly, brows quirking downward in displeasure. “Dementors on the loose on the hunt for wizards; the Ministry running a soul-harvesting operation all over Britain... my personal favourite is the riveting article on page six, the one about the Dark Lord’s imminent return to this Earth in Dementor form, along with his army of the undead.”

Hermione could not help but roll her eyes. The Prophet had become even more ludicrous than usual. “What are the other papers saying?”

“Much of the same, I’m afraid. The only exception is The Gazette.” He reached over the table, grasping another ream of newspapers that had been put away. “Here we actually get writing that is at least... plausible.”

Hermione took the offered paper, eyes already scanning the pages. The headline itself was much drier and factual than most were in the Wizarding world. The main story addressed the sudden and enigmatic breakout, acknowledging the Ministry had absolutely no clue what had happened. It also spoke about the destruction of a prominent Wizarding estate in Cambridgeshire where the Dementors had converged, but gave very little information.

The Transfigurations Professor read quickly, both alarmed and relieved at the article’s simultaneous wealth of information and general vagueness. Her eyes finally skimmed over to the bottom of the page, to the author’s by-line. Astoria Malfoy. Had Narcissa tipped her off?

“You know,” Neville continued after a drawn-out pause. “Black Manor is in Cambridgeshire.”

Hermione sighed deeply. Of course he knew she knew; this was merely the most roundabout way of asking for confirmation. The nagging feeling of unwarranted secrecy came to bother her again. Of all people, Neville deserved to know.

“Yes,” she whispered softly, looking at him with concern in her eyes. “I’m so sorry, Nev.”

His hand crumpled the paper he held, and Hermione could see how the harsh set of his jaw betrayed his deep disappointment. She reached out a hand over the closed fist now crumpling the pages of the Prophet, running her fingers over his knuckles in a faint hope to convey her sympathy.
Neville shot her a grateful look. “It’ll be alright, really. We’ll rebuild. We’ll have the Ward running in no time.”

Hermione couldn’t help but wonder if Neville needed to voice those thoughts aloud so as to make it easier for himself to believe them. She didn’t. She also chose not to mention anything about Narcissa’s and Kingsley’s exchanges... especially about how the fate of the Manor’s reconstruction seemed to hinge over Narcissa’s willingness to become a pawn to the Ministry.

Her thoughts naturally drifted toward the blonde, and Hermione sighed. She did not like how things were left the night before. She ought to speak to Narcissa, to really talk to her, and find some other way to rebuild Black Manor without the need to Ministry interference.

She gave Neville’s hand another squeeze, standing up with a strong determination to find Narcissa. There had to be something they could do.

“We’ll do it, Nev. We will.”

She didn’t stay to hear whether Neville had a reply. Her feet were taking her running down to the Dungeons, her mind a chaotic entanglement of thoughts that drowned out everything else. She was Hermione Granger, and by Merlin, she would find another way.

“Professor?”

She was nearly at the Dungeons when the familiar voice stopped her in her tracks. William White had seemingly appeared out of nowhere by one of the moving staircases.

“Mr. White. How may I help you?”

The young boy hesitated, shifting his weight from one foot to the other and wringing his hands in an obvious display of deep discomfort.

“William? What’s the matter?”

“I... I think I’m meant to ask Professor Black, but...” He bit his lip, his discomfort rising. “I don’t know how, Professor. I thought... Maybe... You’re a Muggleborn as well, Professor, so I thought you’d understand better...”

His stammering wilted into an uncertain silence enveloping them both. Hermione could do nothing but wait for him to continue.

“I was wondering, Professor, if it would be at all possible for me to stay. For the summer.”

Hermione felt her heart shattering into a million pieces in that moment, aching for the young boy before her, merely a lost child who had finally found his true home. She forgot all about the Dementors, all about Black Manor, all about Kingsley’s machinations with the sorrow William’s question brought her. Despite being a Muggleborn, she could not possibly relate to what he was feeling—not even in the slightest. She always looked forward to going home, to her loving parents, to a part of her identity she would never, ever forget.

How many children felt the way William did—the way he surely would feel every summer hereafter? She knew Harry had. Hogwarts had been his true home; he had felt its loss keenly every time he had to return to the Dursleys. Even Tom Riddle had found a home in this castle—the only one he had ever known.

The fact he was even asking, however, spoke volumes.
“I’m afraid the castle is not open to students in the summer, Mr. White.” He looked as if he had been prepared to hear that answer, as if he had been preparing to not show his disappointment, but it was in vain. Hermione could see it clearly in his eyes. “Are... are things alright at home, William?”

She could see how her question startled him. To Hermione’s surprise, however, he merely smiled. “Oh, yes, Professor. I’m just... It’ll be odd to come back, you know? To... just doing Muggle things in the Muggle way, after so long of...” he waved his hand, gesturing to the castle in general.

Now that Hermione could understand, even if deep down she knew he was not being entirely honest. “It will take some getting used to—especially since you cannot perform magic outside of Hogwarts. But I want you to know, William, should you need any assistance... with anything, you can always send me a letter.”

He raised a brow, his confusion evident. “I have no way of owling you, Professor.”

“But you can send a Muggle letter,” she quipped. “Not to Hogwarts, of course, but to a Muggle address.”

His eyes lit up. “Oh, could I really, Professor? I... I wouldn’t want to be a bother.”

Hermione waved him off. “You wouldn’t be, William. I want you to know, you don’t have to hesitate to contact me should...” she paused, thinking about all sorts of scenarios that could make the young boy wish to remain in the castle for the summer. “Should you need a friend. I’ll get you the address before you leave for the summer holiday, yeah?”

He nodded. “Thank you, Professor. Truly.”

She smiled. “Go on, off you go. Enjoy the last few days of term while they last.”

His smile mirrored her own, and for a moment, Hermione felt nothing but a bit of relief. There was very little anyone could do for William—however, there was no rule against offering him a sympathetic ear should he need one. It was a technicality, she knew, but it was also the truth. Hermione could only hope the situation at his home wasn’t as bad as she feared, though she knew that was to be naively optimistic. At the very least, corresponding with William might provide her with the evidence she needed to remove him from an unsafe situation.

She had nearly forgotten why she had gone all the way to the Dungeons when she arrived at the door to Narcissa’s quarters. William’s predicament had effectively derailed her line of thought. Hermione raised a hand to the door in an absent-minded knock, lost in too many entangled thoughts that didn’t seem to fully connect to one another in any logical way. She could not remember the last time her mind had been so overloaded.

“Come in.”

The door creaked open, and Hermione instinctively followed the sound of Narcissa’s voice. She was surprised to see Narcissa sitting in her small private parlour, taking tea with none other than Harry Potter himself.

“Harry,” Hermione surprised even herself with the animosity her voice carried toward her friend. “What are you doing here?”

Harry’s deep green eyes were tinged with guilt. “’Mione, please let me explain...”

“I called on Mr. Potter this morning, Ms. Granger.”
Narcissa’s interruption startled Hermione for two reasons—the first being its abruptness; the second, the way Narcissa addressed her as Ms. Granger as opposed to her given name. It felt alien in Narcissa’s voice, especially after everything they had gone through in the past few days; it planted a vicious seed of crippling doubt that Hermione could not shake away.

“Oh?” was all that she managed as Narcissa motioned for her to sit. She slumped onto an armchair, feeling as if the strength had been robbed from her legs.

Narcissa eyed her with a questioning look, but Hermione could not quite register it. Her mind kept repeating the cold indifference of ‘Ms. Granger’ on a loop in her head. She almost didn’t hear Harry speaking.

“And I wanted to come. To try and explain.”

Hermione felt Narcissa’s hand softly seeking her own. The gentle squeeze made her turn to meet a concerned blue gaze. “Are you alright, Ms. Granger?”

“I’m fine,” Hermione swallowed through the newly-formed lump in her throat. She turned to Harry before Narcissa’s gaze broke her resolve. “What did you want to explain, Harry?”

He sighed deeply. She noticed the dark circles under his eyes—he looked like he hadn’t slept a wink since she last saw him.

“I... I felt like I needed to make some things clear, ‘Mione. Kingsley’s idea to ask Madam Black to do some reconnaissance was...”

“To use her, you mean.”

Harry grimaced, but Narcissa was the one to speak. “We’ve been over this, Ms. Granger. This is merely politics.”

“Still,” Harry continued, raising a hand so Hermione would not interrupt him. “I wasn’t happy with it, but I did think it was a fair trade to Madam Black if her surveillance was lifted, and if the Ministry aided with the reconstruction of Black Manor. That’s the only reason I agreed to it.”

Hermione raised a brow. “But?”

His shoulders slumped. “I never agreed to having the Ministry impede or hinder the reconstruction if she refused to help. I just wanted you to know that I didn’t agree to it, and I was caught by surprise too. I didn’t want you to think I had anything to do with that.”

Hermione could see the sincerity in his eyes. All the animosity and distrust she had harboured since the previous evening evaporated, and in their place blossomed a strong validation of her friendship. This was Harry, her friend whom she loved like a brother, whom she trusted above all others. It was good to know for certain he was on her side.

“Thank you, Harry.”

Narcissa’s cup clinked onto its saucer. “Yes, thank you, Mr. Potter. While the apology is not particularly necessary, it is certainly appreciated. In any case, my mind is already quite made up.”

Hermione did not like Harry’s sudden look of guilt. His grimace told her more than Narcissa had just now; she turned to the blonde in utter befuddlement. “Wait a minute. You... Are you actually doing it?”
Narcissa nodded. “I am, indeed. I’ve determined it to be the best option.” Her gaze cooled considerably as she looked back to Harry, though it held no malice. “With or without the Ministry’s encouragement regarding Black Manor.”

Harry looked ashamed. Hermione began to feel her anger bubbling up in her chest.

“The Ministry can’t corner you like this! There must be another way!”

“Even if there were, Ms. Granger, my decision is final.”

Hermione’s free hand balled into a fist at her side. Narcissa squeezed her other hand once more. “Hermione.”

The Transfiguration Professor looked up, hating how all it took for her anger to evaporate into thin air was for Narcissa to say her name in a voice as soft as velvet. The concern in those blue eyes had turned to pleading.

“I am asking you to trust me. Can you do that?”

It was not fair; it was a low blow, and Hermione hoped to Merlin that Narcissa knew it. “Of course.”

She was rewarded with one of those smiles she had come to learn Narcissa never gave anyone else. It almost made the anger and anxiety over the Ministry’s machinations worth it. Almost.

“Ms. Black, I want you to know that you can count on me. You too, ‘Mione. I don’t understand why Kingsley is doing things the way he is, but I will do anything in my power to make sure he doesn’t go over the line.” Harry said fervently. Hermione could appreciate his support and dedication, but didn’t want to tell him Kingsley had already stepped well over the line, in her opinion.

“Thank you, Mr. Potter. But as I have told Ms. Granger,” Narcissa side-eyed Hermione, as if to remind her of the extensive discussions they had had the night before, going in circles in the same argument, “I understand the Minister’s motivations, as well as his strategy.” She gave a little wry smile. “I am used to politics.”

Hermione sighed. It was useless to say that didn’t justify it, because to Narcissa, it did. She grimaced thinking about how Narcissa must view these two young, fierce Gryffindors crying out for the unfairness of it all.

Perhaps Narcissa thought them naïve. The idea didn’t sit well with Hermione.

After Harry had left—with more promises and declarations that he would do his best to make sure Kingsley would do the right thing—Hermione found herself still slumped on Narcissa’s chair, holding a cup of tea that had long grown cold.

“Would you mind if I wrote a few letters for a little while?”

The question startled Hermione out of her thoughts. She looked up as Narcissa stood, her blue gaze an open question. “Would you like me to leave?”

Narcissa approached, taking Hermione’s hand. “I didn’t say that.” She knelt by Hermione’s chair,
bringing the young witch’s hand to her lips. Hermione felt exposed under the scrutiny of those tempestuous blue eyes, as if Narcissa’s gaze pleaded with her to bare her very soul. “Something troubles you.”

The Gryffindor had to scoff playfully at Narcissa’s suggestion—it was possibly the understatement of the century. “Several things are troubling me.” Her gaze met Narcissa’s with a defiance she couldn’t quite conceal. “The Ministry using you is just one of them.”

Narcissa sighed, and Hermione leaned in to rest her forehead upon the blonde’s. There was an undeniable comfort to being this close—after their lengthy discussions and having Narcissa call her ‘Ms. Granger’, a certain amount of insecurity had blossomed, and it felt comforting to quell it with their proximity.

She felt more than saw Narcissa’s small smile. “I assure you, Hermione. I’ll be using them as much as they’ll be using me.”

“But I don’t understand that” Hermione declared, because truly, she didn’t. She could not conceive of any strategy—even an underhanded Slytherin one—that would create a scenario in which Narcissa held the Ministry’s reins, not the other way around.

Narcissa’s hands found Hermione’s cheeks; the blonde held her face so as to look more deeply into Hermione’s eyes. “I will take advantage of every situation presented to me, Hermione. It’s my way.” She smiled faintly. “If it weren’t, I would never have kissed you. Not at the Manor, not ever.”

Hermione frowned. “That’s irrelevant, because I think I would have cracked sooner or later. But with the Ministry...” she exhaled deeply. “I don’t know how to help. I don’t know how to make this better.”

She felt Narcissa stroking her cheek with an agonizing tenderness in her touch. It made her want to forget the last few days.

“It is not your obligation to fix everything. You’ve already helped me so very much.”

Hermione took Narcissa’s hands in her own. “What are you planning?”

Narcissa quirked a brow—it was a bit of a challenge, Hermione could tell. “Well, firstly I will... mingle with my old circles once again. I’m sure they’ll be delighted to see me,” she said with a measure of sarcasm. “At worst, I’ll be able to uncover some unscrupulous dealings or two to make the Ministry happen—there are always things underfoot. At best...” she smiled widely now, and Hermione could see, perhaps for the first time, that there was a healthy dose of excitement behind Narcissa’s plotting. “Well, at best I’ll be able to secure funding from two fronts.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “How so?”

Narcissa stood, bringing Hermione up with her. “As long as I can gather information for the Ministry, public funding for Black Manor will be guaranteed. But I sense another opportunity to secure funds and support from my old circles.”

Hermione was stunned at the realization. “You’re creating a safety net.” Narcissa nodded, seemingly pleased that Hermione had worked it out. The thought didn’t excite her exactly—especially if the money for the Manor came from unscrupulous dealings, but she supposed the bottom line was to rebuild it, whatever means necessary.

And hell, if Kingsley seemed so keen on playing dirty, why fault Narcissa for doing the same?
Another realization came to her. “Is that why you tipped off Astoria? For *The Phoenix Gazette*?”

Narcissa looked remarkably pleased with herself. “Rather perceptive of you,” she spoke almost cheerfully, as if the thought of working this all out excited her. “Yes. Anyone who is anyone in my old circles will know the ‘Wizarding estate’ in Cambridgeshire is Black Manor.” She took Hermione by the hand, leading her to her private office.

She motioned to her desk, where Hermione could see a moderate stack of letters. Narcissa let go of her hand, motioning to the stack. “I’ve received these just this morning.” She took a few off the top. “Letitia McNair. Paola Zabini. Elizabeth Nott. Margaret Avery. All of them have written me, asking—in varied levels of discretion—about Black Manor. Lady Zabini and Ms. Nott have already invited me to tea.”

Hermione leafed through the rest of the stack, bemused and confused all at once. She mulled over those names and the men attached to those families, nearly all of them rotting in Azkaban. She knew that Narcissa’s contact with those families had been limited if not extinguished, but how many of those letters expressed true sympathy and support? How many were just... posturing, as Narcissa would say?

It only took her one look at Narcissa to realize it didn’t matter. She kept forgetting that posturing in a nest of vipers—she cringed inwardly at the comparison, but really, it was nothing but appropriate —was what Narcissa was raised to do. It was her element.

Narcissa seemed to sense Hermione’s discomfiture. She tossed the letters back onto the desk and walked back over to where the Gryffindor stood, taking Hermione’s cheeks in her hands. Hermione didn’t expect the soft kiss Narcissa bestowed her, but its gentleness went a long way in assuaging her recent discomfort.

“Don’t worry, darling,” Narcissa said, eyes gleaming as she leaned down again to graze her lips against Hermione’s once more. “It’s time to do what Slytherins do best.”
“What an unpleasant affair, this business with that girl.”

Narcissa could only just hear her mother’s strident little whisper over the crackling fire and the garbled sounds of the Wizarding radio, so engrossed she was in her book.

There was a rustle of newspaper pages, and her father’s long, weary sigh acknowledging his wife.

“What business, dear?”

_Druella_ made a rather strange sound; it was an eerie mixture of a scoff and an evil cackle. It made Narcissa glue her eyes to the page in front of her as she felt a chill running down her spine.

“Why, Cygnus, haven’t you heard?” her mother said in a deceivingly sweet tone. “I would think you’d be well-acquainted with the matter; surely you and your associates have discussed it at some point.”

Narcissa watched her father roll his eyes over the edge of her book. He folded his newspaper slowly and deliberately—reading was futile now that _Druella_ had captured him in conversation.

“Evidently not,” he replied, removing his reading spectacles and carefully wiping them clean with his embroidered handkerchief.

_Druella_ smiled wickedly; her sharp, pointed fingernails tapped the black top of her writing desk with a loud, clacking sound that made Narcissa’s stomach turn.

“That is most surprising; most surprising indeed,” she drawled through her shark-like grin. “One would think you men would deem it appropriate; what must Lord McNair be going through in these trying times for his family?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Narcissa saw her father’s jaw muscles twitch.

“We do not concern ourselves with these petty family matters,” he said, his voice unnaturally hard.

_Druella_ was not in the least fazed by his tone. She snorted a sarcastic laugh; her wicked smile widened eerily.

“One could hardly call what Letitia did petty,” she argued, her voice cold, yet sardonically giddy
in a strange, wicked way that made the hairs of Narcissa’s arms stand as if she had been caught by a sudden chill. “Whoring herself around like a little worthless tramp, with no regard...”

“My dear,” Cygnus interrupted with an angry hiss. He glanced at Narcissa momentarily; his gaze briefly connected with his daughter’s before she quickly hid in the book she held on to like a lifeline. “Do mind your language in present company.”

Druella scoffed, waving him off. Narcissa caught the glint of the fire reflected in her mother’s rings with the dismissive gesture.

“Let her listen,” she said venomously, turning to look at Narcissa with fire in her eyes. “She ought to know what will happen when she’s old enough to be tempted to spread her legs open to scum...”

“Madam Black, you forget yourself; she’s not yet nine!” Cygnus roared vociferously. “Spare her, and myself, of this sordid talk. I won’t have it in my house. Enough.” He growled, crumpling his newspaper in his fist.

His wife sniffed haughtily. “You are far too soft on them, Lord Black,” she sneered, using his title in the most pejorative way Narcissa had ever heard. Her mother turned her gaze towards her, and she immediately wanted to sink into the ground. “In a few years, if you’re not careful, they’ll be the ones birthing bastards like brooding mares, tainting the good family name.”

Narcissa was frozen under Druella’s gaze; she did not even dare breathe in fear until her mother turned to look back at Cygnus with disdain in her eyes.

“Mark my words, Cygnus. Your weakness will breed little whores who will bring nothing but shame to your House and your name...”

“I said enough!” Cygnus whispered, his voice lowering in a warning that went unheeded.

“As you wish,” Druella quipped mockingly. She stood, menacing and imperious in her full height. She turned back to Narcissa, eyes narrowing.

“Come along now, child,” she drawled, and the chill of her voice made Narcissa’s hands tremble in fear. “It is time for your lessons.”

Narcissa swallowed, trying to stop her shaking hands. She made to stand, but was clearly not quick enough to satisfy her mother.

“Now, I said!” Druella screeched, startling Narcissa so badly the book she held on to so tremulously tumbled to the floor with a loud thump.

“Narcissa, stay where you are.”

Cygnus’ commanding whisper stopped both witches in their tracks. Druella’s eyes widened in a viscerally angry expression; the prominent veins of her neck pulsed, a visible sign of her wrath. “I beg your pardon?”

“There will be no lessons today,” her husband said calmly, carefully unfolding his newspaper and straightening the crumpled edges. He perched his spectacles atop his nose with a hum of satisfaction as he began to read again.

Druella’s lips pressed into a dangerously thin line; her left eye began to twitch in utter fury.
Narcissa looked at her mother, cowering under her wrathful gaze, then turned beseechingly to her father, who continued reading without sparing his wife another glance.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Druella hissed, holding out a hand for Narcissa to take. “She will not miss her lessons,” her voice was equal parts command and threat. “She likes her lessons; she wants to be a proper lady, don’t you, Narcissa dear?”

Narcissa did not know where to look or what to say; her immediate response was a weak nod that only served to incense her mother further.

“Don’t you, Narcissa?” Her mother repeated in an angry hiss, eyes narrowing further.

“Y-yes, Ma’am,” Narcissa swallowed dryly against the lump in her throat.

“There; it is settled,” Druella said through a worrying smile, her voice sickeningly sweet. “Come along now.”

Narcissa hesitated for only a moment—just long enough for her mother to send her a warning glare and for her father to absent-mindedly turn another page of his paper. She put her book down; Druella stretched her arm out further in impatience. Narcissa had scarcely taken a tentative step towards her mother when Cygnus’ voice broke the tense silence.

“You don’t have to go if you do not want to, angel.”

Narcissa thought her mother’s eyes would pop out of her head—they went wide and white in unhinged fury at her husband’s words.

“Your father seems to be under the impression that insolence is humorous,” she squawked, her voice rising dangerously with every word. “Pay him no mind, Narcissa; come to me at once.”

Cygnus lowered his paper and smile, patting his knee, beckoning Narcissa. “Come sit with me, angel. Show Papa what you’ve been reading.”

Narcissa looked from one parent to the other, tempted by her father’s kind offer, yet petrified by her mother’s icy gaze.

“Narcissa,” Druella insistent, voice stringent in a wrathful whisper. “Come to me at once if you know what’s good for you. I forbid you from humouring your father’s silly whims!”

Narcissa felt like she was about to cry; her bottom lip trembled in fear of her mother. Druella’s eyes went white with rage.

“Come to me at once, you insolent, disobedient brat!” she shouted; Narcissa flinched.

Cygnus suddenly stood, dropping his paper to the floor as he towered over his wife and daughter.

“You forget yourself, Madam Black!” he said through gritted teeth, using his wife’s title in an eerily derisive tone as Druella had done to him earlier. His voice was no more than an angry murmur, but there was a sudden authority in his tone that was unmistakable. It made Druella physically take a step back in shock.

“I am the Lord of this House, and you would do well not to question my authority,” he drawled angrily.
Narcissa watched in utter amazement as her mother seemed to shrink in place, cowering at her father’s tone. She had never witnessed such a thing. Druella’s eyes were still openly defiant, but her posture had changed entirely as Cygnus straightened to his full height.

“Now,” he continued, turning to Narcissa, who still stood in shock. His voice softened with every word he spoke. “Cissy, my darling. The choice is yours—would you rather go with your mother or stay here with me for a while longer?”

From behind her husband, Druella shot Narcissa another venomous glare; an open warning.

Narcissa flinched at the clear threat in her mother’s eyes, but her father’s smile was warm and his gaze was kind. “I...” she began, trying not to crumble under Druella’s menacing glare. “I think I would like to stay and read,” she finished shyly, looking away from her mother for a moment. “Just for a little while.”

She could see her mother was fuming—her face was an angry shade of red, and her jaw was clenched so tightly Narcissa could see the muscles twitching as her mother glared daggers her way.

Cygnus clapped his hands, slumping back into his seat. “That’s settled then,” he said brightly, all traces of anger and authority evaporating from his voice. He patted his knee once again. “Come, little bird, show me what you’ve been reading so intently on your little perch.”

Narcissa took her book, sending a worried glance towards her mother before making her way to her father and settling on his knees. She leaned against the comfort of his chest, feeling safe and warm, enveloped by the familiar scents of eucalyptus and pipe tobacco that were all Cygnus.

Druella fumed at the corner, hands balling into fists at her sides. Narcissa did her very best to ignore her, choosing instead to enjoy the safety of her father’s arms.

“Mrs. Black,” Cygnus said coldly after a few moments, watching Narcissa open her book and flip through the colourful pages. He did not look at his wife. “Why don’t you find a way to occupy yourself... elsewhere?”

His wife stormed out with an angry huff. Narcissa flinched when she heard the door to the study slam shut and the sound of her mother’s angry footsteps pounding the stairs to the upper floor.

Narcissa felt her father’s body relax with a deep exhale. He leaned back into his seat, eyes fluttering closed for a moment.

“Cissy, sweetheart,” he spoke after a few moments, his voice now soft and serene. “What have you been reading today?”

She flipped the book’s pages open until she found the one she looked for. “The Warlock’s Hairy Heart,” she said.

“Hm,” her father hummed. “Will you read it to Papa?”

Narcissa smiled, her mother’s fury forgotten. She leaned further into her father’s chest and began reading as he listened, eyes closed and a little smile tugging at his lips.

She finished reading all of the Tales of Beedle the Bard. Her father’s breathing was an even,
deep, comfortable cadence at her back—Narcissa thought he may have dozed off while she read.

That was not the case. Once she closed her book after the Tale of Three Brothers, Cygnus let out a deep, rumbling chuckle.

“Thank you for the read, princess,” he said, mussing her hair affectionately. “It was delightful.”

“You’re welcome,” Narcissa replied, preening. Even though she hated when Bella messed up her hair like that, it was always alright when Father did it. It was one of his ways of saying ‘I love you.’

“I haven’t heard these stories since I was about your age,” he pondered aloud, his hand outstretched for the book on Narcissa’s lap. She handed it to him with a smile.

The corners of his lips turned upward in a smile as he flipped through the pages, delighting in the beautiful illustrations that accompanied each tale. “Thank you for the delightful diversion,” he said with an affectionate hug. “I’ve got a great deal on my mind, and this little interlude was of great help.”

Narcissa smiled. “Better than reading the newspaper?”

He winked. “Much, much better.”

She hugged him back, smiling. However, something had been nagging at her mind ever since her parents’ frightening confrontation.


Her father’s expression soured. Narcissa felt bad for asking, but she could not contain her natural curiosity: she knew Letitia; she was only a couple of years ahead of Bella at Hogwarts. She was a cheerful sort of girl—Narcissa remembered her as a guest at the Black Manor one summer; Letitia was happy to play with her and Regulus when most of the older children chose to simply ignore them. She was kind and bright, and always invented the best of games for them to play.

Cygnus exhaled unhappily.

“Letitia McNair is a young, impressionable lady who made some rather unfortunate choices.”

Narcissa wanted to ask what he meant by unfortunate choices, but he seemed to anticipate her question; he held a hand up to stop her.

“You’re a bit too young to understand it, sweetheart. But her choices will regrettably affect her entire family in a rather poor way,” he sighed deeply. “I’m afraid your mother is right to expect only the best from you and your sisters. We must all strive to do right by the family, always, to remember the good of one person is not above the good of the family. Family is the most important thing.”

Narcissa frowned, not much liking to hear that her mother was right in any capacity. Her father chuckled a little at her expression, but lifter her chin to tell her, very seriously.

“Remember, Cissy: family is everything.”

Her father dismissed her shortly after their conversation so that he could tend to his affairs quietly.
in the study. Narcissa roamed the house, bored, chatting with family portraits and running giddily after rogue Dust Pixies that had miraculously escaped the House-Elves’ meticulous cleaning.

It was lonely at home, with both Bella and Andromeda away at Hogwarts for most of the year. Sometimes her cousins Sirius and Regulus came to visit, but with them always came Aunt Walburga, whom Narcissa disliked intensely, even if the woman seemed to have an odd soft spot for her. She could find ways to quietly entertain herself most of the time, but eventually the solitude and silence got to her.

She couldn’t wait to go to Hogwarts. Bella liked to tease her, saying she would be sorted into Ravenclaw, but Narcissa knew she would find a home in Slytherin. She could feel it in her bones. It wasn’t far-fetched to think so—it was in her blood.

Her daydreaming was stopped abruptly short as she rounded a corner, nearly colliding with the waiting force of her mother, who faced her with a frigid, tempestuous expression.

“You will learn,” Druella whispered acerbically, eyes clouded by unbridled fury, “to not ever disobey me, girl.” Her hand grasped at the junction of Narcissa’s shoulder and neck with bruising force, nails digging into her skin.

Narcissa blanched, heart suddenly in her throat, beating madly. Her knees went weak, but the sheer force of her mother’s grip on her shoulder kept her from sinking into a heap on the hardwood floors.

“M-m-mother...” she stuttered, words evaporating into a whimper of pain as Druella’s grip tightened.

“Insolent little brat,” she hissed, forcefully dragging Narcissa up the creaky staircase of Charles House, to the upper floor sitting room. Narcissa held in her cries of pain; at every sound that escaped her, her mother’s grip became more violent.

Druella dragged her into the sitting room, all the way to the far wall, where there was an intricate tapestry Narcissa knew by heart ever since she was old enough to talk: the prestigious Black Family tree.

“Look,” Druella hissed, turning Narcissa’s neck painfully to direct her attention to the tapestry. “Look at them; look at their names!”

Narcissa whimpered, holding back tears that stung in her eyes.

“Remember their names.” Her mother continued. Narcissa held back a sob as her mother’s grip tightened further still to punctuate her crazed statements.

“Don’t take your place on this tapestry for granted, you loathsome, disrespectful little urchin. By sheer dumb luck, you were born into a noble station. Some of us had to fight for the Black name; you and your sisters were undeservingly born into it.”

Druella’s usually strident voice got lower and lower with every word she spoke, until it was nothing but a threatening murmur that Narcissa strained to hear.

“You must protect it, at all costs,” her mother continued, her voice bitter. “The Black name may very well die with you, but its lineage must not be lost,” she spoke resolutely. “Do you know what Letitia McNair did?” Druella asked airily, her clawed grip upon Narcissa’s skin morphing into a menacing caress.
“I asked you a question, girl.” Druella warned.

“N-no, Ma’am,” Narcissa gasped out when her mother pinched her side painfully. “I don’t know.”

“Do you know what a whore is, Narcissa?”

Narcissa shook her head before remembering her mother could not abide nonverbal answers. She rushed to speak before she received another pinch. “No, Ma’am.”

“Well,” Druella quipped, nails dragging over Narcissa’s shoulders softly, but with bite. “I think it’s time you learn... for educational purposes.”

She turned Narcissa’s body to face her, hands grasping at the young girl’s cheeks and forcing her to look her mother in the eye. She held Narcissa in place by digging her pointed nails into Narcissa’s cheeks.

“A whore is a woman with no principles or morals, who offers her body to any sort of scum who might want it for the sake of selfish pleasure. She spreads her legs to them, taking their filthy seed because she has neither honour nor shame, not for herself or her family. Do you understand, my darling?”

Narcissa nodded weakly, when really, she understood nothing at all. She was terribly confused by what her mother was telling her, but she dared not ask.

“Letitia,” Druella continued spitefully, “is nothing but a dirty, shameful whore.”

Narcissa desperately tried to make some sort of sense out of what she was hearing, but it was in vain.

“She took a mudblood into her bed,” Druella said, voice dripping with intense disdain.

Narcissa’s eyes widened at the word—her mother was always berating Bellatrix for saying it, because it was, in Druella’s own words, dreadfully unladylike. To hear her say it now with so much venom in her voice made Narcissa’s stomach turn uncomfortably.

“She took mudblood filth to bed, and now she’s with child, carrying a disgusting half-breed in her rotten womb.”

Narcissa gasped with shock; Druella smirked wickedly.

“In one fell swoop, that little tramp ruined her entire family—she has stained it, besmirched the honourable McNair name with filth and impurity—she is rot to the very root of the McNair family tree.”

She turned Narcissa’s head towards the Black tapestry, drawing her attention to a few burnt spots. “Tell me, Narcissa, my sweet,” Druella whispered evilly at her ear. “What ought we do when a tree’s branches begin to rot?”

Narcissa could not answer; she trembled in place as her mother’s nails dug deeply into her skin, drawing blood that trickled, hot and wet down her cheeks with her tears.

“We cut them down.”
As she watched the throngs of students filtering out of the castle and into the waiting Thestral-pulled carriages, Hermione felt a painful knot forming in her stomach.

There was just something—well, there were actually a great many things—that simply did not sit right with her. Perhaps it was all that mess with the Dementors and Black Manor. Perhaps it was the Ministers dodgy tactics and Narcissa’s blasé acceptance of it all. Perhaps it was the easily overlooked fact that the End of Year Banquet had been fraught with an underlying fringe of anxiety and panic as students leafed through all the Wizarding newspapers that featured news of the terrifying breakout in bold black letters—all while the Headmistress made an honest attempt to relay a hopeful message of unity and strength; one eerily reminiscent of Hermione’s own time as a student, when the threat of Lord Voldemort loomed heavy in the air.

No wonder she hadn’t worked up much of an appetite.

It had been disconcerting and strange, to see the frightening—though admittedly ridiculous—headlines on papers scattered over the House tables over the last few days of term. The atmosphere that should have been bubbly with excitement with the approach of the summer holiday was dampened by nervousness and uncertainty.

Stranger still was seeing Astoria’s article on the *Phoenix Gazette*. Even though Narcissa had explained to her the hows and the whys, Hermione still felt confused by the seemingly convoluted strategy Narcissa had come up with—she was beginning to realize there was a lot to the woman that she simply didn’t know or see. It was odd to see Narcissa, so soon after the destruction of the biggest project of her lifetime, posturing—there was no other word for it—at the last banquet. She pretended everything was absolutely fine, commenting on the weather and food, humorously bragging about Slytherin winning the House Cup, and just generally acting as if nothing were amiss.

It threw Hermione, it really did, almost as much as when Narcissa had reverted to coldly calling her ‘Ms. Granger’ when Harry was present. It left her at a loss—she thought she had come to know Narcissa rather well over the course of the year, but evidently, she did not actually know Narcissa enough to keep up with her confusing actions, not even a little.

It was a rather small thing, a small insecurity that should have been all but completely insignificant, but Hermione had the terrible habit of letting little things like that fester until they consumed her from within.

She had left as soon as the banquet ended, needing some space away from everything and everyone. The Astronomy Tower had always been a grand place to stop, take in the breath-taking views, and think. She didn’t know how long she stayed out there, leaning against the railing and watching the world go by around her. Surely it had been a few hours; the coming dusk began to tinge the edges of the horizon with pinks and purples, and the waning sunlight dappled the clouds with shades of orange.

Hermione felt Narcissa’s presence before she heard her voice; she smiled, even if she did not quite know whether she was happy to see the witch or not.

“I thought I’d find you here,” Narcissa said, her voice warm like the sun. Hermione’s smile widened, even if Narcissa couldn’t see her face.

“You were very quiet at dinner,” Narcissa remarked as she approached Hermione, leaning over the railing herself.

Her very presence radiated warmth, and she looked so utterly beautiful under the colours of the
twilight skies, Hermione’s heart swelled in her chest. Happy; she was definitely happy to see her.

“I had a lot on my mind.” Hermione said simply.

“Hm,” Narcissa hummed, directing her attention to the rapidly thinning crowds of students making their way to the carriages. In the distance, a little beyond Hogsmeade, the thick steam of the Hogwarts Express rose in a dense column of smoke before dispersing into the horizon. “Yes,” Narcissa continued after a few moments of serene observation. “Yes, I suppose you must have a lot occupying your mind at the moment.”

Hermione chuckled a little. “I’ve got so much to think about, my head can’t just pick one thought to focus on. It’s quite annoying, really.”

Narcissa smiled, still looking at the departing students with a pensive expression. She kept looking down, but angled her body slightly towards Hermione.

“Is there any way I could help you unburden your mind?” she offered.

“Ha, you can try, I suppose,” Hermione laughed. Down below, she spotted one little blonde head, walking alone and far slower than the others, lingering on the castle pathway wistfully.

Narcissa focused on what had grasped Hermione’s attention.

“William,” she whispered as they both watched the young boy walk dejectedly to the carriages. “I do hope he is not returning to something awful at home.”

Hermione nodded, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth. “We can only hope,” she murmured, “I gave him my parents’ address... In case he wants to contact me through the Muggle post.”

Hermione heard Narcissa make a small sound of surprise.

“That was rather inspired of you,” she commented, and Hermione could not help but preen a little at the praise.

They stood in silence for long, contemplative moments. The last students boarded the last carriages, and eventually, dusk fell, dappling the dark skies with starts, and for one moment, the whole world fell silent.

Hermione eventually broke it.

“I... I still don’t understand several things.” She said, directing her voice not to Narcissa, but to the void of the night that surrounded them. “Your old circles, tipping off the press... I...” she exhaled deeply, unsure. “I don’t quite understand the reason.”

Narcissa hummed, considering it for a moment. “Call tipping the press a conversation starter,” she said, fingers tapping on the metal railing, nails producing soft clinks that echoed in the emptiness of the tower. “Putting me at odds with the Ministry gives me, finally, something in common with the people I used to associate with. It’ll be an easy way to bridge old connections.”

“But I still don’t understand how you can be so certain that will work,” Hermione reasoned. “You’ve been removed from those circles for far too long; what makes you think you’ll be so easily accepted back?”

“I never said it would be easy,” Narcissa said with a little sad smile. “But I know these people. I know how they operate, because in a way...” her voice drifted off, as if she were admitting
something shameful. “That is how I operate as well.”

Hermione frowned. “I suppose it’s the how I don’t quite understand.” She confessed.

“Oh, that is quite simple,” Narcissa said, finally turning and facing Hermione. The brunette turned towards her, caught off guard by the eager glimmer of those silver eyes. “They will come to me.”

Hermione quirked a brow in confusion. “How?”

“Tipping off Astoria planted the seed,” Narcissa explained. “The next thing to do would be to show myself at a big event—a big, Ministry-sponsored event.”


Narcissa smiled widely. “Well, that’s that job done, I suppose.” She straightened against the railing. “Most of my old acquaintances will be present—several of them have to—they are mandated to do so every year as part of their conditional freedom.”

“Conditional freedom?” Hermione pondered aloud, brows furrowing. “That... that’s a thing?”

Narcissa nodded sombrely. “Several of the Death Eater wives went through separate, private trials of their own. While they were not Death Eater themselves, many were complicit in their husbands’ actions—some reached agreements with the Ministry that may include surveillance, donations to Muggle-related charities, community services and the like.”

“I had no idea.” She turned a disbelieving look toward Narcissa. “What makes you think they’ll just come to you at the Gala, though?”

Narcissa’s smile became a little intimidating; her eyes were hard. Hermione wasn’t sure what to think about the expression. “If there is one thing Purebloods love more than anything, Hermione, it is gossip.”

Hermione laughed, not expecting that, not with the seriousness of Narcissa’s gaze. The blonde softened at the sound of Hermione’s chuckles, and the strange tension that had hung in the air between them evaporated.

“Well. I guess some fun must be had while there is a gaggle of Dementors on the loose,” Hermione quipped sarcastically.

Narcissa chuckled. “Indeed. If you’d like, we can go to Diagon and find suitable evening gowns together.” Her perfectly sculpted brows furrowed. “I believe I must update my wardrobe; I can hardly show up in teacher’s robes.”

Hermione giggled. “I’m sure you’d still look stunning.”

Was that a blush tinging Narcissa’s cheeks with pink? It was too dark to tell, but Hermione felt her lips tugging into a smile all the same.

“Thank you, Narcissa said.” Her expression became serious after a moment. “There is, however, one favour I must ask of you—one not so enjoyable as dress shopping with me.”

Hermione took a breath. “Hit me.”

Narcissa leaned closer, a hand finding its way to Hermione’s shoulder in a tentative, pleading
touch.

“I would like you to pay our friend, Ms. Isobel MacDougal, a little visit at the Gala.”

Hermione frowned, confused. “Why?”

That predatory glimmer in Narcissa’s eyes returned; it sent a shiver down Hermione’s spine.

“I don’t believe, not for one second, that you missed something with the wards,” Narcissa said, voice lowering to a menacing drawl that somehow made Hermione’s knees weak. “It’s time to find out who’s playing us for fools.”

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!