Glass Silence

by Zarrene Moss (Menzosarres)

Summary

In another world, Hermione Granger never attended Hogwarts. Orphaned at age three, she grew up supporting a low-income adoptive family without the means to pay for her education. Post-war desperation and a chance encounter lead her into the employ of the three Black sisters. She finds herself caught in their deadly web, helplessly waiting to see who will reach her first.

Notes
Welcome to Glass Silence, also known by such auspicious titles as “The Scandal Fic”, “A Catastrophe in Three Acts”, and “Don’t Ask Me Why I Named It That I Legitimately Don’t Remember.”

After six long years languishing unfinished on fanfiction dot net and numerous requests to change both the status and the location, here it is, pseudonym and all, completed, on the archive.

I think a six-year project has earned a six-year author's note, lots of disclaimers about reconciling six years' worth of writing styles, starting it as a joke, the ridiculous premise, the 100% guarantee that there is absolutely no incest, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, but you know what? Just... have it. It is what it is, and it's finally, finally done. Enjoy. Or something.
Chapter 1

Hermione Granger did not destroy a Horcrux. In fact, Hermione Granger did not ever set out to destroy Horcruxes. What's more, Hermione Granger never became friends with Harry Potter or Ronald Weasley. How? Why? Because in a different reality, in a different time, Harry James Potter and Ronald Bilius Weasley managed to scrape by without her to defeat the Dark Lord, and they were forced to do this alone because of one small inconsistency in the timeline of the day: Hermione Granger's parents died when she was three years old. She spent a single month in a Muggle orphanage, followed by one year in a Wizarding orphanage, where she was then adopted by a wizarding family with much in the way of love and good intentions but little in the way of money or means.

And so, Hermione Granger did not attend Hogwarts. Her adoptive parents taught her the minimal spellwork to keep her own magic in check and spells to help them with the upkeep of the small inn they ran on the outskirts of Diagon Marketplace, but nothing beyond that. When her acceptance letter arrived by owl on the eve of her eleventh birthday, her family sat her down, told her that she didn't need a fancy education to find happiness, and proceeded to put an end to any dream of such learning before it could begin. Instead, Hermione cooked, stripped bedsheets, cleaned linens, swept floors, stocked pantries, scrubbed showers, and ran errands to keep her second mother and father from bankrupting themselves completely. She knew that they loved her, and she came to love them in return, and logic told her perfectly well that if she were not there to help her new parents, the inn would close. Even if she insisted on attending Hogwarts, they had no money for spellbooks or robes or fancy equipment. She didn't even have her own wand, using instead a splintered hand-me-down from a great-great-grandparent she wasn't even related to.

She tried not to begrudge her family. But it was hard, watching the children she befriended in the summer disappear each fall and return with eyes full of wonder and stories of magic she may well never see. She learned to read cookbooks and two-knut fiction scrolls sold by the vendor in the corner stall, but the shop selling spellbooks was far beyond her earnings, and the only library was too far to walk. On a few precious occasions, her mother would Apparate with her to that end of the district, but she could only browse and read in the few hours they spent, as there was no guarantee she could return the books before their due date, and the accompanying fine would have been unacceptable. Still, she taught herself whatever she could glean from the other children, and her parents helped where they could.

She was always a bright girl, and grew up street-smart if not book-smart, with a constant longing to know more, to understand everything.

When her father grew ill shortly after her seventeenth birthday, her mother was too stressed and overworked to make household decisions. This left Hermione to sell the inn and use the money to set up her mother and herself in a small but sanitary apartment only a block from St. Mungo's, where she had her father admitted for an indefinite time. The next thing to do was to find a new job. She vowed that she would continue to support the family who raised her until she had worked herself past the point of endurance.

For a year, she truly had to. The war was on, and Voldemort's shadow seemed determined to bleed the very life out of every wizarding household and business. Hermione had to work three jobs to keep her mother living in relative comfort, while her father's health quickly faded despite the best care she could afford for him. On weekdays, she worked as a cleaner in the Ministry of Magic. She kept her head bowed as she scuffled in and out of conference rooms and private offices, and she learned much about the war, then, absorbing gossip and politics and more information than she had
ever heard about the world beyond Diagon. After dragging herself exhausted from the Ministry at nightfall, she would head over to the Leaky Cauldron to bartend, having to falsify her age as well as escape the lecherous eyes and wandering hands of drunken patrons. On weekends, she was a nanny and chauffer for a wealthy pure-blood family whose three children were still too young to attend Hogwarts.

Each of her jobs was degrading in its own way, and the vibrant young woman she had been growing into was quickly being crushed under the weight of so much exhaustion, so much dismissive scorn, and so little time to herself.

Then, in a single day, the war had ended. While most of the world celebrated, Hermione once more found herself out of luck. Her pure-blood employers fled the country without even giving her a final paycheck, the ministry decided that—as part of their new, progressive stance—they would put everyone in charge of the upkeep of their own offices, and routine employee background checks which had been neglected during Voldemort's reign of terror suddenly revealed Hermione to be three years too young to bartend. Her employer, a friendly man, simply muttered as he handed over her last earnings, "At least you were legal. But seventeen's only legal for magic, dearie. To handle wizarding booze you know you've got to be twenty."

Trying not to cry, Hermione was thankful that at least he hadn't gotten her arrested.

Back in the apartment, Hermione summoned what newspapers she could from the garbage bins in the alley out their window and began scrounging for job opportunities.

She was interviewed by a family looking for a full-time nanny, but the hours would leave her no time for a second job, and the pay just wasn't enough on its own. She trekked to the far corner of the marketplace for an interview at a large owlery, but the position was filled before she arrived. Back at the Ministry, she saw two separate employees about secretarial positions, but without schooling she simply wasn't qualified in their eyes.

She joined the dreary herd of Ministry employees in a crowded lift, ready to give up here and attempt another bartending job somewhere less savory than her last out of sheer desperation. She wasn't listening to the voice naming the department stops, so she almost got out when most of the others did, but she caught herself just in time to hop back. There were still three floors to go.

Left with only one other occupant, they were between her floor and the one above it when the lift shuddered, jittered, made a strange, almost hiccup-y sound, and stalled.

The figure behind her, a tall woman with fair brown hair and solid black robes, let out a curse and kicked the side of the lift.

By contrast, Hermione's reaction made the woman's seem mild. The events of the past days finally coming to a head, she let out a strangled cry and crumpled, sliding down the wall and starting to sob into the sleeves of her best, interview-only robes.

With her face buried in her arms, she couldn't see the other woman approach, but she did feel gentle fingers come to rest on her shoulder. "Are you alright?" For some reason entirely unknown to herself, this only made Hermione cry harder. "Of course you aren't alright; you're sobbing in the lift. What am I thinking?" She felt the other woman slide down beside her and put an arm around her shoulders. "You aren't claustrophobic, are you?"

Somehow, Hermione found this strangely comical, and her sobs became mixed with half-hiccupped laughter. "N-no, it… I'm alright, or, I will be—"
"Come off it. If it isn't the lift, then you may as well get it off your chest. Talk to me. I'm a stranger, what could it hurt?"

Allowing her tear-streaked eyes to peer up from the crease of her elbow, Hermione truly looked at this woman for the first time. She had a kind face, and a striking one, with aristocratic features softened by full lips. But her skin was beyond pale, and dark shadows hung heavy beneath her eyes, the slight wrinkles there belaying her otherwise youthful beauty. Her hair was longer than Hermione’s and a shade darker as well, but the long curls looked oddly unkempt, as though she had rolled out of bed without fixing them. Altogether, she looked quite as tired as Hermione felt. "I'm sorry," Hermione started. "It's just… It's been a rough few days."

The arm tightened around her shoulders for a moment as the older woman replied, "That it has."

Hermione blinked up at her, somewhat surprised to run into someone else who wasn't still in the midst of celebration and revelry regarding the Dark Lord’s fall.

"So I'm not the only one, then?"

A dry chuckle answered her first. "Hardly," the woman said.

Hermione sniffed rather indelicately and watched as a wand was pulled from the woman's sleeve before she briskly conjured a handkerchief. Vaguely, Hermione found herself missing the comforting warmth of that arm about her shoulders.

"Thanks," she murmured, dabbing her eyes and blowing her nose. Without a word, the handkerchief was banished once more, leaving two tired women settled on the floor of a broken Ministry lift.

"We're likely to be stuck here for some time."

Hermione nodded, well aware of the famous fail that made up the Ministry maintenance department.

"So. If you don't mind, could I pry again? What happened in your life? You look like you could use an open ear…"

Looking into warm eyes – dark, that shade between chocolate and black – Hermione felt a flood of words and emotions claw their way up her throat and to her own surprise, she talked.

"I'm stuck," she started, her voice cracking. "I lost my job—hell, I lost three jobs in a single day, and no one will hire me now that the war is over. I'm too young, too inexperienced, I don't even have a real education. My dad is dying in St. Mungo's. I haven't seen in him weeks I've been so busy, and I've been barely scraping up enough each month to pay his fees. Keeping it all a secret is exhausting! I can't even let my mother know that I've been working three jobs, because she's… she's a disaster. She hasn't been emotionally stable since dad was committed. She can't hold up a job, but she'd insist on it if she knew what I've been doing."

"What have you been doing?" the woman asked, her voice compassionate, but firmly inquisitive.

Hermione sniffed again. "I was a cleaner here at the Ministry from five to ten, and then I worked the bar down at the Leaky Cauldron till closing. Weekends I was a glorified nanny for three young children."

"What happened?"

Hermione could hear her defeated anger slipping into her words. "Now, the ministry does its own cleaning, I was ousted from bartending for being too young, and the pure-blood family I worked for
fled after the war."

She couldn't meet the other woman's eyes any longer, afraid any pity or repulsion she saw there would bring her to tears again. After all, most people's reactions to an uneducated cleaning girl ranged only in the spectrum from disdain to disgust. She hardly ranked higher than a house-elf to the average witch or wizard.

For a moment, the woman was silent, then she offered, "Five in the morning? By Merlin, you can't have gotten out of the Leaky Cauldron till three at the earliest, and having to rush to the Ministry a mere two hours later? I dare say you're lucky to be alive, living on that little sleep."

Daring a look up, Hermione could see only compassion in the older witch's eyes. "I slept on my lunch break," she hesitantly continued. "And sometimes in one of the offices if I knew there was a meeting going on. And supper hour, most days. I told my mum that I've been working a nice, cozy secretary job here, and that they give me an apartment to stay in. That's why I'm 'never home.'"

Looking down once again, Hermione noticed her hands were shaking. She squeezed them together, but the woman had already seen, and she gently took one from Hermione's lap and encased it protectively between her own. "No one should live like that," she said softly. "You're tiny. You've been practically starving yourself for a spot of sleep! How long has this been going on?"

"Roundabouts a year now, I suppose." Hermione was beginning to feel safe with this woman, far safer than she had felt in a long time. When her next question led Hermione further into the tale of her upbringing, it took little coaxing to speak. After all, what else was there to do? They were trapped, and at least the quiet exchange of words was distracting. She talked of why she didn't attend Hogwarts, her life at the inn, even the tale of her first parents dying in a tragic plane crash.

"They were Muggle dentists. I hardly remember a thing about them, but I knew they were good people; they were in Africa, working with Operation Smile—it's a Muggle thing where people volunteer or donate money to help surgically correct facial deformities in children. They were on a small private plane traveling from a village to one of the cities. Engine failure. I had no living family members, and since most of their work had always been nonprofit, the small sum I inherited went to the Muggle orphanage I was first put in. Nothing went with me to the wizarding children's home. When the Trums adopted me, they asked if I wanted to keep my last name. As a three year old, it was like asking if I wanted to keep my teddy bear. So I'm still a Granger."

Suddenly, it crossed Hermione's mind that not only had she been subjecting this woman to her entire life story without a second thought, but she didn't even know her name.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to go on and on," she said, a blush spreading across her cheeks. She started to withdraw her hand from where it lay contentedly between two comforting palms, but the witch subtly tightened her grip, and Hermione didn't fight the contact again. "I-I don't even know your name... I'm Hermione Granger."

Without letting go of Hermione's fingers, the woman turned to face her, only to find Hermione once more staring down at her own lap. A gentle finger placed beneath her chin coaxed Hermione to look up, meeting a gaze she couldn't quite make sense of.

"Don't apologize, Hermione. That's the first thing. Don't let anyone have a power over you that they haven't earned. In this lift, who is to say that you're any less important than me? You have so much unchecked potential... I think it is well beyond time that someone helped you take control of your own life. If you'll hear me out, I may have a job for you."

Before Hermione had a chance to sort through that information, the lift jerked to life, resuming its
upward journey with the ominous clanking that clearly meant all was as well as could be expected.

As her companion rose from the floor, she offered Hermione a hand. Hermione took it and stood as well. Before she could take back her hand, the woman used her grip to draw Hermione's attention once more. "I'm Andromeda. Andromeda Black. Allow me to get us lunch and we can continue this conversation over a cup of tea and some food."

It clearly wasn't a question. All the same, Hermione responded, "Alright, that sounds – Alright."

Andromeda chuckled, squeezed Hermione's hand once more, and dropped it as the grate slid aside to reveal the Ministry Atrium.

Hermione followed a step behind the other witch until they reached the Floo chamber. Hermione hesitated as Andromeda joined one of the queues. She had cleaned the soot from this floor many a time, but had never actually used it to travel. Only official Ministry workers and high-status guests were permitted here.

Seeing Hermione's reluctance, Andromeda returned to her side. "What is it?"

Hermione blushed. "I've never… I haven't actually used the Floo before. My apartment isn't even connected to the network."

The other witch's eyes widened a fraction, but she took charge, not allowing Hermione time to feel any more embarrassed. "Come along then, here, take my arm…" She guided Hermione's hand to the crook of her elbow. "…and just don't let go. The only bad part of Floo travel comes if you breathe too much. Magical soot is right unpleasant for the sinuses."

The joking comment served its purpose, distracting Hermione as they reached the front of the line and stepped together into one of the giant fireplaces. "And keep your eyes closed." Casting down her handful of powder, Andromeda spoke with precision, "Diagon Alley!"

Green flames obscured Hermione's vision just long enough to remind her to close her eyes. Then, she felt the world begin to spin around her, feet no longer touching anything resembling solid ground, wind roaring past her ears. Her fingers tightened around Andromeda's elbow, the only thing keeping her remotely grounded. As quickly as it had started, the motion halted, and she staggered as her feet hit ground that seemed to be in a distinctly different place than before her journey. Luckily, the other witch caught her with a gentle arm about her waist, giving her a moment to let her head stop spinning.

"Blimey…" she muttered. "I hardly see why anyone would choose to travel like that," she added, collecting herself enough to take a step away from Andromeda.

She gave a slight laugh. "I find the toilets rather more distasteful."

Taking a moment to consider the spinning heads she had seen disappearing down the Ministry drains —another form of transport she had never been given an opportunity to try—Hermione decided that perhaps Floo was the better choice. Herself, she preferred to travel via the personal cleaning staff phone booth, even if it was often cramped with three or more people and was located in a distinctly shadier part of the city.

Walking again, Hermione stayed a step behind her odd acquaintance, studying her, trying to make sense of her. She noticed once again that Andromeda was taller than her, and seemed to walk with… purpose. No, more than that, she walked with presence. Her confidant strides said, "notice me," in the same way her patrician features said, "I'm something beyond you." Her robes were clearly
tailored; the heeled boots Hermione caught glimpses of beneath the hem of the robes were probably worth more than her yearly income. She felt the hopeful feeling that had come over her in the lift begin to fade. What could someone so clearly a member of high society want with a cleaning girl? Why had she been so kind to her in the lift?

Before she could talk herself out of it, though, they had reached a café beside Flourish and Blotts, one of the more popular lunch destinations, but an affordable one, where Hermione had eaten numerous times… before her father had fallen ill… before everything had gone to pieces…

Andromeda held out Hermione's chair for her like a proper gentleman, and it brought a smile to the younger witch's face once more.

While they waited to order, neither witch seemed ready to break the silence, but after the waitress had left, Andromeda propped her elbows on the table top and began her own tale.

"Since you haven't seemed to change your opinion of me since I told you my name, I'm guessing you haven't had the time to follow the news in this past week."

Hermione shook her head; sipping absentmindedly on a cup of tea she couldn't quite remember ordering. She hadn't been paying any attention to the goings on of the world in these two and a half weeks since the Dark Lord's end. The first week she was still working, the second she was being fired…

"Then it's of little surprise you haven't heard my name before. I've had a… low profile life. I had a husband and a daughter. She was an Auror, and a good one, but like so many others, she wasn't quite lucky enough to survive the war. My husband died as well; they didn't even know who he was – just a routine raid made by Snatchers."

Hermione held a hand over her mouth in shock, trying to understand how this woman remained so kind and collected after such recent tragedy. "Merlin, that's… I'm so sorry, I…"

Andromeda waved away her words. "What's done is done. In some ways, it was for the better. My husband and I were preparing for a divorce, and it would've hurt my Nymphadora so horribly… We had only stayed together so long for her sake. There was no love left between us… he was a wonderful, kind man, but he couldn't reconcile the fact that I grew up in a different world than him. I was not interested in any sort of blind devotion, neither the sort he had for the Aurors and Dumbledore, nor the sort my sister had for Voldemort."

Hermione's eyes widened at the casual, biting tone with which she spoke his name. Even after his fall, very few took the chance that his name might still bring death to their homes.

Andromeda continued without pause. "I escaped from one sort of madness into another, when I married Ted. I thought I was freeing myself, but…” she visibly shook herself. "But that is hardly relevant. Either way, at least my daughter died without having to grieve her father, and she died in the arms of her own husband, who she loved very much. However, it was still the wrong time for her to die. They had just had a child."

Hermione stifled a noise of surprise.

"And they left me to raise him. But I… I am not cut out to mother again." Her face closed. "I visit him often, I give him what love I can, but he is better off where he can be surrounded by love. With the responsibilities I now have, it was only safe for me to let his godfather raise him, with the help of the entire Weasley family, of course."
Hermione was having a bit of a hard time following at this point, but she didn't interrupt. Clearly, Andromeda had given up her grandson to be raised elsewhere, but seemed to have taken care that he was raised well. She could not grudge her that. Andromeda seemed to be at a pause in her story, and Hermione wondered why the other witch felt she deserved to know all this about her.

With a soul-deep sigh, Andromeda continued. "Now, the important part, I suppose. I'm sure you've heard the name Bellatrix Lestrange?"

Again, Hermione nodded. Yes, she had heard of Bellatrix Lestrange. The Dark Lord's right hand. A mad Death Eater, escaped from Azkaban with her equally mad husband.

"She is my sister."

For a second, Hermione took this in stride, as she had every other word from Andromeda's mouth. Then, the words hit home. "What? She's your – you're related to –"

"Yes. Bellatrix Black was one of three sisters. Myself and Narcissa—Narcissa Malfoy, now—being the other two. But I left the family; I was disowned, for marrying a Muggle-born. I had no contact with Bellatrix and very little with Narcissa until this past year.

"Now, there are two things that you must know about Bella. She's insane. That means she's absolutely illogical, absolutely unaware of common sense. But she is also the most resourceful, devious, cunning survivor I've crossed paths with. Everyone, literally everyone thought she had been killed by Molly Weasley in the final battle. It wasn't until she stood up three hours later and asked—" she cringed at the recollection "—where the party had gone… that we finally realized Molly Weasley had never been capable of a Killing Curse. By then, the only ones left in the room were the dead and the grieving families. Thinking back now, I'm not sure what possessed me to do it, but when wands were drawn and curses began flying at her, I yelled for everyone to stop. I reminded them that there was to be no more killing. The battle was over, those left on the losing side were to get a trial. I personally took Bella's wand and chained her, personally led her over to the other prisoners, while all the time she laughed in my ear and taunted me that she had been right all along – that blood was the only thing that mattered, that I couldn't kill her because she was my blood…"

Andromeda was clearly lost in her own world, reliving those moments, and Hermione was equally entranced by the smooth, aristocratic voice gone hoarse with memory.

"But she was wrong. It wasn't any of her misguided notions of pure-blood supremacy that made me save her, it was my own humanity. And perhaps just a bit of… vindictiveness. I wanted to prove that, for once, I had more power than her. Now, she's in my debt and regardless of right or wrong, that feels good."

Andromeda's eyes were unfocused but burning with an almost frightening intensity. Hermione found herself wondering just how much the sisters may have had in common had Andromeda not been so isolated.

"Both she and Narcissa went to trial, and I attended. I expected Narcissa's acquittal. A few nonsense words about acting in protection of her son, the fact that Harry Potter himself testified in her favor, and she got off scot-free. Her husband, Lucius, is under house arrest; only three years, which is a light punishment for one of the most longstanding Death Eaters. They announced that Rodolphus had died of wounds inflicted in battle, which could easily have been true, since he dueled against my daughter. Then, it was Bellatrix's turn. To understand what happened next, I had to realize that, with Azkaban indefinitely rendered inoperative, the Wizengamot was grasping at strings. They had no options. There was nowhere even remotely as safe as Azkaban had been, and Bellatrix had escaped from there already. None of the foreign prisons would have admitted her, and nowhere in Britain
would hold her for more than a day. More than anything, the Ministry needed to save face. They’ve become something of a joke since the war. So what do they do? Without giving me as much as a by-your-leave, they announce that she has been declared, ‘unsuitable for imprisonment due to her mental state’, and sentence her instead to lifelong house arrest. And who is to be her warden? Me. I’ve been tasked with keeping my dear sister imprisoned in the upstairs of Black Manor. Beyond that, Narcissa has also claimed her share of the old property, since Malfoy Manor was destroyed, and her nightmare of a husband moved in as well, though she wants nothing to do with him at the moment. It's a bloody family reunion, and I'm expected to be the peacekeeper, the mediator."

She laughed bitterly. "And Merlin knows I've never been a peacekeeper. I suppose it's a good thing my life had already gone to hell, the distraction was almost welcome. Bellatrix has been shockingly… cooperative, and I'm willing to bet she will continue to be, so long as it serves her purposes. Cissa spends all her time skulking around avoiding Lucius and writing to her son, who left the islands, hoping to find a new future in France. And me? To be quite honest, I'm dreadfully bored. I feel as though I'm living in a ghost house, with Bella confined to the upper floor and everyone else avoiding each other as though the world will end if anyone has a bloody conversation!"

Hermione's soup had long gone cold, and she had yet to take a bite. She was utterly frozen; unable to do anything but try to understand the life this woman had been pressured into. The only thing she could think to say was, "But, couldn't you have just said no?"

Andromeda flinched, as though Hermione's words had slapped her in the face, only then seeming to remember that she was speaking to another person. "If I had said no, they would have had to kill her," she said flatly. "There was no other option. And that is one thing the Ministry has never, never done. They will drain the soul from you," she said bitterly, "but they will never take a life in punishment." The tone of disdain in her words and the haughty expression in her eyes made her look like a true aristocrat, a true pure-blood. "And while I don't give a rat's ass about the Ministry, I do care about Teddy, sorry, my grandson. And I don't want him to grow up in a world where the people he's supposed to look up to are murderers, and where his mad great-aunt has been turned into some sort of martyr in the eyes of a government-hating generation."

Hermione stared at the woman across from her with nothing but admiration in her eyes. "You've really thought this through, haven't you?" she said, awe clear in her tone.

Andromeda's gaze mellowed, and a small smile quirked the corners of her lips. "I've had quite a bit of time to think about it. Now, just the fact that you haven't run off screaming yet makes me feel that I didn't misjudge you in that lift. See, I need help. I was at the Ministry today getting permission to hire a cleaner—every change made in the household has to be Ministry-approved. Honestly, I don't need a cleaner. We have two house-elves, and much of the house takes care of itself, but neither of the elves will venture near Bella, and no one in the household, elves included, can cook. At all. Hearing that you worked in an inn, I assure you, you're overqualified. But more than anything, I'd like to hire you to be… company. I need someone around who will talk to me like a person, rather than any of my old acquaintances who either won't come within a hundred yards of the Manor, or only want to bemoan my life at me when they do visit. I need someone to keep me sane. And the pay would be excellent. It would more than support your mother; easily cover any bills St. Mungo's could charge. To be frank, my sisters and I have more money now than we could use in a lifetime. Wait—don't answer yet."

Seeing words on the tip of Hermione's tongue, a protest that she wanted to earn her keep, not be paid out of pity, Andromeda held up a placating hand. "Beyond that, I can teach you. I'm a skilled healer, and I was top of my class at charms. I went through two years of pre-Auror defense training before my pregnancy put an end to that. And I would be beyond happy to teach you what I can."
Hermione's hands were shaking again, but it wasn't from exhaustion any longer. Working in a Manor, being paid to cook a mere three meals a day and clean a single floor, while being taught by a skilled, educated witch? Learning. How tempting it was.

"I understand if you say no. I know, it's a hard thing to ask of someone to live in the same house as a convicted Death Eater, a murderess…"

"No! No, I mean, yes, I mean." Hermione swallowed audibly before continuing. "I would be beyond privileged to work for you, Ma'am."

Andromeda's face broke into an ear-splitting grin. "Yes? Truly? Well that's a relief, or I might just have had to cast a memory charm, with all that sensitive information I just told you." The tone was light, but Hermione felt a slight chill down her spine all the same. "But none of this, 'Ma'am' business. It's Andromeda, or even Andy, and we'll get on just fine. Save the ma'am-ing for Cissy."

Hermione fought down a "yes, Ma'am." It was an ingrained response to anyone above her.

"How soon can you move in?"

"M-move in?"

Andromeda quirked an eyebrow. "Merlin's beard, you didn't think I'd make you commute, did you? You can have your pick of the guest bedrooms. Of course, you can come and go as you please; visit your parents, take care of any other affairs, but it would be impractical for you to live elsewhere."

"Ma'am, that's too much," Hermione started. "You can't mean for me to live in your home! I-I don't belong in a Manor. I'm a cleaner and not much beyond. I'm perfectly alright to just—"

"Rubbish," she replied, voice firm. "You are a beautiful, bright young witch who has been unfairly abused by life. Let me help you, Hermione." She reached across the table and took a firm grasp of the younger witch's hands. "I'm not asking this of you out of pity; I'm asking this because I genuinely like you, because I genuinely need someone to help me, and because I genuinely believe my time won't be wasted if I spend it with you, spend it teaching you."

The sincerity in the other woman's voice brought Hermione close to tears again. "T-thank you. I'll try not to let you down," she whispered. Andromeda gave her hands a squeeze before letting go and leaning back in her chair.

"So. How soon can you move in?"
Bright and early the following morning, Hermione stood in a mix of nerves and determination outside an ivy-bound wrought-iron gate, the only break in the massive stone wall hiding Black Manor from the surrounding countryside. In one hand, she clutched the small tea-spoon Portkey which Andromeda had charmed for her the previous afternoon. In the other she held a single battered suitcase containing what amounted to her entire life in Diagon. She had told her mum an edited version of the truth – she had a new job, a better paying job, housekeeping for a wealthy family, a private sort of family, and that she would visit when she could. The only response was a pat on the cheek and a whispered, "I'm so proud of you, dear."

The gates swung wide, untouched, as though an unseen hand drew them apart and beckoned her forward. Swallowing against a suddenly dry mouth, she hoisted her case above the pea-gravel drive and took the first cautious steps onto the property.

The drive sloped in a gentle upward curve, flanked on either side by lawns and gardens clearly long gone to seed. The ivy had reached its vines down the walls and into the grass, winding around unidentifiable topiary and crumbling stone benches. A single ancient oak—warped and bent until it grew sideways along the ground—was hung with heavy moss and surrounded by a multitude of its saplings, fighting for sunlight in its all-encompassing shadow. A few shocking splashes of red, pink, orange, and yellow showed where flowers were still fighting the thigh-high grasses and wild oats. On the other side of the drive, what may have once been a glassy pond had been overtaken by cattails and water lilies, fully abloom with beautiful flowers, but each flower forced to grow beyond the water to escape the spread of lily pads.

Entranced by her wild surroundings, Hermione had not heard Andromeda's approach.

"There were birds, before," she spoke, startling Hermione enough to whirl around. "Easy there, it's only me," the witch said with a wry smile.

"Oh! Hello, sorry, I was just, um… looking around."

"I saw," Andromeda replied, her smile widening for a moment, then fading as she continued to speak. "No one cares for the grounds anymore. The gardens belonged to my grandmother… My parents had no care for tending to the landscaping. Even so, we had a gardener for the longest time. When I was eleven, he disappeared. In the next few days, so did all the birds. I haven't seen so much as a swallow fly over those walls since."

Hermione took notice of the odd silence in the area. She felt a chill race up her spine—it was eerie, how quiet the space was. There should be small creatures scurrying in the undergrowth, bullfrogs croaking out a dissonant chorus in the swampy pond, and certainly birdsong amidst the trees and brush. But the only sounds seemed to be a muffled breeze and her own heartbeat, until Andromeda broke the silence once more.

"But enough of that. What sort of welcome am I giving? Hello! Welcome to my not-exactly-humble abode." She snapped her fingers, cueing a pop of displaced air and the appearance of an elderly house-elf. "Atcham, see to it that Miss Granger's bag is placed in her room. I expect everything to be in order by the time we've walked up."

Without a word, the elf was gone again, taking Hermione's things with him.

"Come along; I thought I'd give you the runabout of the place before midday," Andromeda
continued with a smile.

"I… Thank you; that would be lovely." Hermione prided herself on forming a sentence with minimal stammering. She was still feeling quite overwhelmed by all of this.

As they fell into step, Andromeda gave her a brief overview of the Manor grounds. "There's nothing of importance out this way, in front of the house. Off to the side there, I'm not sure if you can see it… That's the old stables; empty, now; I haven't ridden since I was a little girl. Farther around the back there's a tool shed with a back room where the gardener lived, as well as the quarters where the house elves stay."

Hermione blinked at the complete indifference with which Andromeda spoke about servants not living in the Manor. Here, in her ancestral home, the older witch seemed even more… daunting, more aristocratic. She also looked more put-together, dressed in the same sort of tailored robes, though a gleaming emerald tone today— it was her hair that made the difference. Where it had seemed unkempt and lackluster the day before, today the sleek curls gleamed with health, the sun-kissed brown holding distinct highlights of auburn and bronze in the morning light. Her eyes still looked tired, though, the dark circles beneath them standing out painfully against her fair skin. It was only when she glanced up slightly further that Hermione found Andromeda's eyes locked into hers, sparkling with amusement and quite aware of the scrutiny she had been under.

Hermione blushed furiously and looked down as Andromeda chuckled. "Is there something on my face?"

Hermione's blush deepened, if at all possible. "N-no! I mean, sorry, I didn't… I didn't mean to stare. It's just…" She trailed off before she could dig herself in any deeper.

"I look like I've not slept in weeks, is that it?" the other woman prompted. Hermione raised her eyes once more. "Don't worry, I'm quite aware. Sleep has been in short supply while getting settled here, but hopefully that should change in the next week. Especially if I have someone else doing the cooking," she added with a wry smile. "Raising Nymphadora may have taught me how to prepare instant dinners, but Cissy won't touch anything that's been made by just flicking a wand."

In another step, they arrived at the stairs leading up to the Manor doorway. While Andromeda continued up, Hermione stood for a moment in the shadow of the imposing building, taking in the stonework that made its base, clearly visible where the hill sloped downwards. The stone melded to dark-hued wood. It seemed as though the house had been cut from some immense tree, for there were no lines to mark places where boards should have come together. Dark iron latticework covered the windows and trimmed the angles of the house. The steps she stood upon were hewn from an effervescent marble; dark greys swirled through with a brown so odd in shade it could have seemed crimson in another light. This gave the house the overall effect of being some large creature, with hair of iron, flesh of wood, and marble veins to give it life. Hermione shuddered.

Andromeda had realized by then that Hermione was still at the base of the steps, and she watched as the aura of the house had its effect on the younger witch. She strode back down and placed a gentle hand upon Hermione's shoulder. "Take a moment, breathe. It is better once you are inside."

Hermione looked up, a question clear in her gaze.

"I've always felt it, too, out here. It's so… oppressive. Another reason I would hardly have chosen to live here. But I promise I've had enough time to leave my mark indoors, despite my sister's protests." She smiled. "I prefer a… kinder atmosphere."

Andromeda's hand slid down Hermione's shoulder to rest in the small of her back. It could have
seemed an invasive touch, but Hermione only felt warmth, and a sense of comfort from the familiar gesture. With the faintest of pressure, Andromeda steered Hermione up the steps. At the top, she brought her free hand forward to settle neatly against the crack between the two large doors. A spark shot from each of her fingertips and skittered along the door in a display of light that formed some picture Hermione's vision could not quite grasp, and with the sigh of old entrances, the doors parted.

The atrium was cavernous; dim and windowless, yet what light there was seemed gentle, even warm; suffusing the air itself. The light was an almost physical presence, so it was a bit of a shock when an actual presence spoke from outside the light's reach.

"So this is your idea of hired help, Andromeda?"

Hermione's eyes landed upon the figure of a woman at the far end of the hall, where her face was so fully encased in shadows that Hermione could not make out any features. Still, the voice was similar enough to Andromeda's that she could immediately identify Narcissa Malfoy, despite the absolute lack of the warmth that was always present in her sister's voice. This voice was utterly cold, derisive, somehow scathing without even any true emotional inflection.

Narcissa stepped into the light and began a progression towards Hermione and Andromeda. An instinctual reaction to the poise, grace, and power with which the Lady Malfoy carried herself made Hermione bow her head in deference before she could even get a good look at her. Eyes to the ground, Hermione could see a pair of sophisticated black heels stop just before her. A single elegantly manicured hand rose into Hermione's range of vision, holding a sleek ebony wand. Almost going cross-eyed to keep the pale fingers within her sight, she shuddered as the tip of the wand pressed beneath her chin. The pressure increased until she raised her eyes to meet the glacial blue of those before her.

Looking up into this face, Hermione was struck by the paradox of similarities and differences between this woman and her sister. Both had the same patrician beauty; the same curve graced their lips, the same high cheekbones and flawlessly-straight noses highlighted the eyes, the same pale skin stood out so starkly against the dark circles of fatigue. Yet beyond this, Narcissa was different. Her hair was so fair as to be almost white, but her eyelashes were dark and full, drawing the gaze directly into eyes resembling some arctic landscape in their utter coldness and icy blue intensity. The other clear divide between the two sisters lay in their actions. Narcissa's dehumanizing motion of touching her only with the tip of her wand immediately reminded Hermione of Andromeda's gentle touch in the elevator as she had raised Hermione's chin in much the same manner. While Andromeda's motion had been one of gentle insistence and compassion, Narcissa's was a calculated maneuver of distain and contempt.

"Really, Andromeda? A child? What use have we for a girl here. She can hardly be out of school."

Hermione felt exposed, vulnerable, scared, embarrassed… All from only a few words spoken by this haughty witch, and words not even directed at her! She wanted to turn away, run away, but Narcissa's wand and steely gaze held her firmly in place.

Andromeda stepped up to Hermione and pushed Narcissa's wand aside with two fingers. "Now, now, Cissy, be nice. This is Hermione Granger, I quite like her, and I absolutely forbid you from scaring her off."

Hermione was looking at the floor again, but she managed a smooth curtsy and a hesitant, "P-Pleased to make your acquaintance, Lady Malfoy."

Narcissa sniffed dismissively, but her words were less harsh. "Hmmm. Well I suppose something can be said for a servant that knows her place. At least her manners are better than yours, sister."
The heels stepped to the side and Hermione allowed herself to straighten fully and look around once more. Narcissa was moving off towards the far door, but she called over her shoulder, "You know, Bella will eat her alive when she finds out your… guest… is so easily frightened."

Hermione felt indignant, but Narcissa's words still drew a shudder from her.

"And that is why, Cissa darling, I do not intend for the two of them to make any sort of acquaintance," Andromeda said. "But I'm sure we appreciate your concern."

A cold laugh echoed from Narcissa's end of the room. "Andromeda. Really. Don't be so naïve. You know as well as I that Bellatrix perceives absolutely everything that goes on between these walls."

With that, the second Black sister was gone, and the room felt distinctly warmer to Hermione.

Andromeda sighed. "Pardon my sister. She… doesn't take well to strangers."

Hermione shook her head. "That's quite alright."

Andromeda gave a single sharp laugh. "No, it really isn't, but seeing as her… attitude… is unlikely to change, I suppose you have the right idea. Cissa can be… distant, even cold, but she isn't cruel. She's led a different life than the both of us."

"You don't need to tell me any of this, ma'am," Hermione started, feeling somewhat uncomfortable being told private things about their family.

"What did I tell you about calling me Andromeda? And no, Hermione, I do need to tell you this. I want you to be comfortable here, so you need to know what you are going to be caught in the middle of. Whatever things Narcissa might say to you, she honestly means no harm. She is not like my other sister, who might speak to you with a smile in her eyes as she rips you to pieces. That is why I'm going to ask that you stay off of the third floor, at least for a few weeks, until I can… give Bella a chance to adjust to another presence in this house."

"So… I don't have to do the housekeeping there?" Hermione asked, not wanting to sound too eager to get out of work despite her relief at Andromeda's words.

Andromeda shook her head. "Not anytime in the near future," she replied, voice flat and commanding.

Even seeing only the first two floors, the mansion was immense enough for Hermione to feel dreadfully lost and overwhelmed. Luckily, much of the house was unused—a plethora of guest bedrooms, miscellaneous half-baths, and odd little spaces filled with family portraits and mysterious artwork. "You won't have to do anything there; the house-elves take care of dusting and general upkeep in the empty spaces."

It was true. Despite the apparent uselessness of the areas, not a speck of dust or lingering mildew could be found. The house felt old, looked old, but did not smell old or rundown.

And Andromeda had been right. Inside the house, the aura was one of shocking wealth, but it was still tastefully decorated and well-lit, livening up what could have been an oppressive atmosphere.

Also on the first floor was a set of double-doors trimmed with silver vines that Andromeda said marked the entrance to the library. "No one really uses it, as far as I can tell." Andromeda made to walk past, but Hermione lingered, staring at the firmly closed doors.

"Why not?" she asked.
"Hmm? Oh, our family has long forbidden elves from going into places of learning, so the library hasn't been cleaned properly in decades, perhaps centuries. I have my private collection in my bedroom, but I simply can't stand the dust in there. Would you like to see inside?"

"Yes, please!" Hermione said, unable to contain her excitement at the thought of an entire room full of unappreciated books.

Andromeda strode forward and pushed the doors open with a short burst of magic. Hermione felt her eyes go wide in awe.

The room was clearly taller than the rest of the first floor and must have taken up half the width of the house. Bookshelves of varying height stretched out in all directions, filled with more paper and binding than Hermione had set eyes on in her life. The entire far wall was a mass of windowpanes and cloudy glass, filling the space with natural light, despite being grainy with dust. Specks of dust swirled in golden clouds on the eddies of air created by their entrance, and the spines of the books were clearly coated by the same. Towering ladders sped back and forth along the shelves by magic, creaking softly in the otherwise silent room. To Hermione, it was the most perfect place she had seen in her life. "This is beautiful," she whispered, and Andromeda's chuckle shook her from her reverie.

"Well then, if you ever feel the urge to read, or clean, or do anything else you'd like, feel free."

Hermione looked at the elder witch with a look of such utter gratitude that it brought a blush to Andromeda's face.

"Really? You… you mean that? You would let me use your library?"

"Of course!" Andromeda replied. "Nothing here is off limits to you, save the third floor. And if you do some cleaning, I may even join you here another time."

Hermione wanted nothing more than to throw her arms around the other woman, but she resisted the urge, instead simply whispering, "Thank you, thank you so very much."

Andromeda smiled at her before placing her hand once more in the small of her back and guiding her from the room. "As much as I can see you would be content to spend the rest of your day there, we have a bit more yet to see."

Narcissa and Lucius's room bordered Andromeda's and one other guest room on the second floor, which, as they passed, Andromeda identified as, "Narcissa's other bedroom." Hermione's own chamber was slightly farther along the hallway, and they did not enter yet, heading instead to the kitchens. It was there that Narcissa appeared once more, this time with her husband.

They stood at the far end of the elongated kitchen, and from the charged silence that hung in the air, it was clear that Andromeda and Hermione had interrupted something. Narcissa stood with her shoulders pressed into a cabinet, leaning back, wand out and aimed at Lucius. The man's stance was threatening, leaning forward, clearly the reason for Narcissa's defensive position. Still, he straightened immediately when he realized they had company.

Narcissa straightened as well, expression implacable. "Lucius, meet the new help," she said flatly.

As Lucius turned his gaze to Hermione, she took a moment to realize that she intensely disliked this man. He had yet to speak a word, unlike his wife, who had been quite unfriendly, yet Hermione did not instantly dislike Narcissa the way she disliked her husband. Perhaps it was the way his gaze met her eyes for only a moment before straying down her chest, or the way he looked down his nose at his own wife, or even simply the way he flicked his cloak over his shoulder in an overly self-
importantly manner. Whatever it was, it was only reinforced when he spoke in a nasally drawl that made Hermione's skin squirm.

"What's this? We've employed a child?"

"Manners, Lucius," Andromeda snapped out.

Hermione's eyes widened; Narcissa had said much the same thing, yet it had not drawn this sort of instant anger from Andromeda.

Narcissa looked right into Hermione's eyes as she replied to her husband. "Yes, Andromeda is fond of her for some reason, so I'd suggest you treat her cordially, if that is even within your realm of ability."

Her voice was utterly scornful as she spoke, seeming to dismiss her husband in every way possible as she flatly insulted him without even meeting his eyes. Hermione found herself unable to break the strange magnetism of that icy stare, until Andromeda placed a firm hand on her shoulder.

"Behave, you. Lucius, if you so much as insult Hermione, I will know about it, and you will not be pleased with the results."

Lucius's eyes darkened with anger and he stepped towards them, advancing across the room until he stood directly before Hermione. She refused to cower from this man; he provoked little true fear from her, only a peculiar hatred she trusted quite well. She met his gaze until it was him that broke it, trailing down her body in a way that made her feel truly angry. He murmured, "Now, perhaps we got off to a hasty start, don't you think, girl? You and I could be friends, could we not?"

He reached a hand out to grab her waist. Hermione, suddenly feeling anxious, stepped back and raised her own hand to halt his motion. Without warning, his hand shot out and slapped her across the cheek. She gasped as her eyes watered and she staggered back a pace. She would have fallen had not Andromeda's waiting arms caught her in a firm but careful hold. She wrapped her arms around Hermione's waist and pulled her back against her, raising a gentle hand to cup the cheek that Lucius had struck.

"Know your place, girl," Lucius snapped out before his eyes suddenly bulged in his head. As Hermione looked on in confusion, he slumped sideways onto the ground. Narcissa stood behind him, wand raised, anger clear on her face. She stepped to him and flipped him over with one heeled foot.

"We may be married in name only, but Merlin help me if I have to watch you touch another woman while under the same roof as me. You will never lay a finger on her, or you will find yourself sleeping on the third floor. Is that clear, dearest?" Narcissa spat out the last word with biting sarcasm, digging her toes harder into the immobilized man's side.

Hermione's cheek stung, but her eyes widened as she heard Narcissa—who had called her a child mere moments before—call her a woman. Andromeda had not yet taken her arms from around her waist, and even though Hermione had quite regained her footing, she did not try to pull herself away. She felt safe, here. As Narcissa lifted the petrifying spell, the arms held her tighter for a moment. Lucius glared daggers at her as he stood and strode from the room with what little dignity he had left.

Narcissa pocketed her wand once more and Andromeda slowly allowed Hermione to pull away, asking, "Are you alright?"

Hermione swallowed, unable to meet either witch's eyes. "I'm fine. But... I don't know if I should be here. I don't want to cause you any trouble, and clearly I'm not wanted here. Perhaps you should hire
Andromeda cut her off. "No. This is not any trouble of your making. I'm terribly sorry that Lucius did that… I had no idea he would even spare you a moment's notice; he has been so withdrawn lately."

Hermione hesitantly addressed Narcissa, "But I don't want to… to affect your marriage, ma'am. I didn't mean to cause any more difficulties here…"

Narcissa gave a dismissive laugh. "You aren't. There is no marriage for you to affect. Besides, we need a cook. I will have a decent meal before tomorrow, and so long as you are willing to make it, you stay."

Hermione was shocked. After her first impression of Narcissa, she had expected her to send her out the front door as soon as possible. Instead, however cold the words, she was still making it clear in some odd way of hers that Hermione was welcome here. So, as years of cautious tact had taught her to do, she changed the subject.

"Very well, ma'am. Now, not that I have any problem cooking for you, but… why do your elves not cook?" Hermione asked tentatively.

It was Narcissa who answered her. "There used to be many more elves in servitude to the Black family, but… Bellatrix killed the last of mine in a fit of anger and 'Dromeda's were set free when she came of age and had… no interest in claiming her inheritance." Narcissa gave a derisive sniff. "The two we still own technically belong to Bellatrix, but the third, which used to do the cooking, died while she was in Azkaban. Did something wrong and punished itself to death without Bellatrix around to tell it 'enough'."

Hermione gasped aloud, covering her mouth with her hand. "That's dreadful!"

Narcissa shrugged. "Well it certainly was a waste."

Hermione's eyes widened, but she withheld the urge to speak again. Still, in her mind, she thought it was even more horrible that this woman clearly didn't see the elves as living beings, merely as a thing to use at her convenience.

Andromeda gently stroked the backs of her fingers against Hermione's reddened cheek. "You sure you're alright," she asked kindly, staring directly into Hermione's eyes. There was a slight sensation of warmth that seemed to emanate from Andromeda's fingers, and the slight pain from Lucius's slap was quickly fading.

Blushing, Hermione nodded.

"Then perhaps you would like some time to get acquainted with the kitchen and your room before lunch? Don't worry; you don't need to cook today."

Despite feeling a moment of utter panic at the thought of Andromeda going away, Hermione managed to nod slightly.

"Very well. I'll send one of the elves to your room at the first hour to fetch you for lunch. Until then, I'd recommend you stick to the kitchen or your chambers." She pulled Hermione into a quick hug, the gesture of affection making Hermione wonder once again at the utter lack of care she seemed to have for Hermione's position in life. Pulling back, the older witch looked into her eyes and said, "I'm so glad you're here."
"Let the girl be, Andromeda," Narcissa said, an odd undercurrent of amusement clear in her voice.

Once the two sisters had left, Hermione rubbed harshly at her eyes with her palms, feeling a shadow of the sting in her cheek lingering in her mind and wondering what in Merlin's name she had gotten herself into.

Andromeda was kind to her, so much kinder than she could have ever expected any pure-blood to be towards... towards someone like her. But she was still so very much a pure-blood. She still made Hermione feel even smaller than she usually felt, but in an almost... comforting way. She made Hermione feel safe, very safe, and that thought scared her. She had worked in a pure-blood household before; she couldn't afford to feel safe.

And Narcissa... Hermione was somewhat frightened of Narcissa, but still oddly drawn to her. She seemed so distant, unaffected by anything, until suddenly she would speak or act and she held such power. Hermione felt guarded towards her. There was clearly more to this woman than a pure-blood trophy wife or a witch with a heart of ice.

And Lucius. Hermione shuddered even thinking the name. There was a man of cowardice and cruelty all wrapped up in one unpleasant package. She had felt the stares of drunken lechery on her before, at the bar, but she knew how to handle sad or lonely drunkards. Even angry drunkards. But a sober, angry man who still looked her with desire was something she had little experience with. Well, none, to be honest. Men who weren't drunk didn't pay her much mind in Diagon. She wasn't pretty; she was worn, tired, and far too undernourished to be pretty, she had always been told. But she guessed Lucius's attentions were more to spite his wife than any real attraction, which only made him more dangerous. Hermione despised creatures like him, people who had no real aura of power, yet who used magical or physical superiority to intimidate those weaker than them.

Still, she needed this work. She needed to help her family. And that library, all that knowledge, Andromeda to teach her, it had to be worth living in this madhouse.

As she finished taking stock of the kitchen, she felt a half-hysterical laugh bubble up from the depths of her chest as she thought, I haven't even met the one who's actually supposed to be insane.

When Hermione entered her chambers for the first time, she wondered if she had gone in the wrong door. Stepping back into the hallway, she reoriented herself, double checked, and still found herself outside the same door, walking into the same rooms. Rooms that couldn't possibly be intended for a servant.

The bedroom was done in shades of cream, bronze, and chestnut, with olive-trimmed rugs and drapery. It was twice the size of the most expensive suite at the inn, and had a full-wall window seat that overlooked the wilderness of the grounds. The bed was a queen at least, and, when she ran tentative fingers across the sheets, they felt softer than anything she had touched in her life, softer than the silk sheets she had been in charge of washing at the home of her last employers. The room was lit by magical torch, to be dimmed or brightened by only a spoken command. A writing desk, two chairs, and a bedside table made up the rest of the furniture.

There were two other doors in the room. One led to a spacious bathroom, with a nicely-sized tub and glass-encased shower. The other was a closet, in which her few garments were already hanging. It was only then that Hermione truly accepted that she was going to be staying here, in the nicest room she had seen in her life. She was hardly able to wrap her mind around the fact that, as of yet, she had not truly been treated like a servant in any way other than the words of the Malfoys, and in Lucius's cruel temper.

Sinking down into the welcoming softness of the bed, she could almost feel the stress of the past
weeks fading from her body. It left only wonderful warmth and an overwhelming desire to close her eyes. Giving in for what she thought would be just a moment, the last thoughts to pass through her mind were, I could get very, very used to this. I'm not going to let myself be scared away. So long as I'm wanted, so long as Andromeda wants me here ... I can let myself have this. As long as I don't forget how quickly this could end, as long as I don't let my guard down... I can let myself have this.
Chapter 3

Lunch was a small, cozy affair, if anything can truly be called cozy in a place so very large as Black Manor. Andromeda was waiting for her in the kitchen once the same elf had woken her from her nap.

"I hope you won't mind that I haven't pulled out the finery or moved us into the dining room for lunch, but Narcissa, Lucius and I have developed a little routine. We really only dine together at dinner. Otherwise, I prefer the kitchens, Lucius eats in his chambers, and Narcissa takes her lunch upstairs with Bellatrix."

Hermione couldn't help but arch an eyebrow at the further hint of animosity lingering in this household. "That's quite alright, ma'am. If I won't be a disturbance, the kitchens would be just fine."

The older witch chuckled. "I do wonder how long it will take to break you of that. It's Andy, please."

Hermione blushed. Addressing her employer by her given name was going to take some getting used to.

"And you certainly won't be a disturbance. I'm glad for any company that I'm not related to. Here—" She gestured to a stool across from her at the small central table. "—take a seat."

Hermione sat, noticing that while the kitchen itself was designed for functionality, it was not meant to be used in a real dining situation, having only a table for perhaps three people, and only two padded stools. There were another few seats stacked in the far corner, but there were pots hung on the legs, so it didn't seem they'd been used in quite some time. Of all the rooms in the house, this felt the least pretentious. Though cooking wasn't Hermione's favorite pastime, she thought she could be quite comfortable here. As Andromeda slid a plate with a simple meat, cheese and greens sandwich across the space, a thought occurred to Hermione.

"How should I deliver meals to each of you? Is there someplace I can—"

"—No, no, you needn't deliver anything. If you set out plates on the counter in the morning and at midday, the elves will bring them when desired."

Hermione paused with the sandwich halfway to her mouth. She set it back on the plate. "What exactly am I to do, then?" Wincing at her own curt tone, she hastened to add, "I don't mean any disrespect but… If all I'm expected to do is cook a few meals, you're overpaying me."

Andromeda looked amused. "Hermione, Hermione, what am I to do with you? I do believe I've gone and found the only scrupulous servant in the whole of Diagon." She leaned across the tabletop as though preparing to reveal some huge secret. "You do realize there probably isn't another witch or wizard in the country who would be willing to work under the same roof as Bellatrix, no matter what the price? Regardless, if Cissa gets a decent meal, if I get a decent distraction from teaching you, and if Bellatrix doesn't kill you, well, you'll have certainly earned you keep."

Hermione couldn't help but think that, when she put it that way, it all sounded a bit more reasonable and significantly more insane.

"As for what you're to do, I doubt you'll ever find a boring moment under this roof. You'll have the cooking, then I'd like to come up with some sort of schedule to work with you on your magic, but aside from that, your time is your own. I have a feeling you plan on spending some of it in the
"Oh, yes!" Hermione answered. The mere mention of that magical room made her beam at the older witch, but she tried to curb her excitement at the prospect of another visit in favor of keeping a professional demeanor.

Andromeda chuckled at Hermione's mirth, standing and starting to gather up their plates. Hermione made a small sound of protest, reaching for the plates, but Andromeda waved her off. "I am a mother, you know; I'm no stranger to doing dishes. It's just the cooking I never could quite get the hang of."

Hermione resumed her seat.

"Now, I was thinking we could have your lessons in the morning, whenever you've finished up with breakfast. I often go to meetings at the Ministry after lunch, so if we work early in the day you'll have the afternoon to yourself. Would you be comfortable starting tomorrow?"

"That would be wonderful," Hermione replied. "I'm so—you have no idea—I'm... so grateful for this."

The corner of Andromeda's mouth turned up in what Hermione had long thought of—in the privacy of her head—as the pureblood smirk. All the guests of the family she had been a nanny for had seemed to use it as their only form of showing their amusement, but somehow it was rather more endearing on this particular face.

"You're quite welcome, though I don't know what you're thanking me for, yet. I have a feeling you won't be quite so grateful after you've been knocked on your arse a few times working with defensive magic."

Hermione's voice was embarrassingly breathless as she replied earnestly, "Oh, I'm certain I still will be."

Andromeda didn't seem to notice.

Hermione spent the time between lunch and dinner walking the circuit Andromeda had escorted her through earlier, seeing how many rooms she remembered without prompting, peering once more into those she didn't. She thought she must look rather like a thief, increasingly nervous of being caught wandering despite the fact that she had been given explicit permission to roam these two floors. As she entered the stairwell to return to her chambers, she could not help but pause on the landing and crane her neck to peer up the next flight of stairs. She wondered what the rooms of a madwoman would look like. She tried to imagine them, lots of dark colors... crimson, obsidian? Torture chambers where the eldest Black sister could enact dreadful scenes on figments of her fractured imagination? A cell? She couldn't picture Andromeda allowing either of those last two into her home, but who knew how much control Andromeda really had over her sister.

A door slamming somewhere below her sent her scurrying back to her rooms, idle musings finished for the moment. She began more closely examining the bedroom, finding heavy parchment and fragile, fledgling-fletched quills in the drawer of the writing desk, along with squid ink in a delicate crystal bottle. She recognized the distinctive purple-black with amusement, recalling the utter impossibility to get it out of her clothing when a wealthier guest at the inn had spilled a vial as he signed the guestbook. She decided to write a letter to her mother. She had told her she was leaving, but knew that her mum would be worrying until she heard from her.
Dipping a quill and carefully scraping the excess against the lip of the decanter, she began.

Hi, Mum,

_I've really found a touch of luck with this place. The work is light, the people are—_

She stopped. What on earth could she say? She could hardly say, 'good' or 'kind' or 'reputable' or any of the usual things one would say of their employers. She settled for

— interesting, and my rooms are a wonder. I'm staying in the main house, in my own chambers, and I think you'd like the décor…

She soon filled half the roll of parchment with sugar-coated, lighthearted words sure to leave her mother smiling. She thought she could work up the courage to ask Andromeda to let her use one of their owls to send it, or she would stop by Plumage's Post the next time she was in town. She couldn't bear to visit in person very often, because it worried her mum more to see how tired she was than it did to simply keep herself at a distance.

The pop of displaced air accompanied the same elf once more into her rooms.

"Dinner," he said briskly, already raising his fingers to snap himself away once more.

Hermione realized that she was unsure exactly what that meant. She had been told she would start preparing meals tomorrow, but was the elf a summons to join the family in the dining room or to make herself something in the kitchens? In the household of her last employ, she would not have hesitated to heat up whatever leftovers the family had from the past night's dinner, but, from what she knew of Andromeda, she had a rather frightening inkling that she would be expected to dine with them tonight, to act the part of some sort of guest.

She recalled an entrance to the dining room through the kitchens and figured it to be her safest choice. The kitchens were dark, so she pushed through the swinging doors into the chandelier-lit dining room. It was perhaps more appropriately titled a dining hall, in honor of its fairly monstrous size and stiflingly gaudy décor.

She found the center table empty, a massive, oaken affair that could seat twelve, sixteen, perhaps twenty bodies. Clearly, it was not intended for a simple evening meal.

A smaller table on an elevated dais across the room was occupied by the Malfoy couple, sitting across from each other in a parody of familial closeness betrayed by the look of distaste simmering behind Narcissa's cold eyes whenever she looked at her husband. Hermione already felt out of place in her worn, simple, hand-me-down black robes, but Andromeda entered from the main door just as Hermione was beginning to fear she would have to approach the hostile environment at the table alone.

The younger witch let out a sigh of relief at Andromeda's welcoming smile and quick, beckoning flick of the wrist. Lucius's head turned to follow his sister-in-law's gaze and glowered at finding Hermione there. She winced, thinking longingly of the simplicity of dining alone in the kitchens, but Andromeda had already crossed the room and taken her elbow in that warm-yet-commanding grip, steering her towards the table. By some small mercy, Andromeda took the seat beside Lucius, leaving Hermione to settle tentatively into the space across from her and beside her sister. Narcissa did not seem inclined to acknowledge her presence at all, but Lucius certainly did.

"Andromeda, what is the meaning of having this… filth at our table."

Hermione's eyebrows raised as both sisters replied in unison, "Watch your tongue, Lucius."
Her mouth quite positively dropped open when she saw Andromeda smile fondly at her sister and heard a quiet chuckle drift from Narcissa's lips, a shockingly warm sound, laced with genuine affection and a delicate mirth that softened those icy features into something perhaps… snowy. Still cold, but not so brittle.

Lucius looked livid, but bit his tongue as Andromeda gave him a skin-melting stare. Returning her eyes to Narcissa, she noted, "We used to do that all the time as children. People thought we were twins until your hair lightened." It was clearly a tactic meant to draw attention off of Hermione, and she was grateful for it.

Narcissa's gaze was lost somewhere in a far off memory, but she murmured, "We did, didn't we? Talking together. There were times even our parents thought we spoke our thoughts with a single tongue. It drove Bella out of her m—" Her words jerked to a halt, slamming into that wall of phrases that just didn't quite come out right, and the brief moment of warmth was shattered.

Lucius crushed what remained under his arrogant heels when he shoved his chair back from the table with a screech of wood on marble and stood. "You two may be set on this illusion of courtesy, but I am still the head of this house and I'll be damned if I'm going to eat my meal with a hired hand."

Before he could finish his melodramatic departure, Narcissa's voice rang out with the precision of a well-timed blow. "You have never had a place in "The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black." She spoke the title with an odd mix of pride and… if Hermione was not mistaken, sadness. "What little there is left of it will never accept you, and you have never been the head of any household I've chosen to live in."

Lucius spun back on his heel to face them, wand flashing into view from within his sleeve. Hermione flinched, struck once more by the tension coiled beneath every conversation in this home. Wand leveled at his wife, Lucius hissed, "You will not talk to me that way. I've tolerated this behavior since Draco ran off, but you are taking it too far."

"Don't talk to me of tolerance, Lucius," Narcissa replied, a glint of burnished wood flashing between her knuckles as well.

As Lucius approached, Hermione fought the urge to slide down under the table or slip away into the kitchens. She wasn't afraid of Lucius, not after having seen him taken down a notch by his wife already, but she was still cautious of the rage in his eyes, and even more cautious of witnessing something she shouldn't. She knew very well what happened to servants of pure-bloods who saw or heard things they weren't meant to. They disappeared.

Andromeda intervened. "Lucius, perhaps it would be best for you to take your meal in your chambers tonight." Her voice was as cordial as could be, yet there was a bite behind it, a sheath of velvet over a blade of steel. Hermione had a feeling she would run with her tail between her legs were she on the receiving end of that tone.

For a moment, it seemed he would ignore her, but a glance between the eyes of the two sisters told him that Andromeda's words were likely to be his only chance to walk out with a semblance of dignity. He took it.

When the door had shut behind him with an echoing boom, a measure of tension seemed to leave Narcissa's shoulders, though her posture remained rigid.

"Cissa, why do you keep putting up with this?" Andromeda asked softly.

Narcissa did not seem inclined to answer. Instead, she snapped her fingers, summoning a female elf
Hermione had not seen before. A tray hovered in the air beside her graced with four bowls of a delicious-smelling soup. Hermione took a sip, marveling at what a few more pricy spices could do to what she recognized as a pre-made wizard meal. Narcissa had also taken a sip, but her face was a study in distaste. "I know you have an odd attachment to the girl, Dromeda, but I really would have preferred a meal tonight over this show of our… hospitality."

Hermione was beginning to understand some of what Andromeda had said about her sister. Narcissa was… genuine. She spoke her mind with little regard for those she considered beneath her, but she wasn't… rude. She was unapologetically pure-blood, highborn, used to getting what she wanted, but she wasn't cruel. While Lucius spoke with blatant arrogance of a sort he did not seem to have earned, Hermione could see that Narcissa's pride came from somewhere within her, some part of her so intrinsic to who she was that it only seemed right for her to, well, rule. To lord over those around her. She could hardly imagine Lucius ever holding any authority over this woman, yet it was clear he never stopped trying.

Glancing across the table at her employer, Hermione mused that Andromeda had many of those same qualities, though it was clear she tried to lessen their effect. Andromeda had that same presence that marked her with an almost royal authority, but she had put in effort to become part of a more plebeian crowd. She was a wolf in sheep's clothing, and despite having spent years in a world she did not truly belong to, she returned to her own world as easily as a snake shedding its skin. She belonged in this room surely as Narcissa did, but her time apart had taught her a kindness Narcissa had never known. A kindness that came through in all she had said and done for Hermione, in sparing the life of Bellatrix Lestrange, and in that knowing smile she was now aiming towards Hermione across the table, a smile that seemed to say Andromeda knew that she was the object of the younger woman's thoughts, and didn't seem to mind in the slightest.

"She starts tomorrow, Cissa. I think your patience will last till then," Andromeda replied, eyes still on Hermione.

Narcissa sniffed delicately.

The rest of the meal passed in near silence. Andromeda occasionally tried to draw the others into conversation, but her sister's terse replies discouraged her while Hermione was far too nervous to offer any sort of dignified exchange. She was far too focused on the most decorous way to eat the larger pieces of vegetables from the soup to converse.

Narcissa was the first to leave, rising wordlessly and following the path Lucius had taken from the room mere moments before, though hers was a much more graceful departure. Hermione made to follow, rising and starting to gather both her and Narcissa's bowls, but Andromeda laid a hand on her wrist to stop her motion.

"The elves will take care of that. Sit with me for a moment."

Nervously, Hermione complied.

There was no sound from the elder witch for a few heartbeats, prompting Hermione to look up and meet her gaze. Andromeda slid her chair closer and rested her elbows on the table. It should have been an undignified motion, yet it was done with that effortless grace the woman seemed to possess, the arms moving together, fingers twining elegantly to provide a resting place for her chin. She quirked her lips opposite the tilt of her head, and Hermione once more stopped herself from staring too long, glancing around rather awkwardly, unable to maintain the intensity of that gaze.

"I can't seem to tell if I fascinate or frighten you," Andromeda said.
In a surprisingly candid moment, Hermione replied, "Both." She blushed at her own response, but did not look down at the table, even daring to meet the other witch's eyes once more. She saw amusement there, genuine, and some other emotion she could not identify.

Andromeda's smile widened into something almost... predatory. "Wonderful."

In that moment, Hermione couldn't quite seem to look away. She was trapped, falling into eyes which seemed to hold more life in this single moment than Hermione had lived in all of her eighteen years. Then, Andromeda laughed brightly, head tipping back, and the moment ended.

"I've got a few things to sort out this evening, so I'll let you alone until tomorrow. I hope I don't frighten you so much that you won't meet me in my study tomorrow after breakfast to start working on some magic?" she inquired, eyes flashing, words lilting, teasing.

"O-of course not," Hermione replied, wishing her veins were too tired to draw the blood for a blush up her cheeks. They weren't.

"I'll see you then. Goodnight, Hermione." She rose and crossed behind the younger witch's chair, resting a hand briefly on her shoulder.

"Goodnight, ma'—Andromeda," Hermione replied, just managing to bite off the end of "ma'am."

The hand on her shoulder slipped a few inches down her back as Andromeda pulled away with a whispered, "That's better."

And she was gone.

The next morning saw Hermione waking with the dawn, light from between the half-open curtains prying her eyelids up and drawing her across the room. Years of waking with the first glimpse of daylight had made it near impossible to sleep past sunrise, even if she had the time or inclination, and she seldom had either. A glance at the clock above her bed told her it was just early enough to start on breakfast.

Awaiting her in the kitchen were four scraps of parchment covered in what she presumed was Andromeda's neat, efficient script, as she doubted anyone else in the household would have thought to leave her a description of the various things each did not like to eat. Eggs made Lucius ill, Narcissa did not like any strong flavorings - onions, garlic, peppers, and the like - Andromeda wrote that she herself had an insatiable sweet tooth, and Bellatrix wasn't picky. Fresh breads and fruit were delivered twice weekly. Anything else she needed she could write on a grocery list and leave it for the house elves. They all preferred a light breakfast.

She set on a kettle to boil for tea, and then scanned through the pantry shelves once more. She decided to play it safe, murmuring a spell to quickly toast two pieces of dark, artisan bread for each of them, then charming the sink to wash strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, and blackberries while she opened a package of yogurt for parfaits. Finding a jar of hazelnut spread in one of the cabinets, she spooned a small amount into the bottom of each cup before adding the layers of fruit and yogurt.

She spotted a bag of Honeyduke's Chocolate Hearts on the shelf just as the female elf popped into the kitchen. The elf appeared elderly, with a tiny, wizened face and startlingly clear green eyes. She was dressed in a gray scrap of fabric which, though worn through from washings, at least appeared clean. Many households did not even allow their elves to clean their single garment, so this was a slight improvement.

"Rommie is to bring food to the master, now," the elf said.
"Just a second," Hermione murmured, unable to resist the urge to crumble a bit of chocolate atop Andromeda's parfait in honor of her "insatiable sweet tooth."

"That one is for Andromeda, is that alright?"

"Of course, missus," Rommie said.

Before the elf could snap away, Hermione added, "Call me Hermione, please. We're to work together, after all."

"Of course, missus," Rommie replied, looking at the ground before disappearing, leaving a crack of displaced air and one less plate of breakfast.

As Hermione nibbled at her own toast, leftover berries, and yogurt, the other plates disappeared one-by-one. Andromeda's was the last to go, and Hermione waited a few more minutes before heading to her study on the first floor.

Fairly certain she had remembered the right room, she knocked.

"Come in," Andromeda called.

She was seated behind a wooden desk of dark-stained hickory. The wall behind her was a mass of maps, pictures, and unidentifiable scraps of paper broken up by two great slashes of window overlooking the drive. The other walls were bare stone, as necessitated by the wall sconces that must light the space at night. A thick carpet decorated the floor, resting beneath the only other furniture in the space, a bench beside the door and three chairs. Andromeda was seated across the desk from her in the largest one.

She looked up as Hermione entered, graceing her with a distracted smile before scribbling something final on the paper in front of her and slipping it into a drawer. She snapped her fingers and the male elf appeared to take away the remnants of the breakfast Hermione had made. She was rather gratified to see that the only thing remaining were crusts from the toast.

"Will that be all, Miss Andy?"

She waved him off.

Returning her attention to Hermione, she gestured at the wall behind her. "Pardon the mess, but this was my mother's study, and I haven't had the chance to figure out what half of that even means, let alone whether or not I need to keep it. Have a seat, make yourself comfortable."

Hermione sat.

"I know you said you've not had a formal education; is it too invasive to ask exactly how informal you meant?" Andromeda asked.

It was that gentle, understanding tone that had drawn out Hermione's life story in the lift... was it only two days ago? My, how time had flown. "Not at all. I learned about the same as any other wizarding child until I turned eleven; you know, reading, writing, basic spell casting we aren't supposed to know. But when my letter came from Hogwarts, my parents had to tell me they couldn't afford to lose my help around the inn, so since then I've learned only what my parents taught to help keep the place running and whatever I could from books and friends who did attend school. I'm not utterly useless, just... not very well-rounded."

Andromeda hummed in contemplation. "Interesting. I'm actually quite intrigued by some of the
possibilities here. Do you know anything at all about magical theory?"

"Only a touch of transfiguration and charms. They're my favorite, the first sections I always headed for at the library. Transfiguration is the only subject I learned in any sort of order. Otherwise, I've always just..." Hermione wasn't sure whether to continue. There were things she had done with magic, things her peers had said didn't work, said were impossible. The pause had become awkward, though, so she took a deep breath and finished. "I've always just... put things together. I read whatever I could get and if there was a spell I needed but couldn't look up, I would... push two together, or the ideas of them, and it usually just... worked." She waited for Andromeda to laugh at her, to say she was crazy, that the only people who made up spells were old witches in the Ministry's Department for the Creation and Production of Conceptual Magics.

Andromeda did not laugh.

"Oh, yes, this is lovely! See, I've never much approved of Hogwarts. They have some of the most talented brains in the wizarding world on their staff, and still they manage to be so dreadfully closed-minded about some things. They teach to a test, all of them, teaching spells as a manner of 'memorize these words' and 'now flick your wand like this' and why not dance a jig while you're at it? That's bound magic, and it's bullocks. Big, fat, hairy, camel bullocks."

Hermione couldn't hold in a giggle. She would not have pegged the poised woman across from her as the type to curse like a sailor.

She continued. "Incantations and patterns were only invented in the last thousand years or so, if you'll pardon the history lesson. It's sort of like spoken, written language. There are many different dialects, alphabets, phonetics, to use to communicate, yet they're only words for bigger concepts, concepts that exist whether or not we give name to them. Both Wizardkind and Humankind were communicating long before we had put words to the powers we wield. You don't actually need the phrases and traceries to practice magic; in fact, it isn't even a more advanced skill to use nonverbal magic. The problem is that when children are taught from an early age to only do something one way, it becomes increasingly difficult to counteract all that... programming. You, on the other hand, are a child of circumstance, so you've already begun working with unbound magic, something I was fascinated with when I was working with the Aurors."

"Unbound?" Hermione prompted, intrigued. Andromeda was a natural teacher, a born storyteller, as Hermione had already learned from their chat in the café the day they met. She was animated in a very subtle way; all flashing eyes, words that wrapped around your mind, drew you into her, and a minimum of those distracting hand motions so many people would use for emphasis.

"Yes, although that is perhaps a misnomer. After all, even unbound magic requires a wand, for the most part, because wandless magic is an entirely different skill. Unbound magic is akin to the magic that Muggle-borns use without their knowledge before they learn of their skills. It is an innate part of every witch and wizard. Some would call binding your magic with spells and the rotes of wandlore a shortcut and the most... proper form of magic. In reality, the only thing it is better for is its safety. Magic was always meant to be free, yet just encasing it in human form is a sort of trap. Some of the more radical members of this branch of study call it enslaved. Still, there is nothing we can do about that – we are born with magic inside of us, and taking it out would kill us. Still, without trapping magic, it is very difficult to control, so we bind it with incantations.

"As you've probably noticed, creating magic casts off a burst of light, color, smoke, or at the very least, sound. That is the magic eating away the prison of the binding spell."

"I've never heard anything about this!" Hermione couldn't help but exclaim.
Andromeda smiled indulgently. "No, most never do. Most never care to. I'm getting to the why of that."

Hermione blushed. It was always a rush whenever she could learn something new, discover some piece of the world she had not yet exposed, and she tended to forget her manners. "Sorry, ma'am."

Andromeda quirked an eyebrow. Hermione hurried to correct herself once more, blushing. "Sorry, Andromeda."

"Better." She smiled. "Moving on, can you picture those sparks, those flashes of light? They're often violent, regardless of the nature of the spell. Now, imagine using your body for that purpose, without the go-between of a spell to bind it."

Hermione gulped audibly, wondering how many of her patchwork spells could have killed her.

"That's the danger of unbound magic. It can eat you alive, from the inside out, one piece at a time, or all at once in a fiery blaze. It has happened before. I'd say you've been lucky, as you have at least been binding your spells with an idea of their purpose, if not the traditional spellwork that should accompany them. But unbound magic can be some of the most powerful, some of the most exhilarating, and some of the most natural magic a witch can perform, if you can control yourself."

"I want to teach you – wait! Don't protest yet, I can see it scares you, but I can promise you will be safe with me. I'm not the most skilled witch in the traditional sense, in many ways, I would say that would be Bellatrix, as much as I am loath to admit it, but this has been my passion for years. I worked closely with Minerva McGonagall herself on the theory of unbound magic. Let me teach you, please. Give me this much trust."

Somewhere in the middle of her speech, Andromeda had moved to the chair beside Hermione, and it was a tribute to the enthralling qualities of her voice that, in truth, Hermione had not even noticed. Now, she took Hermione's hands from where they gripped her armrests and intertwined their fingers, drawing them into the older witch's lap.

"You can still learn spells, the library is completely at your disposal, but this is the sort of opportunity I've waited a lifetime for! A mind like yours; so much potential yet so open, so vulnerable to new ideas, new truths. You're old enough to understand the need for care, old enough to control yourself around this sort of power, yes, but, Merlin, your mind is so exquisitely uncorrupted. Let me have this, please."

Hermione's "uncorrupted" mind was whirling. Some of what Andromeda was saying terrified her, certainly, yet some of it called to her. Part of her knew she could never regain all she had missed in the years she should have been at Hogwarts, but this, this would give her an experience none of those children she had longed to be had ever had, would ever have. And the way Andromeda spoke, Merlin, it was entrancing, enticing. Hermione felt wanted in a way she had never felt in her life. There was a possessiveness to Andromeda's words that should perhaps have bothered her, but it felt… right.

"A-alright. Yes. Merlin knows what I'm getting myself into, mind you," she said, trying to sound firmly reluctant while really feeling far too excited for the fear to last too long, "but I'll do it. I... I do trust you. I'm not sure why but... I do." Besides, after putting her up like this, taking care of her mum and dad, she couldn't exactly afford to decline.

Andromeda was positively beaming. She drew Hermione up by their joined hands and pulled her into a firm hug, wrapping her arms around her neck and drawing her close. Without pulling back, she spoke into the younger witch's ear. "You won't regret this, Ms. Granger. I won't let you regret
Something about that last phrase was mildly alarming to Hermione, there was something dark to it, but Andromeda's embrace was warm and Hermione could blame her goosebumps on the breath feathering across the pulse point behind her ear, so she chose to forget it.

Andromeda drew back slowly, separating their bodies but recapturing Hermione's hands. She was perhaps a palm's width taller than the younger witch, so Hermione neck tilted back to meet her eyes. Again, there was something there, in those strangely provocative eyes of hers, and Hermione wanted to dive into them and swim until she found all the answers, all the secrets, but a knock on the door made Hermione startle backwards, wondering how long she had been standing that close.

"Andromeda!"

"What do you want, Lucius?" Andromeda said, clearly exasperated. "I'm busy."

"My bloody wife has disappeared yet again. If she's in there, tell her she damn well better talk to me sometime, or I'll—"

"—Or you'll what, Lucius? She isn't here anyway. If you knew Cissa half as well as you should you'd know she'll be found when she wants to and not a moment before."

"By Merlin this house isn't that big! I'm not going to…"

His words trailed off into the distance as he paced away, leaving Andromeda and Hermione behind and entirely unsure what was supposed to come next.

"I suppose that was enough of a shock to dump on you in one morning, no?"

As much as Hermione would have loved to sit here all day, to learn as much as she could from the most engaging woman she had ever met, she knew a dismissal when she heard one.

"Same time tomorrow?" she asked, trying not to sound desperate.

"Of course. And you're welcome to… talk to me anytime, know that," Andromeda replied. "My doors are always open."

Hermione was unsure why that drew a blush, yet once again her cheeks were betraying her. "Thank you. I'll, um, keep that in mind."

She turned to go.

"Oh, and Hermione?"

"Yes, ma'am?" she asked, wincing when she realized she had dropped her name yet again, but Andromeda let it slide.

"Thank you for the chocolate - it's my favorite. Close the door on your way out."
As she settled into her first week at Black Manor, a pattern began to weave its way into Hermione's days. She dove headfirst into the challenge of creating a menu of sorts for her employers; one which did not require an excessive amount of time on her part, but which would also draw no complaint from any one of her more intimidating superiors. The plates would disappear from her kitchen artfully arranged with her foods of choice and reappear almost entirely empty, to be met with a relieved sigh, knowing she had yet to utterly fail. She often tried to engage the two house-elves, Rommie and Atcham, in conversation, but unless addressed with a direct request for help they would respond only with varying degrees of "Yes, missus."

Andromeda made it clear she was welcome to dine beside her, but Hermione chose to take her meals in the kitchen, and the issue was not pressed.

Her morning lessons were fast becoming a highlight of her day. Andromeda never seemed to judge her by any semblance of a traditional magical standard; rather, she spent the first week merely feeling out Hermione's strengths and weaknesses. The young witch discovered much about herself in the process, often surprising herself with her own abilities. Her patchwork education may have been lackluster, but her strength was not. Even without training, she had built up a level of control quite beyond her age, which Andromeda speculated as a mixture of the repetitive tasks she had undertaken in her home and her self-inflicted fluidity within the world of magic.

Hermione thought Andromeda's testing peculiarly haphazard, and it was beginning to feel redundant, but it was this realization that led the younger witch to connect the dots and see the pattern Andromeda was weaving for her. It was in this pattern that Hermione found Andromeda's true genius at teaching. Without her realization, Hermione was beginning to… well… see the spells. No, that wasn't quite right. It wasn't physical, wasn't visual. It was something more than even perceptual. It was an unconscious categorization, an assignment of spells based on the tasks they performed. By leading Hermione's already known magical abilities into recognizing the similarities and differences in their purposes, Andromeda was teaching Hermione a new system for merging and creating her unbound spells.

When Andromeda saw that Hermione had figured it out, perhaps three days into their meetings, she graced her with one of the approving smiles Hermione was becoming almost dependent on. "Ah, so you've noticed the method to my madness? Excellent."

Though Hermione was still rather timid around the family in everyday interactions, she had developed a sort of rapport with Andromeda that existed within the four walls of her mother's study and allowed her to speak more freely.

"This wasn't really a test at all," Hermione mused aloud. "You could have gauged my abilities in a day at most, but… this was the first lesson."

Andromeda nodded and arched an eyebrow, prompting Hermione to continue.

"These spells… they're… related?" Andromeda made no more to reply, so Hermione continued, trying to sound more sure of herself. "I'm beginning to… anticipate the sort of spells that you're going to ask for next. I can feel how one spell will lead into another, or how the last two could mix."

Andromeda smiled once more and elaborated on Hermione's assumptions. "Precisely. While a school curriculum would teach you spells in broken, distinct divisions with names like Charms,
Transfigurations, Divinations, Defenses, Herbals… magic simply isn't that—"

"—linear?" Hermione offered, then bit her lip. She always had a nagging habit of wanting to pipe up when she knew where a lesson was going, but interrupting was probably not the best idea, and it wasn't the first instance she had done so with Andromeda. "Sorry," she murmured.

Andromeda merely gave her an indulgent smile and a soft chuckle. "Correct, again, Ms. Granger. Five points to Slytherin!" At Hermione's confused expression, Andromeda was quick to add, "Not that you would have been a Slytherin, as such. I was one – merely a reflex to give points to my old house. I can't see you in silver and green, though. Perhaps a Ravenclaw… even a Gryffindor. Who can say?"

Hermione's mind connected the references to the stories from the other Diagon children, stories of a singing hat and house rivalry and common rooms in dungeons and towers. She had lived in her imagination back then, begging her friends for tales to feed her fantasies of a life she might have had.

Andromeda's eyes had darkened. "I must say, I'm having a hard time feeling charitable towards your parents, right now. It was absolutely criminal to not send you to school. I don't doubt that you could have been quite the brightest witch of your age."

Hermione blushed and shook her head. "Hardly," she replied, trying to brush off the compliment.

"I'm serious, Hermione. Not that I'm not thrilled to have you all to myself, but you would have thrived at Hogwarts."

Though years of seeing herself as the lowest end of society had taught Hermione little self-worth, she couldn't help but brighten at Andromeda's words. "Really?" she asked cautiously, as though afraid the words would be taken back.

"Of course. I could see you as quite the teacher's pet," Andromeda said with a wry smile. "McGonagall would have adored you… the librarian would have known you by name… I bet you would have been the only student awake in the entire classroom during History of Magic."

This drew a smile from Hermione. She had heard of the ghost teacher with the voice dry and monotonous as unsweetened rock-cakes.

Andromeda returned to the lesson in a matter of a moment. "But it does no good to dwell on might-have-beens. Where were we?"

"Magic isn't linear?" Hermione prompted.

Andromeda went on to explain that types of magic are much more circular. There are three broad categories, for convenience sake: Transfigurative; spells which change the form or purpose of an object or idea, Charming; spells which cause an object or idea to perform an action, and Engaging; spells of an offensive or defensive nature, most commonly used in dueling. All magic fell into at least one of these categories, but many fell into two or all three, hence, the only way – Andromeda insisted – to organize magic was to picture a loop where one type flowed into another and another and right back to the start.

By the end of the week, Hermione had added her own twist to this system for her sanity's sake. She began thinking of Transfigurative, Charming, and Engaging spells as the primary colors, red, blue, and yellow. When she needed a spell that both transfigured and charmed, she could reach into her mind and swirl her imaginary pallet, plucking out the proper shade of purple and casting a spell. It was trial-and-error, at first, to find exactly which end of the spectrum spells would fall into, but the
longer she spent in that room with Andromeda, the more missing pieces seemed to fall into place, the more magic seemed to peel itself open to her, and the more enthralled she became.

Andromeda seemed to feed off of Hermione's successes. The first time Hermione managed a spell she had no name for, it triggered the older witch's eyes to gleam with a sort of biting joy. No matter how tired Andromeda appeared when Hermione entered, she seemed rejuvenated by the time the younger witch left, as though a weight had been lifted from her shoulders with each spell Hermione cast.

Magic was only one piece of Hermione's interactions with Andromeda, though. Andromeda Black, Hermione decided, was a very… physical person. She would often pace the room, her circuits leading her time and again to wherever the younger woman sat or stood. Many of these passing moments resulted in a quick brush of fingers across Hermione's shoulders or down her arm, or perhaps a lingering hand at the small of Hermione's back. In her moments of instruction, she frequented the chair across from the younger witch and had taken to picking up one or the other of Hermione's hands between her own, playing aimlessly with her fingers as she spoke.

It was distracting to say the least.

The woman moved in a way Hermione admired too much to envy, with a sort of fluid grace to her every gesture that drew the eye and snared it. As much as Hermione thirsted for learning, as much as she listened raptly to every piece of knowledge Andromeda could impart to her, she found that it took little more than a casual touch to fracture her attention and leave her scrambling to catch up to the last words.

The side-eyed smiles Andromeda gave her when she stumbled over her own tongue began convincing Hermione that Andromeda was quite aware of the effect she was having on the younger witch, and took some strange pleasure in setting her on edge, but she pushed the thought from her mind, thinking she must just be looking for something that wasn't there.

It took a nearly disastrous attempt at a simple unlocking spell for Andromeda to notice the decrepit state of Hermione's wand. Andromeda was having her cast spells she would typically use an incantation for, spells she already knew, but without speaking, something Hermione found rather more challenging than creating a silent spell she did not actually have a name for. As she flicked her wand while drawing out a shade of pale blue from the depths of her mind, a sliver of splintering wood from the handle pricked her forefinger and snapped off, slipping into her skin.

Hermione let out a muffled curse at both the sharp pain in her finger, and the state of the lock she had been aiming towards, which was now a steaming mess of melted metal. "Oh, bugger!" She slid down into the chair behind her.

Andromeda caught sight of a drop of blood as Hermione lifted her finger to her lips, sucking at the cut.

"Are you alright?" she asked, ignoring the faintly smoking floor and pulling Hermione's hand towards her.

"Fine, I'm grand, really. It… it happens. Too often. I'm terribly sorry about your lock!" she added, wondering how much the silver-embossed thing had cost. "Merlin, I'm sorry, I should have thought before I cast on something that val—"

Andromeda held up a hand, cutting her off. "It's alright, really. I'm much more worried about having pieces of wandwood under your skin." She was inspecting the splinter in Hermione's finger with a
critical eye. "Don't move," she ordered, kneeling down and resting Hermione's wrist on her thigh as she reached into her sleeve for her wand. She lifted the younger witch's hand once more and placed the tip of her wand beside the sliver of wood. With a muffled incantation, Hermione felt a soothing warmth spread into her fingertip and leak down into her palm. She felt no pain when Andromeda gently extracted the offending splinter, but she felt a different sort of warmth when her finger was tenderly lifted and brought to Andromeda's waiting lips. They closed about Hermione's fingertip in a leisurely motion, cheeks hollowing in a soothing pull, tongue flicking over her small injury in a teasing caress.

Hermione could not seem to pull her eyes away from those lips; she had no control over her own hand, Andromeda's fingers controlling hers as surely as her lips were controlling the very pulse that beat at her throat. When the lips slowly parted, allowing her hand to escape with a final, lingering brush against her lower lip, Hermione had to relearn how to breathe.

"Had to make sure there weren't any more… splinters," Andromeda whispered, voice entirely too husky for the safety of Hermione's stuttering heartbeat.

"T-thank you," she managed. She glanced down at her hand, noticing there was not so much as a lingering twinge of pain or a faint prick mark.

"Of course," Andromeda replied, rising once more and extending her hand to help Hermione from her seat. Hermione accepted the proffered palm with her now-uninjured hand and stood. Andromeda did not let go. She absent-mindedly toyed with Hermione's fingers as she picked up the old wand Hermione had dropped on the edge of the desk with her other hand. "By Merlin!" she exclaimed softly. "I can't believe you haven't killed yourself with this!"

Hermione ducked her head, embarrassed in a helpless sort of way whenever she had to watch as someone like Andromeda witnessed the things she lived with. It was one thing to wear the same three sets of house-friendly robes; after all, she was technically a servant here, and she kept them clean and well-fitting. It was another to have to use a wand that could easily do damage in this house, damage she certainly could not afford to repair, but what could she do?

"I'm sorry, really. I'm used to its… moods. It's been a long while since it bit me like that," she joked halfheartedly. "You can take the damages out of my pay, and I'll polish it tonight…"

Andromeda shook her head. "If you polish this twig down any further, you'll be casting with a toothpick!" She dropped the wand and Hermione's hand in one motion. Hermione nervously knitted her fingers together, fingertips drumming agitatedly against the backs of her hands.

In a swift motion, Andromeda cradled Hermione's cheeks in her palms and tilted her head up to meet her eyes. Once she had the younger woman's full attention, she let her hands slip to her shoulders instead. "Listen to me, Hermione. I'm not going to dock your pay for an accident. I would never do that. You needn't apologize to me; I couldn't care less about the bloody lock. I'm worried about you." Her hands squeezed Hermione's upper arms. "You can't know when something could go wrong! With a wand as old as that, the best you can hope for is that nothing explodes when you use it. I'm amazed you went these last few days without an accident." By this point, her palms had slid down Hermione's arms and were now grasping the younger witch's hands once more. "I know you have a… thing… about earning your keep, that you don't want charity from me, but the next time I'm near Ollivanders, I'm going to get you a new wand, one that will not only not kill you, but which will be made to answer to you, and I don't want you to say one word about paying me back."

Hermione wanted to protest; Andromeda had already done so much for her! But as the older woman raised Hermione's hands to her face, pressing her knuckles into her lips and looking down at her with pleading eyes, she could hardly deny her.
"I – alright," she muttered reluctantly. "I – thank you."

Andromeda's eyes brightened and she grinned. "Brilliant."

Her lips graced across the back of Hermione's hand in what could have been a butterfly kiss, but could have just as easily been a simple side-effect of letting go.

For all that she spent every morning with Andromeda, this was only one of the facets of the twisted family Hermione was living amongst, and she was beginning to find herself just as intrigued by a second Black witch, one whom she found herself crossing paths with more and more as time wore on.

Starting her second day, Hermione took to the library after lunch each afternoon, cleaning and organizing and flipping through pages in equal measure. On her second visit, she found that she was not always the sole occupant of the neglected room.

Standing atop the second-to-last rung on the ladder, Hermione used the tips of her fingers to slide a book into its proper place on the shelving. Reaching for its neighbor, she nearly tipped off when the library door opened with a creak to admit the frantic-eyed form of Narcissa Malfoy. Hermione froze, never sure what to expect from the withdrawn, volatile woman. Narcissa peered around for a moment but her eyes did not stray to the upper recesses where Hermione perched. Letting out an audible sigh, Narcissa grabbed a book from the nearest shelf and slumped down into a neighboring loveseat, kicking off her shoes and swinging her legs up and over the far armrest in a picture so lacking in grace or decorum that it drew a startled laugh from Hermione.

In the high-ceiled, echoing chamber, the sound carried, and Narcissa immediately jerked up into a standing position, drawing her wand and demanding, "Who's there!"

Not wanting to end up on the wrong end of a defensive spell, Hermione called out in a trembling voice. "It's just me, Hermione. Sorry if I disturbed you, ma'am."

Finally identifying the source of the voice, just visible above a row of bookcases, Narcissa gradually lowered her wand. "Whatever are you doing in here, girl?" she asked sharply. "No one comes in here," she added, voice lower.

Hermione debated climbing down so as not to continue the conversation at such an awkward angle, but felt oddly safer in the heights. "Yes, Andromeda told me as much," she started cautiously. "But… I… I've never been around so many books in my life, ma'am, and I… I do so like them. I hate to see them left untended. I thought… I thought to use my spare time to dust and put this space in order." Hermione was aware that she was babbling, but the unreadable, calculating look that was affixed to the other woman's face seemed to draw out almost pleading explanations. "I had no idea anyone else would come here. I can go…"

Though her face remained impassive, Narcissa shook her head. "Oh, don't leave on my account."

"No, really, it's no trouble… I—"

Narcissa cut her off. "—Stay," she said, voice firm, commanding.

Knowing better than to argue, Hermione was left to fidget awkwardly atop a ladder, unsure whether it would be rude to continue her work. Narcissa seemed prepared to ignore her presence once more, settling back into her seat, though with a great deal more grace and poise this time, so Hermione turned and pulled the next book from the shelf, resigning herself to having an audience.
Her organizing strategy was haphazard at best, rather like the solitaire card game Clock played by wizards and Muggles alike. Each time she came across a book in her dusting that wasn't where it belonged, she would pick it up, bring it to a more suitable category, and begin dusting there until she reached another book that needed a new home. In this way, she was often forced to traverse from one end of the chamber to the other and back again in only three books, but it was the only way she could think of doing this without leaving piles of half-organized books behind when she left later in the afternoon.

Today, she could feel Narcissa's eyes on her each time she crossed the space where the elder witch sat; sometimes even when across the room, but if she chanced a glance over her shoulder, Narcissa would appear engrossed in her book. Hermione made a game of attempting to see the title, either written across the top of the page, or along the spine, or even on the front cover, wondering what sort of books a true Lady read. However, despite many roundabout paths taken, Hermione couldn't quite grasp hold of the illusive words.

After a time, Narcissa rose gracefully, pocketed the small book in the depths of her robe, and departed the library, leaving Hermione feeling relieved, but oddly… alone.

The next day found Hermione once more tidying a row when the door creaked open and the same pale figure entered. Her eyes immediately locked into Hermione's. Narcissa gave a curt nod, acknowledging her presence, but said nothing. She settled into the same chair, and Hermione went back to work.

She couldn't help but cast a few glances towards the blonde figure, though. She was dressed as impeccably as ever, in a manner Hermione would have considered more appropriate for a luncheon than a chair in the library of her own home, but it was fitting for what little she knew of the witch. She wore light robes of a deep sea-green, which, Hermione thought, had they been a shade lighter, could have made her look as pallid as a drowned corpse. Instead, the rich shade leant her skin a pearl-like tone and darkened the crystalline blue of her eyes. She quickly glanced back to the shelves when Narcissa looked up, but watched from the corner of her eyes as the fair witch scanned briskly from side to side, as though hunting for an unseen observer, before casually toeing off her polished black boots and tucking her feet daintily beneath her.

Hermione could have thought it amusing, but instead found it rather sad. She tried to imagine what sort of life this woman had led that would lead her to believe that being seen relaxing in her own home was a sign of weakness.

When Narcissa was settled into her book, Hermione began scaling the nearest ladder, holding two books on wizarding history which she knew belonged on the uppermost shelves, not down below with the healing texts. This ladder was rickety, and a bit twitchy, wanting to scuttle away like a shy puppy whenever she approached it, but it always seemed to settle down nicely once she was on it.

When the upper rungs made a particularly loud creak of protest, Hermione caught Narcissa's eyes darting over to her as she was nearing the top, but she pretended not to notice, focused instead on finding the proper brass plaque which labeled the section she wanted so she could come down quickly. She wasn't afraid of heights, per say, but she wasn't thrilled by them, either, especially when perched on a wobbly ladder. She spotted books of a similar nature to the two she carried and slid them carefully into their slots.

When the ladder Hermione had ascended suddenly slid sideways with a sickening screech, the ultimate form of toe-curling nails-on-blackboard magnified by the cavernous room, Narcissa cried out harshly. "Stop! Stop," she said again, tone calm once more. "Get down, now."

Hermione, frozen since the ladder had moved with a distinct lack of her permission, unlocked her
limbs with a conscious effort and tried to slow her racing heart. She cautiously descended, wondering exactly which of her actions had triggered the Lady Malfoy's demand. She kept her chin down when she reached the floor, not approaching the figure in the chair, as though clinging to the shelved-in row would provide her some sort of buffer from any impending punishment.

"Come here," the older witch snapped, sounding impatient for the first time.

Stifling a whimper, Hermione cautiously approached until she was close enough to view Narcissa's footwear without raising her gaze from its submissive posture.

The blonde witch sighed. "Relax, girl," she muttered, though her tone was not encouraging. "I'm sure you'll go right back to your cleaning and climbing once I've gone, but for the moment I have no desire to watch you nearly kill yourself on these ancient ladders. Get a book. Sit," she added, gesturing to the chair opposite her own.

Hermione stood frozen for a moment, weighing out the words in her mind. Though spoken with a substantial degree of condescension, Narcissa still spoke with a semblance of true care for Hermione's well-being. A bit timidly, she picked up a book she had selected to borrow earlier on ancient runes and sat at the very edge of the chair the fair-haired witch had indicated, shoulders hunched inwards protectively.

Narcissa gave an amused sniff. "I don't bite," she said drolly.

Hermione flushed and forced herself to relax as she opened her book, but the letters seemed to swarm like so many flies on the page, darting in and out of her vision and only managing to point her attention back to the woman seated opposite her. By the time she had read the same page seven times, glancing reflexively up at Narcissa every few lines, the other woman finally spoke.

"What are you reading?"

Hermione jumped in her seat at the unexpected words, not actually able to comprehend that the Lady Malfoy was asking her a question in a conversational manner. "P-pardon?"

Narcissa sighed and closed her book. "I see little point in sitting here and reading when you cannot seem to keep your eyes on your own book and I cannot read when someone is staring at me, so I think an attempt at conversation should be made, to save us both a degree of… discomfort."

Hermione was sure her cheeks were a shade of pure crimson by that point. "Sorry I… I didn't mean to stare, ma'am."

Narcissa quirked an eyebrow. "Of course," she said in a tone so flat that the haughty cynicism could not even roll off of it.

Hermione was fairly certain her cheeks had impossibly darkened. She wondered idly what sort of spell she could cast with the color she turned at her most embarrassed. Shaking off her nervous musings, she decided her best bet was to scrape up some remnant of dignity and answer Narcissa's original question.

"Ancient Runes in the World of the Modern Wizard," she said, awkwardly half-lifting the book from her lap.

"Hmm," was Narcissa's only reply, though her other eyebrow had joined its twin, rising above her eyes in a way that spoke of grudging surprise.

When nothing further was offered, Hermione found herself speaking, though she was honestly sure
she had not meant to. "There were so many books; I simply couldn't decide where to start! I've always loved languages, though – learned quite a bit of Mermish from a travelling fisher-wizard at the inn, and he always told me the best way to learn history is through language..." She bit off the words and looked down. When Narcissa still did not speak, she slowly raised her eyes, expecting a reprimand for her one-sided dialogue.

Instead, she received a calculating look and a small, dry smile. "And here I thought my sister said you were uneducated," Narcissa mused, half to herself. She cocked her head in a very birdlike manner. "But ancient runes are hardly light reading."

Hermione haltingly replied, "I... You would certainly consider me uneducated, ma'am. But... I like to think that I've learned more than some my age have read in all their fancy schooling."

Narcissa hummed again, blinking slowly. "I'll admit, you're... intriguing... for a Mudblood." Hermione did not flinch at the word. She had been called worse, and, coming from the Lady Malfoy, it was almost too expected to be insulting. "It's not often I have someone who can speak as well as a highborn calling me 'ma'am'."

It was a compliment, in a roundabout way. Hermione had always prided herself on sounding as learned as she could, purposely avoiding the commoners' talk her mum and dad conversed in by paging through the dictionary in the mop cupboard whenever her dad wasn't around and the drunkard who always stayed upstairs tried to get frisky with her, as well as by listening to people around her who spoke with that little lilt to their words that told of a different upbringing. She could sound as demure and polite as she needed to work for purebloods and Ministry-folk, but she never had to sound ignorant.

"Well... I try, ma'am."

Now, Narcissa's lips quirked into something almost real. "I think I could like you," she said, voice almost too soft for Hermione to catch the words. "Or at least your taste in pastimes," she added, voice growing more distant again. Still, she spoke to Hermione, and that was more than she had expected, away from Andromeda's mediating presence. "I had a taste for languages when I was younger; nothing like the half-breed tongue Merpeople speak, but I did enjoy high Elvish, and the many dead wizarding languages provided some amusement."

Hermione's eyes brightened. "High Elvish? Why, I thought the last of the Elvin Scrolls were lost in the Archives Fire at Athens?" One of her favorite presents she had ever received had been a used copy of *A History of the Ancient Races* her father had found when a long-departed guest had never returned to claim his belongings. It had been her tenth birthday, and she had read it over so many times since then that she had had to re-stitch the bindings by hand on three occasions.

Again, Narcissa's face slipped into a mask of grudging respect at Hermione's apparent interest. "Something can be said for having private libraries passed down through generations of pureblood families."

"You have Elvin Scrolls in here?" She had yet to even approach the oldest parts of the library, those against the far wall, afraid to damage the racks of scrolls and tablets, remnants of a time long since passed.

"Among other things," Narcissa replied. "I've been reading through these shelves since I was a girl, and I have yet to run out."

Hermione glanced around the room once more, unable to comprehend how Narcissa could have spent her time in here without having it cleaned. "If I may, why have you let everything get so... run
"Disorganized, dusty, filthy, you mean?" Narcissa's face, which had become almost animated when talking about the books, seemed to be shutting in upon itself. "If the space looks as though no one has entered in years, no one thinks to come in."

"But—" she started.

"—This is a place I go when I do not wish to be found, Hermione." It was the first time, Hermione realized, that the youngest sister had addressed her by name. Despite the harsh tone of the words, it was a pleasant change. Narcissa's voice was brittle. "I will explain this to you once, and only once," she continued. "Because if I am to share this space with you, I had best be able to trust your… discretion."

Hermione nodded her head quickly. "You don't need to explain anything to me, Lady Malfoy. I know better than to betray any confidence of my employers."

"Mm," Narcissa mused. "Perhaps. And still… I find I'd rather you not think I've neglected these halls needlessly."

Though she would never have spoken that thought aloud, it had crossed Hermione's mind.

"As I'm sure you're aware, my husband and I are not on the most… congenial of terms, at the moment."

Judging from the many times Hermione had rounded a corner to find the couple quarreling at wand-point, that was an understatement.

"He has his reasons, I have mine, but he is more fond of confrontation than I. When I am not in the mood to deal with his… petty grievances and childlike pride, I come here."

Hermione felt torn. Part of her felt real fear, fear that some piece of what Narcissa was telling her could come back to haunt her, that if she ever reconciled with Lucius, Hermione would become someone who knew something she did not want the rest of society to know, and that would make Hermione very… disposable. But another part of her – a foolish, soft-hearted part – kind of wanted to give the cold, distant woman a hug and tell her that she understood perfectly, that she, too, found comfort and safety in books, though in a different manner, of course. Still, Hermione did not have a suicide wish, so she merely sat and tried to keep a neutral, understanding expression on her face.

"He doesn't look for me here – I doubt the man has ever set foot in this space, and he would not suspect it of me." She gave a self-depreciating chuckle. "He has never bothered to notice that his wife has a brain in her head to match the face he married for the public's sake."

For the first time, Hermione was able to let go of some of the deeply-buried envy she had for the life of a wealthy pureblood. She had never truly wanted to be one, but some part of her had still longed for the security, the money, the education; but this, to have to marry someone based solely on blood, not love, not passion, not even intellectual compatibility… it was not a pleasant thought.

"So this is where I come, when I can get away without his notice. All of the books have a basic wear-and-tear protection spell, as well as numerous anti-aging charms, so I've let the dust… stay. It makes for a useful little deterrent to most visitors."

"Does that mean you'd… rather I not clean in here?" Hermione inquired.

Narcissa shook her head. "Ah, no… no. The place deserves a good cleansing. If Lucius expresses
the slightest interest in what you've been doing, don't mention this little project of yours, and I quite
doubt he'll push the matter."

Hermione nodded earnestly.

Narcissa’s confession created a semblance of peace between the two witches, a façade of trust and an
interesting illusion of respect that allowed for the trappings of conversation to grow up around it. For
the next hour, words were traded on-and-off.

Hermione, feeling a change of subject was needed, judging from the fragile look on Narcissa's face
when she was speaking about her husband, nervously inquired what the Lady was reading.

Narcissa appeared amused that Hermione had the gall to actually attempt to initiate a new topic, but
she did reply. "Light, leisure reading at the moment. Just a little old-fashioned wizard fiction for a
change. Nothing I'd recommend."

Hermione's curiosity was piqued, but she didn't want to push her luck, so instead she asked, "What
would you recommend, ma'am?"

Much to Hermione's astonishment, Narcissa seemed perfectly willing to discuss literature with her.
By the time Narcissa stood to leave, more than an hour had passed in a quiet exchange about the
noteworthy contents of the Black family's legacy library.

Throughout the week, Hermione fell into a system with the blonde Black. She would arrive perhaps
an hour or two before Narcissa and work at her cleaning and sorting, but she would hop down from
the ladders the moment the older woman arrived and settle into her usual seat. Narcissa seemed to
have two moods: talk, or read. Hermione could tell between the two because, if she felt like
talking… she would start talking. And so, her afternoons became full of companionable literature,
either in reading side-by-side, or talking quietly of what they read.

She became much more comfortable in the fair witch's presence, as long as her husband was not
around. In fact, when she finally remembered the letter she wanted to send to her mother, it was
Narcissa she asked first.

"I think Andromeda keeps a bird in her rooms. I just use the house-elves, though," she replied
flippantly, as though the idea of sending elves to Diagon with the mail wasn't even an inconvenience
for them. She made a mental note to inquire with Andromeda, next.

Outside of the library, Hermione almost never caught more than a glimpse of Narcissa, perhaps
talking in emphatic whispers with Andromeda, arguing at wand-point with Lucius, or disappearing
up the third flight of stairs. Still, as little as she saw the two Black sisters outside of their nearly
scripted times in the study and library, she still knew generally where they could be found at most
times of day, still heard heels echoing on flagstone or marble. Andromeda and Narcissa were
presences in her life, which made the absence of the third sister that much more noticeable.

It weighed on Hermione in her moments of free thought that there was a fifth presence in this house
that she had absolutely no true awareness of. She had never heard so much as a whisper from the
rooms above her, let alone caught a glimpse of the mysterious, maniacal third sister. The stairwell
became a guilty obsession for her. She would linger on the second-floor landing for longer and
longer pauses each time before entering the halls leading to her chambers. She would sit in the little
stairway window ledge with a book borrowed from the library, rather than read in any of the more
comfortable settings; the library chairs, her own bed. Narcissa had seen her there once, but had
merely given her an implacable look before moving on without a word. Andromeda's chambers were
closer to the other stair, so she had not discovered Hermione's strange pastime.

She couldn't seem to help herself – she was curious by nature.

Her curiosity only grew worse when she received concrete proof of the final sister's presence, on a night exactly a week since her first in the Manor.

Hermione woke to darkness in a moment of gut-wrenching panic, something solid, heavy pressing down on her stomach, restricting her breath. She froze, eyes wide and unseeing, not daring to so much as breathe. When the weight remained unmoving, she inched quivering fingers beneath the sheets, layers of the finest cloth beginning to feel like a prison. Feeling cold air against her fingertips, she wrapped a grasping hand around the well-worn handle of her wand, drawing it back towards her.

Don't panic, don't panic, she told herself.

The weight shifted, a sinewy motion, and something sharp pressed against a line of bare flesh on her side. She shuddered. Her motion triggered a strange sound to peal into the room, a garbled murmur, not threatening, but certainly not human. Her eyes were beginning to adjust to the faint starlight dripping in through the window, and she caught a glimpse of a flame-orange eye peering intently at her through the darkness.

Voice quavering, she whispered, "Lumos."

There was a bird on her chest, and it wasn't a small one, either.

The eyes were closer to yellow in her wandlight, hooded enough to seem to be glowering menacingly at her. Its head shot forward, trying to bite the ball of light off the end of her wand, but she jerked her hand back, making the bird squawk and hop backwards, spreading wings to a distance nearly as wide across as Hermione was tall. She let out a rather undignified squeak and scuttled upright until her back was pressed against the headboard. Then, she proceeded to have a staring contest from one end of the bed to the other.

It was a pretty bird, she thought, once she got over the sheer size, the sharp talons, and the demonic eyes. It was some sort of owl; coloring similar to a calico cat, all blacks, whites, and greys interspersed with a tawny orange-brown. Tufts of black fuzz stuck up from the corners of wide, round eyes, forming little fluffy horns. In its threatened posture, the head had tucked back into a frame of raised wings, and its small black beak looked almost comical amidst all that feathery indignation.

After a moment, the owl relaxed and raised up its foreleg, revealing a bit of rolled-up parchment grasped in its talons.

Hermione swallowed nervously, wondering if she were in some sort of trouble. A bird this big usually meant business, and not of the pleasant sort. Still, she knew better than to ignore a mail-bird, so she clutched the uppermost blanket protectively around her shoulders and crawled rather clumsily towards the owl. When she stretched out her hand to take the parchment, the owl darted that smallish beak down and snapped it closed about the meaty part of Hermione's hand with surprising strength.

She yelped, snatching her hand back, luckily taking the parchment with her. Expecting the bird to leave now its job was done, she was left to glare at the owl when it simply continued to sit at the foot of her bed, looking very satisfied with itself.

Letting out muffled curses and cradling her lightly bleeding hand against her stomach, she undid the
little piece of ribbon holding the roll closed with her teeth and shook it out flat. It was little more than a scrap; fancy paper covered in only a few sparse lines of hasty, childlike scrawl.

_A little birdie told me my sister’s pretty Mudblood wanted to send a letter. I thought it a perfect chance to say 'Hullo, I know you’re here!’_

_You should come and see me sometime. It’s awful lonely on the third floor._

_Have the bird; doesn’t like me, and he bites like the bastard he is._

_Best regards, pet,_

_Bellatrix._
"Andromeda?" Hermione called out tentatively, knuckles rapping on the door to the other witch's chambers. She had been sitting in her own room long enough to decide that she couldn't exactly keep the bird perched on the back of the desk chair forever. It was the middle of the night, but she had a feeling that Andromeda would rather be woken than have a giant owl tearing apart her house. "Andromeda?" she tried again, slightly louder.

"Hermione?" she heard from within, voice husky and rasping with sleep. A moment later, Andromeda opened the door, wrapped in a silky robe of midnight blue which was hanging open almost indecently at the neckline. Trying and utterly failing not to blush, Hermione firmly affixed her eyes to Andromeda's face instead, noticing that bedhead gave her hair wild curls which she had to hold back from her eyes in a most unrefined way. It was sort of adorable, but paired with the amount of skin exposed below, it was wreaking havoc with Hermione's heartbeat.

"I'm really sorry to wake you, ma'am…" Hermione started, but it seemed Andromeda was not too sleepy to give her a reproachful look for using a title over her name. "…Andromeda, but, erm…" She really wasn't sure how to put this. "Your sister just sent me a really big bird, and I'm not sure what to do with it."

"What?" Andromeda asked, suddenly sounding much more awake.

"B-Bellatrix," Hermione added. "I woke up and there was this huge owl just… just sitting on me. And… it had a note from Bellatrix."

Andromeda stepped aside, briskly pulling the flaps of her robe together and tying it shut as she gestured for Hermione to come in. "Bellatrix contacted you?" she asked. "Sit," she added, all business, gesturing aimlessly over her shoulder as she turned to light the lamp behind her.

Hermione sat in a bedside chair, blinking in the dim light that filled the room. Andromeda's chambers were laid out similarly to Hermione's, though with an extra door in the far wall. It looked slightly more modern in décor than her own, with cleaner lines to the bed and furniture, paler woods, little metal, and trappings in shades of a delicate peach and darker olive to match the odd floral wallpaper that bordered the ceiling. It wasn't anything Hermione would have pictured, but Andromeda fit the room nicely all the same.

"Note," Andromeda added. "You said she sent a note? What did it say?"

Hermione nervously tugged the now lightly crumpled note from the pocket of her robes and handed it over. Andromeda snatched it from her fingers with a haste Hermione realized was coloring all her motions. She seemed far more on edge that Hermione would have expected, almost frantic.

The parchment was crumpled and tossed down with a sound of frustration. Hermione bent reflexively to snatch it up.

"Blank. Of course. Damn my sister and her meddlesome—"

"What?" Hermione asked, smoothing it out once more and scanning the words it held. "It isn't blank… It says—" Hermione's eyes bulged and she grasped her throat frantically as her tongue seemed to swell within her mouth, going hard and dry as dust for a few panic-stricken seconds. The feeling faded quickly, leaving Hermione coughing and drawing in heaving lungfuls of air. Andromeda stood behind her, rubbing soothing circles on the younger woman's back and murmuring...
platitudes of comfort.

When Hermione felt a degree of calm return to her, she risked a questioning glance at the witch behind her. Andromeda let her hand rest between Hermione's shoulder blades, heavy with the weight of the sigh she released before speaking. "Clearly, my dearest sister does not wish me interfering in what she has decided is her business. She's put a secrecy charm on that parchment; don't hurt yourself trying to tell me what it says."

Hermione stared down at the paper, reading over what she considered the relatively harmless words it contained. "It really doesn't say all that much," Hermione spoke with caution, afraid of how much leniency the charm would give her. "But I'm sorry all the same."

"Oh, don't be. As with the many little… peculiarities that come with living under these roofs, my sister's brand of madness is no fault of yours." Andromeda had begun pacing, clearly agitated by some part of their exchange. She walked from window to door to chair and back again, robe fluttering behind her. After a time in which Hermione nervously fidgeted with the paper she still held, the other witch finally spoke. "The bird. Is it still in your room?"

"Yes," Hermione answered, glad of a word she could speak freely. "She…" Hermione hesitated, but decided to try. "ShesaidIcouldhaveit," she blurted, all in one breath, then sucked in a quick gasp of relief when she felt no ill effects. At Andromeda's quizzical look, she reiterated, "She said I could have it; the owl. She, ah, knew I'd wanted to send a letter."

Andromeda's eyes widened, then narrowed to accusatory slits. "When have you been around my sister?" she asked, voice uncommonly shrill.

"N-never!" Hermione stammered, suddenly afraid of the look in the middle sister's eyes. "I barely mentioned it in passing to Lady Malfoy and…"

The charge left Andromeda tone as quickly as it had come. "Ah. That… yes."

She sat slowly at the edge of the bed, facing Hermione where she perched in the chair. She gathered the younger witch's hands in her own, and Hermione could feel Andromeda's slight trembling. She stared beseechingly into Hermione's eyes. "Why didn't you just ask me?" She sounded almost hurt.

Hermione looked down. She still felt a lingering fear, wondering why this incident had evoked such a reaction from Andromeda. "I… I was going to. I just… you've done so much for me already and… Narcissa was there so I…"

Andromeda's voice softened, her fingers unclenching from where they'd held Hermione's in an almost painful grasp. "Hermione, Hermione. When will you learn? I'm here for you, for anything."

"I know! I do. You've been nothing but good to me. I just…" Hermione paused, unsure whether to continue. "I know it; I just don't understand it… I can't understand it." She let her voice die off before gathering it up again. "I can't make sense of you," she spoke, just above a whisper. Andromeda was watching her, Hermione could feel it, but she did not raise her eyes above their joined hands. "I don't mean that in a bad way, of course, but you… You're not exactly the sort I'd expect to take in strays like this."

"You're not a stray, Hermione—"

"Then what am I! Why am I here?" Hermione knew her voice was raised almost dangerously, feelings of confusion and displacement having risen over this past week, despite the relatively warm welcome she had received. Her tone was bordering on a sort of hysteria she thought she could
contain. She couldn't. She looked up into the older witch's eyes. "If I'm not a stray, if I'm not some sort of project, what else could I possibly be? I'm more than a cook but less than a servant; I'm doing less than you said I would and more all the same but—Mmph!"

There were lips on hers. Warm, soft, unexpected lips, cutting off her words as effectively as a muzzle and much more… pleasantly. There were hands cupping her cheeks. Warm, gentle, familiar hands, holding her there with the faintest pressure. Not that Hermione would have pulled away. Oh, no. Her eyes fluttered shut, her pulse threatened to beat its way out of her throat, and there was room for only a single thought in her mind. Andromeda was kissing her.

The kiss was chaste but lingering, leaving no room to doubt that it was very much intentional. It was Andromeda who drew back, creating a heartbeat's space between their lips and charged silence between their eyes. The elder witch gave a nervous sort of smile, one that tugged at something in the pit of Hermione's stomach.

Here she sat, having just been kissed by a woman who was not only her employer, but her teacher, and she knew there should be something wrong with that, knew that there should be a million questions ringing in the air, but all she could think was, Oh. That was… lovely.

It wasn't the first time she had been kissed. There was a boy who worked in the tavern across the street who had stolen more than one passing brush of lips from her. He would have gone further, too, but Hermione had never felt a thing for him, and she made no secret of that when he tried to grope her in the storeroom. And before that, there had been the boy three years ago… when her father had taken her to Hogsmeade for a day near the solstice and they'd run into a mess of Hogwarts students on weekend… A freckled, ginger-haired boy had caught her under the mistletoe. He'd seemed more nervous than she was, but enchanted mistletoe was enchanted mistletoe, and he'd managed a blushing kiss before scurrying off after a dark haired boy with round spectacles.

So, no, this was not the first time she had been kissed, but by Merlin this was the first time she had felt anything. Her lips were still tingling.

"I suppose I shouldn't have done that," Andromeda breathed, nearly kissing Hermione again just with the motion of her words. "After all, we've barely known each other a week."

Of all the things that could have bothered Hermione about the kiss, that was the least of them. In spite of everything—

"—I feel I've known you much longer, though," Andromeda murmured, echoing Hermione's thoughts. "There is a sort of… intimacy that grows from circumstances as strange as ours."

Hermione drew in a shuddering breath. Andromeda was still too close, the look in her eyes too weighty, too distracting; Hermione had no idea what part she was even supposed to play in this exchange.

Finally, the older woman drew back, settling against the headboard of her bed… reminding Hermione of exactly where they were.

"Why…?" Hermione started, but realized there were simply too many ways to end that particular question.

Andromeda picked one. "Why did I kiss you?" She sighed. "Many reasons. Mostly, of course, because I haven't been able to stop thinking about it all week."

Hermione felt a rush of warmth at her words, starting somewhere in her chest and spreading out in all
"And here you were, looking so confused, so unsure, I wanted to make you see that I... Of course, I wasn't actually going to do it, Hermione. I'm hardly a hedonist... I didn't invite you into my home because... well... Perhaps we should start again."

Hermione remained silent throughout this disjointed monologue, unsure what to say because she hadn't any idea what the other woman was thinking. Hell, she wasn't sure what she was thinking herself.

"I can hardly un-kiss you, and I'm sure I don't want to." She quirked an eyebrow. "In fact, I'd quite like to do it again, if you'd allow. Let me take you back to that little café, Hermione. Where we ate that first afternoon." Andromeda's voice, so scattered, now filled with growing excitement. "We can have lunch again, only without the talk of jobs, of my sisters, of political nightmares; just us..."

Hermione finally piped up. "Are... are you asking me on a date, Andromeda?"

At Hermione's tone, Andromeda's lips quirked up. "Hmmm. Yes, I suppose I am."

Hermione knew, oh, she knew, that there was so much wrong with this idea – that this was one of those moments when the best response was to graciously decline and then poof away, disappear, run home – but the only response that seemed even possible after she had shared those lips was, "Alright."

"Brilliant," Andromeda said with that wicked, wicked grin.

It made Hermione wanted to kiss her.

Instead, they returned to the matter at hand; the proverbial elephant in the room, in this case, manifested as an owl in, well, the other room.

Andromeda spotted it right away. It had migrated to the windowsill and was pacing restlessly, clearly looking to hunt some small, defenseless field mouse. Hermione, not feeling particularly gracious towards the nippy little beast, thought it served the bird right to have a few minutes cooped up.

"Eurasian Eagle-Owl," Andromeda announced, very matter-of-fact. "One of Bella's favorite breeds; I suppose you should be flattered." She approached the owl and extended a hand.

"Careful," Hermione called out. "He bites."

Andromeda chuckled. "I'd expect no less." Before the bird could indulge its finger-nibbling habit, Andromeda had snapped her forefinger and thumb closed around the owl's beak and gave it a gentle side-to-side shake. When she released him, the bird yawned innocently, as though biting had never crossed his mind. "Growing up with Bellatrix, you learn quickly to get the upper hand on her creatures... or lose some fingers." She crossed back to where Hermione stood. "He's healthy... If you feed him and let him fly, he'll make an excellent mail carrier for you."

"You mean I can keep him?" The prospect both attracted and alarmed her. After all, while Muggle children grew up wishing for ponies, every wizarding child waited with baited breath for their first owl. Hermione used to save up Knuts in a pickle jar on her windowsill, until her parents had given her the reality check that feeding the bird would cost more in just a few months than the bird itself. So, yes, she would love an owl, but this one... She absentmindedly ran her thumb along the still-stinging bite mark. This one... He bites like the bastard he is. Or perhaps, Hermione could not help but muse, he bites like the witch that raised him. Did she really want a bird from Bellatrix Lestrange?
Andromeda, however, was nodding. "I can't see any reason why not, though I would keep an eye on him. My sister…” she trailed off. "My sister likes to play games."

Hermione needled the bite again. "I've noticed."

Andromeda caught sight of the motion. "He bit you? Of course he did."

"It's alright, really, just a scratch—"

Hermione wondered why she even bothered. Andromeda was already at her side, pinpointing the little v-shaped cut with the expert eye of a healer. Hermione was unused to this sort of care. Neither of her parents had any healing skills, nor the money to pay. Aside from one memorable broken arm and a dreadful case of Dragon Pox, Hermione healed with Band-Aids and water, not magic. Still, that soothing warmth, those sure fingers… Hermione could get spoiled by this sort of thing.

Rather than pressing a kiss to her now-healed injury, Andromeda kept hold of her hand and used it to pull Hermione into another stolen brush of lips; still gentle, but this time, Hermione was less petrified. She cautiously leaned in, gasping when she felt a passing tongue trace along her upper lip. She pulled back, blushing. "I didn't get bitten there," she remarked, smiling.

Andromeda laughed outright, leaning in again, tilting up Hermione's chin and capturing her lips more firmly. Hermione felt this kiss in the pit of her stomach, warming her from the inside out, insisting she close the distance between them. Just as her hands found a home in the older witch's hair, Andromeda nipped playfully at her bottom lip. "Now you did," Andromeda teased, drawing a small mewl from Hermione the younger woman hadn't even known she was capable of. "Can I kiss it better?" Warmth turned into heat, and it was a very flushed Hermione who pulled away this time.

"We shouldn't," she managed, finally trying to reorder her spinning world.

"Oh?" Andromeda asked innocently.

Hermione pulled away and turned her back to the older witch, though it took an embarrassing amount of will. "This is… off. I can't… we shouldn't…"

"Oh, but we should," Andromeda murmured, stepping up behind Hermione and wrapping her arms around the younger woman's waist. "I won't rush you, but I'm not blind."

Hermione shuddered. Andromeda's breath was ghosting against the shell of her ear, playing distractingly along the column of her neck. "I… I'm not even sure what this is," she whispered. "I work for you, Andromeda," she managed. "I—"

"Technically, you work for Cissa. It's her money that signs your paycheck."

"Wha—"

"But even if you did work for me, I'd say the same thing: no person has just one side, and neither does any relationship." She stepped back, allowing a small distance between them. Hermione turned to face her again. "There isn't any reason I can't teach you magic one morning and take you out to lunch that afternoon."

Hermione could feel her protests slipping, though she knew somewhere there was still a line she shouldn't be crossing, somewhere between cooking someone three meals a day and kissing them at three in the morning.

"If you really don't want me, Hermione… if you really find this so wrong, we can go back to the
way things were… I'm no monster. I'd never take advantage of you." She brushed a stray curl off of the younger witch's forehead. "But I think you want this, too."

Hermione could barely seem to draw an even breath, let alone figure out how to answer that, but Andromeda didn't give her the chance.

"Either way, you promised me lunch. Let me have that much, and I'll let you have whatever time you need." She gave a quick whistle, prompting the owl to land on her outstretched arm. Hermione winced at the look of those sharp, deadly talons against that pristine skin. "I'll keep the bird with mine until morning. Take whatever sleep you can, Hermione. Sweet dreams."

With that, she was gone.

Sleep did not come easily. Hermione curled back under the covers but found they offered only an empty warmth after the strange safety she felt in Andromeda's arms. Andromeda. Hermione liked to think she wasn't naïve. She knew there were women in this world who liked other women, and it wasn't nearly the taboo amongst wizards that it was Muggle-side. She had even recognized the attraction between them, though she had firmly believed that it was only a sort of wishful thinking on her part.

The question wasn't whether she wanted Andromeda. Oh, no, the kiss had more than proven that. The question lay in all the other things. Hermione would love to believe that they could have three completely separate sorts of relationships; that her employment and her education wouldn't change in the face of a few kisses or… anything more. But she couldn't afford to believe that. Even in her lessons, there had been that possessiveness to her words, that entitlement in the way Andromeda so often touched her.

But … I didn't mind. Hermione felt the thought surface unbidden, but she couldn't deny it. Part of her simply thrived in feeling that wanted, especially now that she knew it went further. There was a thrill to that piece of Andromeda, that darker edge that she clearly drew from her pureblood, Slytherin roots. Tempered by her genuine kindness… well… it was a heady mixture.

Hermione rolled over, unable to get comfortable.

She knew how to be smart about this. In fact, there were even quite a few ways to be smart about this. But, for once, she just wanted to be stupid.

Hermione laughed aloud into the darkened room, remembering the first night she had lain in this bed. She had been thinking that, as long as Andromeda wanted her, she could let herself stay, keep this job, but only if she managed to keep her guard up. I give myself good advice. She sighed, turning once again. Shame that I'm so awful at taking it. Then again, perhaps she could still take it. Maybe she could let herself have this, or, at least, try this.

Hermione was no coward. Andromeda was an enigma, a spatter of color in a world colored greyscale, and in her impossibility to define, she was intimidating, challenging. But Hermione had never been one to back down from a challenge. If she pushed aside the niggling self-doubt and the sheer impossibility of all of this, she knew she craved everything Andromeda had offered her so far, from the stability of the job, to the excitement of the magic, and now to the magic of those kisses.

And yet, the longer Andromeda had been gone from the room, the more Hermione could focus her thoughts. Had Andromeda's lips really been so alluring, so sweet, so exciting? She had left too abruptly for Hermione to think! Had all the maddening emotions she had felt this night—morning—been nothing more than lingering adrenaline from waking up in the darkness in fear for her life?
She could convince herself of it, Hermione was sure. She had to. If she let this, whatever this was, go any further, she could lose everything they'd built; the fragile trust, the sense of safety, the burgeoning friendship... shouldn't that be more than enough? More than she should risk losing by pursuing some fools' game of intimacy?

After all, didn't she owe herself at least that much? Wasn't the safety she felt whenever Andromeda entered a room worth at least one small piece of trust? Trust that Andromeda could be true to her word, and let everything go back to normal, or, near enough that they could pretend Hermione had never known just how tender Andromeda's kiss could be?

Yes. She thinks I owe her lunch, but I owe her trust much more than that. I can't give up this life for any fleeting moment of her fancy, or my own. Finally, she drifted off, the last thoughts lingering in her mind a mix of, you're a fool, Hermione Granger, and then what in Merlin's name does that make Andromeda?

The next morning marked a change in the household. She woke to sounds from down the hallway, Narcissa's voice raised in cold, clear annoyance. "Where is my cloak, Lucius? Where is it?"

A pause, Lucius's voice too low to hear.

"You think if I can't find it I won't go?" Biting, empty laughter sounded. "I'm not going to argue. It's none of my concern that you've clearly stopped caring about your own... Dammit, Lucius! Accio Cloak!"

Hermione peeped cautiously out into the hallway. The argument was coming from the open door to the Malfoys' chambers. She could now hear Lucius as well.

"He doesn't want to see you, Narcissa. Can't you just let it be?"

Narcissa strode from the room dressed in a heavy traveling cloak, prompting Hermione to quickly retract her head and press flat against the wall.

"Narcissa!" Hermione could hear Lucius's heavy steps chasing after her. "Stop this madness!"

Narcissa halted just past Hermione's door. She hissed, "Madness? What do you know of madness, Lucius?"

While her voice had been soft but biting, Lucius's was unflatteringly loud and shrill. "I've been surrounded by it since we left our home, Narcissa!"

"Our home? Our home?" Narcissa laughed, a fake, cold laugh that sent chills racing along Hermione's spine. "You forget yourself, Lucius. As many nightmares as this place holds for me, it is still much more of a home than the Malfoy estate could ever be. This is where my family has always —"

"—I am your family! I am your husband!"

"Oh, you are my husband, Lucius. I can hardly forget that." Narcissa's voice was so empty, so haunted; Hermione could almost feel the anguish, the rage, fighting beneath that sheet of impenetrable ice. "But you chose the Dark Lord over our son, and you will never, never be my family."

With that, she was gone, a barely audible pop of displaced air to accompany her. Lucius cursed and stomped back to his room, slamming the door behind him. Hermione guardedly peered around the
door frame and found herself meeting Andromeda's gaze at the other end of the hall. With a squeak, she pulled back, then thought better of it and walked out into the corridor. "I… I couldn't help but overhear…"

Andromeda gave a slight smile, clearly letting Hermione know her eavesdropping was not an issue. She was already dressed; casual clothing Mugglesque in style for what would most likely be a day in the office. "Cissa just got word that her son is staying somewhere in London until the trial."

"Trial?" Hermione asked, stalling for time, trying not to think of how she had to turn down Andromeda's offer from the night… as soon as an opportunity arose.

Andromeda nodded. "Even this far along, they're still catching the occasional Death Eater. Narcissa, Lucius, and Draco often have to testify. It's the only thing that can draw Draco out of France. Last time he was here, Narcissa spent an entire week tracking him down just to exchange a few terse words. I doubt she'll settle for any less this time."

"Oh."

Andromeda gave a wry smile. "Yes, 'oh' about sums it up."

"He… Her son doesn't want to see her, then?"

Andromeda sighed. "Let's talk over breakfast."

In the kitchen, Andromeda fed herself while Hermione worked out meals for Bellatrix and Lucius. As she cooked, Andromeda explained.

"See, Draco's had a rough few years. He was always trying to prove himself to his father, as boys so often do. When Narcissa went against Voldemort—" Hermione tried not to flinch at the name. "—at the end of the war, Draco saw it as a betrayal and, perhaps even worse, as an embarrassment. Cissa had tried to protect him, but for Draco… it felt like she was trying to make him seem weak."

"She betrayed You-Know-Who?" Hermione asked, slightly awed. "And she lived?"

Andromeda nodded. "Not just once, but twice. But that is not my story to tell. In the end, it amounted to a small piece in ending the war and a large piece in losing her son."

"That's… dreadful."

"She keeps trying to reconcile, just to talk, but she can't follow him to France. Just like Sweden, Finland, and Belgium, France has denied any wizarding travel by those convicted of Death Eater activity."

"But… I thought…"

"She was convicted, Hermione. She was pardoned, yes, but the conviction still stands."

"Then, how can her son…"

"Draco never stood trial. It was decided that any still enrolled in Hogwarts were to be treated as underage wizards and not convicted for the crimes of their parents. An idiotic ruling, if you ask me; but no one did, and our dear Ministry wanted to save face somehow. Children are useful, in that way."

Hermione was silent, trying to make sense of a world where a son was so angry at his mother for
saving his ass that he would run off to France in what, to Hermione, sounded like the biggest temper-
tantrum in teenaged-man-child history.

"So… she's gone to try to talk to him while he's here, then?"

"Yes. Oh, she'll find him, I'm sure, but I doubt the end result will be any prettier than it was last time. He doesn't want to talk and that's that."

Hermione finished up her own meal in silence. Things moved so quickly in this house. If she didn't keep up, she was sure to be run over.

"Ah, hell," Andromeda suddenly muttered, nearly dropping her little silver teaspoon into an empty cup.

"What?" Hermione asked, worriedly.

"With Cissa gone, I'm in charge of Lucius, which means I can't leave him here unattended, and, if Narcissa isn't back by Thursday, I'll have to escort him to the trial."

"Oh?" Hermione thought that sounded regrettable, just as was the entire situation Andromeda had been cornered into by her family, but why it would garner such a reaction now was beyond her. "I'm sorry?"

Andromeda sighed. "I'm afraid we'll just have to push back our little lunch, Hermione."

"Oh." Unbidden, a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth at last night's memory.

"I somehow doubt that having Lucius sitting across the table would make for a very… friendly atmosphere," Andromeda added, gathering Hermione's hands with an apologetic smile.

Hermione's smile faltered. She gathered her nerve and her willpower, both in scarce supply when Andromeda was sitting across from her, that patrician beauty looking almost fragile in the early light. "Andromeda I… Last night…"

Andromeda said flatly, "Don't."

Hermione blinked. Andromeda knew. How did she know? Hermione had been planning something along the lines of *Last night really shouldn't happen again.* Was she really that predictable?

Evidently so. "I'm sure you've thought of every reason not to continue this, but I'm also sure you'll keep thinking yourself in circles, and if you speak now, you're bound to regret whichever sort of response you've landed on. I want time to convince you that I'm sincere, Hermione, but I'd like to do it away from here, for the time being." She paused, clearly lost in thought. "Perhaps… perhaps we ought to keep things as they were, for now. Only until Narcissa returns and I get a few moments of my scant personal time back." Andromeda rose, clearing dishes, as though she hadn't just ripped all sorts of metaphorical rugs out from underneath Hermione's feet.

"As they were?" Hermione mused, incredulous. She stood on faintly trembling legs to join Andromeda by the sink, passing off her own plate into the rinsing cycle Andromeda had conjured up. With a wave of her wand, Hermione took over the chore. As often as Andromeda did her own cleaning, Hermione still felt strange allowing it.

"Just for these few days. I meant what I said, Hermione. I won't let the things we already have get confused with what we… may have soon. If I'm to keep from doing anything… regrettable—"

Andromeda, having brought over the last of the glasses, startled Hermione by pressing a quick kiss to
the back of her neck, just at the top of her spine. "—then we need our first... date to be very, very far away from the particular... temptations... this home holds."

Hermione shivered, her body deciding to rearrange its warmth into a flush at her cheeks and a heat in the pit of stomach. Andromeda had settled her fingers at the small of Hermione's back in a gesture that was beginning to feel more natural than the emptiness when she pulled away.

For the life of her, Hermione could not find one of her carefully constructed denials in her mind. The best she could manage was, "I'm not sure I'll live out the week if this is your idea of resisting temptations." Hermione bit her tongue, a bit startled by her own audacity.

Andromeda lit up the room with a bright, full laugh. "Oh, very well. I might be persuaded to go easy on you until our little lunch."

Hermione soon learned that she and Andromeda had very differing ideas of "going easy." Though their lessons continued as usual, so did the lingering touches, the charged looks, the shameless-yet-subtle flirting which, now that Hermione could recognize it for what it was, kept her in a permanent state of both embarrassment... and longing. With each day, Hermione noticed more and more about the older witch, little details that hardly mattered, yet which held a sudden fascination for her. The way she always flicked her wand in a tiny circle before casting a spell, or how daylight brought out shades of red-auburn in her hair that were hidden by torchlight, or the way her dark, expressive eyes were never quite the same shade of brown or black from moment to moment.

The mornings were like a waking dream, moments of mirage-like normalcy to hide the tension that had sprung up between the two witches, a tension sure to drive Hermione mad if Narcissa didn't return soon.

With Narcissa gone for the week, the library felt lonely. Though she still spent an hour or so cleaning each afternoon, Hermione found that she could not sit alone and read, missing the presence of someone to discuss with. Andromeda was still often busy in the afternoons, and just the morning was near enough to drive her mad. If she wandered too long in the house, she was sure to run into Lucius, and she felt no need to hear his scathing comments or see his scornful sneer any more than was absolutely necessary.

Instead, she began spending more and more time in the gardens and lawns, exploring a landscape that seemed to have sprouted from some gardener's nightmare, or from some wilderness creature's fantasy. There was beauty in the untamed vastness of these grounds, wild, untouched beauty that Hermione had hardly seen, living where cobblestones were more common than grass. There were places which the forest had entirely reclaimed, youthful trees popping roots like knobby knees through grass long gone to seed, artfully carved stones overturned and drowning in lichen and ferns. The magic of those places lay in the paths Hermione walked; gleaming, pearly stone clearly enchanted to resist nature's advance. In places, shrubs grew on both sides, forming a natural arch overhead which a gardener might spend years trying to cultivate.

The path led to other places somewhat lacking in the romance of wilderness. There was a vegetable garden in the back of the house where scraggly tomatoes fought for space amongst a solid blanket of half-rotting cabbages, and a single bean plant hung limply from its tilting pole. Further along, rows of fruit-trees struggled for ground amid hundreds of their own saplings, sprouted when no birds came to scatter the seeds from fruit unpicked.

Hermione wondered again at the lack of animals. There were small insects here and there, a butterfly gathering nectar, a spider web still hung with dew, but nothing larger than that; no birds in the trees,
no toads in the decaying leaves, no squirrels scurrying to gather nuts before winter, no fish in the lily-strangled pond. It was eerie – no, it was sad. Something had happened here, something had scarred the land beyond nature's ability to heal. Hermione could feel it, a lingering darkness, watching her, like eyes on the back of her head.

Staring back up towards the house, Hermione caught a glimpse of a curtain wavering in a third-floor window. She stared for a moment. Was it the first sign of life from that illusively empty floor, or merely a taunting breeze?

She turned back to the trees. The library was her project, but it felt off, now, as though Lady Malfoy's absence made her time there into a sort of trespassing. The gardens, though… She'd never been much of one for plants, not really, but she was here, and no one else seemed to give a damn, so she'd better do something, hadn't she?

The strange darkness that inhabited the land was stronger near the little shack that had housed the gardener, so Hermione scurried as quickly in and out of the dusty tool shed as she could, gathering a large shovel, a small trowel, pruners, and some ancient gardening gloves.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, she started on the vegetable garden. Practicing her unbound magic in the process, she charmed the shovel to heave-ho the mass of cabbages as she attempted to feed some life into the tomatoes. She watched the little bean plant, knowing she should toss it, but feeling strangely attached to the single, pitiful survivor. She let it be, clearing the soil around it to give it a fighting chance.

She could have done nearly all of it by magic, but it somehow felt like cheating, when all the magic of the estate had been unable to contain this much nature, to just push it away with the wave of a wand. Besides, there was no hurry – she had no realistic goal in working here, just a way to pass time. Andromeda spotted her returning to the Manor Wednesday evening and looked stunned for a moment, as though seeing a ghost. She recovered quickly, though, and was very amused by her dirt-stained elbows and the dry autumn leaves crinkling in the folds of her robe sleeves, scrunching up about her upper arms.

That same evening, she finally braved the room where Andromeda had put Bellatrix's—Hermione's, now—owl. She was wary of it, but thought it beyond time to send her mum that letter. All went well, right up until the moment when she tucked her wand under her arm in order to tie the letter shut. With a happy coo, the blasted owl snatched up Hermione's wand in its deathtrap of a beak and proceeded to, quite casually, snap the piece of wood in two.

"No! Oh, bad bird!" Hermione cried, snatching the two pieces of twig from either side of his owlish grin. Still, he flew off in a most professional manner, letter secure, so Hermione thought that maybe she'd let him back in again. With a sigh, she gently aligned the splintered ends of the wand, the ever futile reflex to make it look right, even though real repair was more than likely hopeless.

She told Andromeda about it over dinner, and Andromeda claimed the broken pieces from her. "I'll stop by a wand shop after the trial," she insisted. "As long as I have a wand you've been using for more than a year or so, it will do to pick out a new one – you won't need to be there."

Part of Hermione was going a bit stir-crazy; having never gone more than a mile or so outside the Manor itself since her arrival, she wouldn't have minded a morning at the shops, but she somehow doubted that a day-trip with Lucius would improve her mood any. Instead, she merely said, "Thank you."

Hermione lay awake again that night, wondering what sort of day would dawn tomorrow, a dawn that would leave her one of only two human souls in the Manor. The silence above her head each
night was starting to frighten her. There was something wrong about that sort of silence, a silence in a house where even whispers echoed. The unnatural stillness itself told Hermione something about the third sister in a way that little note had not; it seemed Bellatrix was trying to hide herself behind a silence of fogged glass, a quiet so impossible that it did little by way of disguise. Just as shadows move behind even the dullest of glass windows, so Bellatrix's presence ghosted in the rooms above her head. Hermione hadn't the slightest idea what was happening up there, but through the concealment, she could tell it surely must be something big.
Thursday morning dawned to sheeting rain and bitter cold. The old house became impregnated with the weather, walls swollen and damp, floorboards biting at Hermione's toes with the nippy chill. On her way to cook something nice and warm for herself and Bellatrix, she spotted Andromeda and Lucius heading for the stairs, the witch's hand clasped firmly about his elbow, leading him. He tried to shake her off. "I'm not a child," he hissed.

"Then stop acting like one," she snapped, and they were gone.

The house was eerie, like this. Her footfalls echoed, dying out so slowly that Hermione could never actually tell when she stopped hearing them. Just as the library felt so strange without Narcissa, so the house felt… darker… without Andromeda. The rain did little to help, pattering mind-numbingly against the glass, blanketing the rooms in a sense of isolation.

After breakfast, she drifted listlessly, feeling an all-encompassing uselessness settle over her. Noticing her thoughts adjusting towards the mood the dreary weather had created, she was pleasantly surprised to hear a loud tapping at the nearest window.

There was her bird, feathers plastered to the bone by the rain, jabbing impatiently at the window to get her attention. She hurried over, scrambling to find the latch and allow the five-odd feet of miserable feathers to flap resentfully into the hall. The owl was too tired to be mischievous, allowing Hermione to remove the parchment he carried before flapping up to a beam overhead and tucking in for an owlish nap. The scroll he clutched was waterlogged, but the writing had been mostly protected from the damp.

Her mother wrote that she was well, relieved that Hermione was settling in nicely at her new job, and extremely grateful for the sizable sum of money she had received. Hermione wondered vaguely exactly how much Andromeda—or, Narcissa, or whichever bloody witch it was—was paying her, but decided not to ask; if it seemed too much, she would have a hard time accepting it, but her mother sounded so thrilled so… best to leave things be.

Setting down the letter, a scrap of paper drifted off of the back where it had been stuck to the dampened parchment. She felt an odd thrill, almost a shock, race up her fingers as she lifted it from the floor. This paper was entirely too dry to be possible, so it was with some trepidation that Hermione unfolded it along the single crease.

Visit me.

That was all. Two words. Yet Hermione knew exactly what was meant by them, exactly who had sent them, and exactly why now of all times.

Bellatrix.

She stood there for some immeasurable span of time, clutching the scrap in lightly trembling fingers. She wasn't thick. She knew better than to actually pay such a command any heed, especially after all Andromeda had said, and yet…

Hermione couldn't put the note down. She couldn't so much as focus on anything else. Every time she took a few steps in any one direction, she found herself opening it again, reading it over. The words seemed to engrave themselves onto her mind, paths of nerves blackened with the ink of that child-like scrawl. Visit me.
Hermione could tell something was wrong. It shouldn't seem so inescapable to her, but no matter how many times she started out for the kitchen, the library, her chambers, her feet led her time and time again to the base of one staircase or another. *Visit me.*

The words were like a leash of spider-silk, drawing her imperceptibly towards the third floor, so gently she did not notice her own missteps until the moment when her toes bumped the bottommost stair. She could turn back, head off down another corridor, but it would be only a matter of minutes before she would find herself peering once more up along a flight of steps into the shadowy recesses of the third floor landings.

Finally, Hermione decided enough was enough. Bellatrix wanted her to 'visit'? She'd bloody well visit. She'd visit and demand an explanation for these cryptic notes, the secrecy spell, the strange, compulsory demand to visit her… *Compulsory*, Hermione realized with a spark of intuition. *Compulsion*… By then, however, it was far too late. Her feet had strayed along with her mind, and she was already halfway up the stairs.

She stood on the last step for quite some time. She could feel whatever Bellatrix had done to that note tugging at her, but was unwilling to make the final motion, unwilling to commit herself fully to this clearly counterproductive path. Still, she couldn't very well stand here all day, and she could admit a twisted sort of curiosity had already been tempting her, so she summoned her courage, dismissed her common sense, and allowed herself that last footfall.

The moment her foot struck the landing, she felt that all-pressing need dissipate, gone as suddenly as it had come, and she knew she stood there completely of her own volition. She half expected a figure to jump from the shadows, perhaps with a sharp, "Boo!" or, then again, perhaps with a flash of green light which would mark the end of her life. But there she stood. She could turn about, walk down the stairs, and pretend this little transgression had never occurred. And yet… here she was, having already committed half of the crime, and, practicality be damned, she wasn't about to leave without reaping at least part of that reward.

*Just a glance,* she thought, peering down the darkened hallway.

The next footfall was her own, a stride taken entirely by her own will. She could not dismiss her curiosity lightly, and those twisted little thoughts which had become so utterly fascinated with this haunting non-persona drew her forward, onward.

The hall in which she stood was noteworthy only in the way it perfectly mirrored those below. The same sort of gaudy-framed family portraits and age-worn tapestries marked the only splashes of color on the bare stone walls, and a large swathe of carpeting covered only the very center of the chilly corridor floorboards. Her bare feet fell lightly as she walked cautiously forward, peering from side to side at the closed doors lining this wing.

There was dust, here, but not the decades-worth that had accumulated in the library. Just enough to note that the house elves had not touched these halls in the time since Bellatrix had arrived.

Halfway down that first passage, she was confronted with a choice. The hall branched, here, offering her a path to her right which would lead deeper into the center of the house, or the path along which she already walked, leading her to the stairway at the far end, a perfect mirror of the one from which she had arrived. She sensed continuing forward would end this little adventure soonest.

She turned instead.

This hallway was different. The portraits here were only empty frames and canvass, the occupants having fled whatever curse had left blackened streaks of charred stone along the walls and melted the
gold filigree that had been their protection. The floor was intact, but the carpet was ripped to shreds. There were no windows, either, as this hallway bordered no outer walls.

Hermione swallowed audibly, reaching reflexively for a wand she no longer possessed. Just as she was going to turn back, the door to her left swung wide by some unseen hand, spilling firelight out to where she stood with an ominous creak.

There was a figure leaning against a wall by the open fireplace, dark, heavy curls silhouetted against the dancing flame. She faced the fire, seemingly unaware of Hermione's presence, though the opened doorway suggested otherwise. Hermione held her breath. She watched as the witch drew a line of flame from the fire with the tip of a crooked wand, letting the fire dance between shadowy fingers for a moment before falling back behind the metal grating.

Without a conscious decision to do so, Hermione stepped closer. She had barely taken a step across the threshold when her feet flew out from under her and she found herself slamming jarringly into the far wall, far too close to the eldest Black sister for comfort. "Hasn't anyone ever taught you to knock?" Bellatrix said without turning from the flames, voice lilting, mockingly pleasant.

"Wha-" Hermione spluttered, unable to move anything save her face, spitting hair from her mouth. "Let me go!" she managed, voice quavering too much for her liking. She felt true panic in that moment, not a calculated, human fear, but the incontrollable, inescapable fear of a hunted animal, cornered, trapped, and about to be eaten alive.

Bellatrix laughed; a raucous, wild sound. "Oh, the little Mudblood pet's scared, is she?" She turned and stepped closer, bringing herself into Hermione's line of sight. She looked absolutely gleeful, a grin as true as it was mad stretching across her lips. "The little Mudblood thought she'd just waltz in and say, 'hello,' nice as she bloody well pleased?" The final, hissing words were punctuated by the feeling of a wandtip tracing the outline of Hermione's lips before slipping down her exposed throat and settling against her fluttering pulse-point.

"Well, I'll give my darling sister this much; she has picked a tasty little morsel."

Bellatrix's face was only inches from Hermione's, breathing the same air. Hermione was frozen more fully by her fear than by the spell, her lips trembling too much to even attempt to speak. She clamped her eyes shut when the wand was raised once more to jab against her cheek, nearly hyperventilating. "But my sister is making a mistake, and I simply can't allow that, now can I, my pretty little Mudblood?"

Hermione felt a whimper slip past her lips, uncomprehending. This was just what Andromeda had warned her of, after all. She'd been drawn up these stairs with words which—though admittedly strange, taunting—had seemed no less sane than any she herself could have written, yet she had found herself in the lair of a madwoman.

"CAN I?" Bellatrix repeated, louder, slipping a hand into Hermione's hair and yanking the younger woman's head back, fighting against the magnetism of her own spell.

Hermione felt sounds clawing their way up her throat, but they were not words, and she knew, if she let one out, she would lose all of them in a rush of fear. Not to mention, she had no idea what Bellatrix was asking her. Swallowing down what panic she could, she gasped out, "What do you want from me?" Her words were shrill with fear, and she could hear the approaching tears in her voice.

Bellatrix's grip tightened, pulling cruelly at the roots of her hair, making the first of Hermione's tears
those of pain rather than fear. "Oh, I don’t want anything from you. I want you gone. My sister can deal with me for the rest of my life, for all I care; I won’t degrade myself to so much as use you, Mudblood."

Hermione whimpered.

Bellatrix’s wand abandoned its home at the nape of Hermione’s neck to accompany a muffled spell from the dark witch’s lips. Hermione shut her eyes as she saw ropes beginning to wind their way up her legs, feeling them crawl across her torso and bind her arms together behind her back, setting her off-balance. She fell to the floor, feeling something crack in her elbow and letting out a cry of pain just in time for a rope to slash its way between her teeth, effectively gagging her.

Bellatrix was laughing. "Ah, I do like Mudbloods better when they're all nicely wrapped up for me, like a dirty little Christmas present." She punctuated her words by crouching over her and giving a quick, harsh slap to Hermione’s cheek. The elder witch’s hand followed the blow, however, lingering against the smarting skin in a dreadful parody of a caress. "Almost a shame I'm going to have to kill you."

Stepping back in a half-skipping motion, she waved her wand with exaggerated flourish, grinning widely as the ropes jerked Hermione upright once more. Feeling the movement jar her elbow, Hermione let out a muffled cry of pain through the rope in her mouth. Eyes gleaming madly, laughing, Bellatrix cawed, "Look at the puppet dance!"

The wand’s haphazard motion led Hermione on a painful jaunt before halting abruptly, leaving her swaying in the center of the room. She could do little more than squirm and glare through watering eyes, the magical bindings far too secure. She tried to scream, tried to call out, but there was no one there to hear her.

Bellatrix was conjuring another rope, and the sight of it intensified Hermione’s struggles. Her chest now shook with the force of her terrified sobs. It was a noose.

"Shame, dearie, that I've got to be so medieval," she taunted, stepping closer and running the deadly coil up along Hermione's cheek. "But the Ministry didn't trust me with any of my favorite spells."

She pouted, like a too-grown child denied a piece of chocolate.

"Mmmph!" Hermione was screaming through the rope, tears streaming down her cheeks. She called out for Andromeda, for Narcissa, for anyone, anyone, but the rope slipped unarrested down over her head.

Pale, slender fingers traced a taunting line along the skin of her throat, back and forth, back and forth, just beneath the rope. "Nothing personal," Bellatrix murmured, voice suddenly soft.

The other end of the rope flew up to the ceiling, slipping through the ring from which an unlit chandelier was already hanging.

The dark witch drew the coil of rope tighter about her throat with shocking tenderness, gracing the younger woman with an almost apologetic smile.

Oh, no, please, no. Hermione thought, giving up on her useless cries, mind running in helpless circles.

Just as Bellatrix waved her wand, drawing the rope taut, the door banged open against the wall in a flash of golden light. "Put her down, Bella."

Narcissa stood in the doorway, eyes narrowed in anger, wand aimed directly at her sister.
Bellatrix merely laughed, a swish of her wand drawing Hermione to her tiptoes, frantically struggling to find purchase for her bound feet against the smooth floorboards.

With a wave of Narcissa's wand, the rope was severed, and Hermione crumpled in a heap. She cried out as she fell once again on her injured elbow. There were flashes of light in the room as the two sisters exchanged a quick volley of silent spellwork, but it ended before she could turn her head enough to witness the brief duel.

When she managed to squirm her way other side, she found Bellatrix pinned against the far wall, just where she herself had been only moments before, Narcissa's wand pressing into the hollow of her throat.

"Oh, come now, Cissy. Why must you ruin my fun?" Despite the precarious nature of her situation, Bellatrix's eyes were bright, her chest heaving, grinning.

Narcissa's voice was scornful and bitingly cold. "Because Andromeda does not take as kindly to your games as I do, Bellatrix."

The dark-haired witch pouted. "Cissy—"

"Not another word, Bella. She doesn't belong to either of us."

Hermione supposed she ought to have felt indignant at the way Narcissa addressed her as though she were nothing more than a thing to be owned, but at the moment she could only feel excruciatingly grateful to be alive.

Narcissa silenced her sister with a spell and turned briskly to Hermione, banishing the ropes that still bound her. She gasped in heaving breaths of air, hands flying to her throat despite the agony such a motion triggered in her elbow. She sat up slowly, curling her knees up against her chest and resting her face against them, trembling.

Narcissa knelt beside her, placing a soothing hand on her shoulder. "Can you walk?" she asked frankly, and Hermione was glad for the practical question, as it drew her back into the moment at hand.

She nodded slowly and stood, cradling her injured arm tightly against her stomach. "Thank you," she gasped out. "Thank you."

Narcissa inclined her head, acknowledging her thanks.

Reaching the door before the fairer witch, Hermione turned around and found her eyes locked into those of the dark woman against the other wall. She was smiling, still, laughter dancing in that hooded stare, though she could make no sound. Her curls fell down across her face, a face Hermione was able to take in for the first time without being in immediate fear of her life. There was something there reminiscent of Andromeda; the pale skin, the dark rings of sleepless nights that had so bruised the space beneath her eyes. Yet where Andromeda's face was softened with kindness, Bellatrix's had been hardened, sharpened, weathered by her own actions and her time in Azkaban. The high cheekbones, trademark to her family, were sharper, here, and her high, aquiline nose almost painfully proud. She had recovered some of her beauty since the pictures Hermione had seen when she first escaped from Azkaban, but it was a sharp, haunted beauty, and all of that inexorable madness remained.

Narcissa was speaking to her sister. "Andromeda can deal with you," she said, turning away and ushering Hermione from the room.
Andromeda met them halfway up the stairs, clearly hurrying towards them. "Oh, thank god," she cried, pulling Hermione into her arms. Hermione couldn't hold in a small yelp of pain, prompting Andromeda to draw back. Her eyes were dark with a sort of rage Hermione had never before seen on this sister. "What did she do to you? Are you hurt?"

Unable to summon words to her mind, Hermione simply nodded.

"Where?" Andromeda prompted sharply.

"My elbow," she managed. Now that the adrenaline had stopped racing through her veins, she was feeling the pain much more sharply. She didn't think she could straighten it if she tried. "I-I think something might be broken."

Andromeda drew in a hissing breath, and her hands were trembling with anger as she laid them on either side of Hermione's injury. Narcissa was silent as Andromeda began a healing spell right there in the middle of the stairway. Hermione could have cried in relief when she felt that beautiful, comforting warmth spreading through her, soothing her frayed nerves as surely as the physical pain. Her eyes fluttered shut and she felt herself swaying backwards as the heat grew, concentrating within her arm and leaving her feeling utterly boneless elsewhere.

Andromeda murmured something to Narcissa, and Hermione felt the younger sister grasp hold of her waist, gently holding her up. The heat was stronger, growing, spreading, seeking out each and every smaller injury as well, rope burns on her wrists, her ankles, her neck, the reddened skin where Bellatrix had slapped her, the skin on her toes which had rubbed raw scrabbling against the floorboards. She felt her knees give out and her head slump backward, but Narcissa kept her from falling. Her eyes fluttered closed.

Slowly, the heat was fading into warmth, as though Andromeda's magic were leaving her with the gentlest of caresses against her very blood and bones. As she recovered, she noticed how much she was leaning on Narcissa and tried to pull away too quickly; finding herself instead slumping forward into Andromeda's waiting arms. The healing had left her feeling almost giddy, and she found herself smiling up at the older witch, raising a hand to her cheek and whispering, "Hello."

Though Andromeda was still clearly upset, she managed an amused smile in return, grasping hold of Hermione's hand and helping her stand.

"Let's get you downstairs," she replied, wrapping an arm around Hermione's waist. "Then, we can talk."

Andromeda's words pierced the gleeful bubble left by the healing spell, suddenly reminding Hermione of exactly what she had done today. She had disobeyed the one and only thing Andromeda had asked of her, and could not even blame it on Bellatrix, at least, not entirely.

The three women descended the stairs in silence, each lost in her own thoughts. At the bottom, Narcissa led them into a sitting room, one of the many scarcely used places tucked behind a featureless door down an unremarkable passageway.

While Hermione and Narcissa seated themselves at opposite ends of a lengthy sofa, Andromeda began to pace. She started to say something two or three times, but cut herself off before even a complete word could fracture the silence. Her every motion spoke of agitation, of lingering anger, and Hermione felt herself curling backwards into the cushions behind her, afraid for the moment when some of that rage would turn to her.

Finally, Andromeda faced her. "What on earth could have possessed you?" she hissed out, clearly
trying to keep from snapping entirely.

Hermione drew herself upright, determined to explain at least what part she could. "She sent me another note," she said, forcing herself to meet the fire in the older witch's gaze. "With my owl. Her owl. I think she spelled it."

Just like that, all the fight went out of Andromeda. "Do you still have it?" she asked, settling between her sister and Hermione on the couch.

Hermione fished the now well-worn scrap from the pocket of her robes. Andromeda passed it to Narcissa, who held it for only a moment before setting it on fire with her wand. "Compulsion. Strong. It was still active," she explained.

Andromeda groaned, letting her face fall into her hands. "Damn her. Damn my sister and all of her bloody games. She knew I'd let you keep that bird. Here I've been, trying so hard to keep you away from her, and she knew just how to spirit you off anyway."

Narcissa added, "It was just a compulsion, Andromeda. It would only work if some part of Hermione wanted to go up there in the first place."

At Andromeda's questioning glance, Hermione nodded reluctantly. "I'm sorry, really, I am, but I… I've always been curious. Just… knowing she was up there, never having seen so much as a glimpse of her… I had no idea she would… I couldn't imagine that she'd…"

Andromeda reached over and stroked the back of Hermione's hand. "I'm not going to scold you," she said. "I have a feeling you've more than learned why I wanted to keep you away, after all of this."

Hermione nodded, feeling such relief wash over her. She had been most afraid she would have lost Andromeda's trust. Andromeda gave her hand a gentle squeeze of reassurance, and Hermione wished idly that they were alone, that Andromeda could pull her into her arms and make her feel safe, so impossibly safe, in that way only she could.

Narcissa rose from the other end of the couch and took over the pacing from Andromeda. "You can't let her off that easily, 'Dromeda," she said. "I'm not sure she understands how very lucky she was today, how very dangerous Bellatrix can be. If the Ministry hadn't hobbled her like this, if she could still cast Unforgivables… I never could have gotten here in time."

"How did you even know to look for me?" Hermione asked. She didn't mean to sound ungrateful, but as far as she knew, there was no reason for Narcissa to have been anywhere near here when she managed that miraculous rescue.

Narcissa began to worry at the handle of her wand in an odd, agitated motion. "You were screaming for me," she answered.

Hermione's eyes widened.

"Or, rather, for either Andromeda or me, or anyone else who could help," she added. "I—I become very… attuned to the people I spend time around." This was the first time Hermione had heard Narcissa sounding anything less than perfectly put-together.

When her voice trailed off, Andromeda finished the explanation. "Narcissa is a skilled Occlumens and Legilimens. Though she doesn't often practice Legilimency, she can always hear when someone she cares—" Narcissa was giving her a chilling glare. "—when someone she has spent time around needs her help. I had no idea you would notice at such a distance though, Cissa." Andromeda
seemed to almost be… needling at her sister, one eyebrow quirked mockingly.

Narcissa's glare remained firmly fixed, and Hermione wondered if this skill was something she should not have known about. "It is difficult not to hear when a mind is screaming as loudly as Hermione's, today," she hissed out.

Unsure of the dynamic in the room, Hermione tried to diffuse the odd tension. "I'm very grateful, regardless," she interjected. "I'll try not to bother you with my, ah, thoughts too often."

To her surprise, her weak attempt at a lightened manner drew a fragile laugh from Narcissa. "Don't worry, girl," she replied. "Unless you feel as much terror as you felt today, I doubt I'll hear anything from you. I know better than to listen to the average thought; that would be the perfect way to hate everyone around me and be driven out of my own mind."

Hermione was relieved. Though she knew she would always be grateful for Narcissa's Legilimency saving her life, she was unsure how she could have functioned had the witch been in the habit of prying into people's minds on a daily basis.

Andromeda's thoughts seemed to be elsewhere at the moment, staring off into the distance. Her voice was heavy. "If you hadn't found her… Would I have gotten here in time? What did she do, Cissa? When you sent me that Patronus… Hermione's in trouble…" she shuddered. "I Apparated here as quickly as I could, but…" she trailed off again.

Narcissa sighed, face impassive. "I think the two of you should talk."

With that, she made an abrupt departure, leaving Hermione and Andromeda alone in the nameless room.

The two witches sat in silence for a long moment. Then, to her own surprise, Hermione started crying. She tried to stop, tried to tell herself it was over, she was alright, but it didn't seem to help. Now that Narcissa was gone, she couldn't seem to summon enough strength to keep her emotions from spilling to the surface.

Andromeda reached over and pulled Hermione into the circle of her arms, which only made her cry harder.

"Shhhhh," she murmured, stroking Hermione's hair. "She's not going to hurt you again. I'll never let her hurt you again."

Hermione trembled, tears falling noiselessly down into the collar of Andromeda's robes. Andromeda held her close, one hand wrapping itself in Hermione's hair, giving her an anchor, the other stroking up and down her back, giving her comfort. "I thought I was going to die," she gasped out. Saying it aloud finally let some of the horror dissipate.

Andromeda allowed her to pull back, but when Hermione tried to scoot back to the side, she gently pressed the younger witch's shoulders down, settling her head into her lap and resuming the gentle task of running her fingers through Hermione's hair. Hermione found herself curled up against the back of the sofa and Andromeda's side, and she finally felt safe again.

"Would you tell me what happened?" Andromeda asked. "I'm not going to press you, but, please, I need to know."

Hermione found the words came easily. She left nothing out, not even her admittedly idiotic decision to continue to Bellatrix's chambers, even after the compulsion had ended. Andromeda did not so much as flinch in her soft, even strokes along Hermione's scalp as the young woman spoke, not until
Hermione recounted part of what Bellatrix had said to her.

"She said you were making a mistake." Andromeda froze. "She said she couldn't allow it."

Though the reaction was brief, Hermione filed it away in her mind as she continued to recount what had happened. In the end, Andromeda was trembling more than Hermione, with clear anger. "How dare she," she spoke, voice rough with clear restraint. "When I go up there I---"

"—Please," Hermione interjected. "Please, don't do anything you'd regret come morning."

Andromeda did not even seem to hear, so Hermione tried distraction, instead. "What did she mean by your 'mistake'?"

There it was, that freeze, that tensing of reflexive muscles crying out against something the older witch clearly would rather not hear. After a moment, Andromeda offered a stuttering explanation.

"Bella has always known that I have certain… proclivities. Despite the strange dichotomy of our relationship now, she was always my big sister. We… talked, at Hogwarts. While she was seducing every pureblood in the Slytherin commons, I was admitting that I never felt a thing towards boys, pureblood or no. She was always kind to me, when it came to that one matter, even encouraging. But when, in a terribly cliché moment, my father caught me kissing a close friend, well… Bella couldn't protect me. She would have tried, though. She always wanted to protect me… and I couldn't stand to see her hurt in trying. I suppose you know the rest. I ran off, married a boy I loved as a friend and had a child with him, purposely alienating myself from my family, alienating myself the only way I could from Bellatrix, doing the inconceivable in marrying a Muggle-born."

Hermione's eyes were wide; drinking in all of this sad, haunting past, wondering at the world the sisters had grown up in.

"Now, when I brought you here… Bella must've realized I would be… interested in you. She couldn't care less who I chose to pursue, so long as I never disgraced the family name like that again," she closed cynically. "My sister does not approve of your blood status," she added, voice flat. "And apparently, she would kill you rather than allow me this."

Something was off, Hermione knew. There was something about that that didn't ring true, something much deeper, something more. She knew it was there, hiding in that flinching reaction not entirely explained by such a tale. The calculated manner in which Bellatrix had attempted this spoke of something more than a mere hatred of her blood. Something in the way Bellatrix had insisted that she would not so much as use her. Use her for what? No, Andromeda was not telling her everything.

Andromeda, however, seemed to be in another place entirely. "She nearly took this away from me," she whispered, leaning closer.

Andromeda broke Hermione's concentration with a kiss, drawing her upright and claiming her mouth in a single breath. Her lips were insistent, commanding; demanding Hermione open to her and give in. She did so willingly. If her lips tasted of safety and desire, Andromeda's mouth tasted of passion. She was unapologetically possessive, knotting her fingers in Hermione's curls, telling her with every press of lips, every brush of tongue, every stolen breath that Hermione was hers, and no one, not even Bellatrix, was going to take that from her.

And oh, it was just what Hermione needed to feel, this easy, rich desire. The mindless wanting that the older witch drew from her with those vixen-like teeth nipping at her bottom lip, that soothing tongue that melted her vague, half-formed questions or thoughts of resistance.
Neither woman heard the door open, but the sharply cleared throat startled Hermione into yanking back, glancing around and scrambling to pull herself together.

Narcissa stood in the doorway, expression unreadable.

Hermione started to put space between them, throat suddenly dry, hands shaking.

To Hermione's surprise, Andromeda did not seem upset in the slightest. She calmly slid over by Hermione once more, wrapping an almost protective arm about her waist.

"Let me speak to the girl, Andromeda," Narcissa said coldly.

Hermione stifled a whimper. This day had already held more than its fair share of improbable situations, and this was quite possibly one more than Hermione was capable of dealing with.

Andromeda gave her sister a calculating look. "Don't terrorize her, Cissa. She's been through quite enough today."

Without further ado, she stood and departed, leaving a furiously blushing Hermione to cling helplessly to a couch cushion as Narcissa sat in a chair beside her.

"I—This isn't—You don't—" Hermione stammered, then stopped, realizing that, in all honesty, she had absolutely nothing to say for herself. Trying not to tear up, she finally said, "I can pack and be gone in the morning."

"Oh, no, I'm not here to fire you, girl," Narcissa assured her. "No, I knew from the moment my sister brought you here that she meant to pursue you, even if she hadn't decided it yet herself." She chuckled. "It runs in the family, after all."

Despite the peculiar nature of that cryptic remark, her next words were enough to make Hermione all but put it from her mind.

"No, my sister can do what she would, even with a Mudblood. She's done it before, and I'm not likely to chase her away again over something so comparably... trivial. There isn't a pure-blood left alive who can afford to be... picky. However, seeing as I've grown accustomed to having you around—I'll even admit you've earned my grudging respect—I thought I ought to warn you: my sister is not as... pure in intentions as you might think."

When the words clicked into place in her mind, Hermione wanted to protest, to defend Andromeda, but Narcissa had not finished.

"Oh, I do believe she means well enough by you, but you mustn't forget that all of us who dwell here are in some way ruled by our eldest sister."

"I don't—"

"Ah-ah-ah. You understand perfectly well what Bellatrix is capable of."

Hermione shuddered. That much was true.

"Just... keep that in mind, the next time my sister offers you some place in her life. As surely as Bellatrix is trapped in this home, Andromeda is trapped as well. Bellatrix owns her, darling, owns her mind, life, and soul."

Too engrossed in individual thought, neither woman caught Narcissa's odd choice of address.
Feeling a soul-deep weariness after the many confrontations of the day and trying not to wonder what sort of discourse was happening upstairs between Bellatrix and Andromeda, Hermione turned in early, soaking herself for far too long in a scalding bath, as though the heat could scour away the phantom touch of heavy rope and mock-gentle fingers she could still feel about her neck. Andromeda's kiss had been a much more effective cleansing, but Narcissa's words had left her with a bitter taste in her mouth and far too many thoughts to allow such comfort to seem as simple or as freeing as it had only hours before.

She tried to sit awake and read, but found herself jumping at the flickering candlelight until she had slunk herself so far down into the haven of her blankets that there was no longer enough light to see the text.

Sleep came with shocking ease. So too did dreams.

As was so oft the case in dreams, the setting was a peculiar hybrid of generic places she had perhaps been, perhaps seen, but could not hope to pinpoint amid her sleeping memories. It was an enclosed space, rather like a piece of the London underground, yet it was clearly lit by some unseen sun, and the turf beneath her sprouted spring-green grass.

She could not feel the grass. She was not truly present, here. No, she was merely an observer, while the characters her mind had summoned were the three sisters, placed in a parody of nonsensical action. There was Andromeda, standing barefoot in the grass, looking with anger down upon something clutched in her hand… rope… no, a leash. Following the line that led from Andromeda's fingers revealed a cruel choke-collar wrapped about the neck of Bellatrix, her pale, sharp-nailed fingers needling the edges of the thick band at her throat. Though it clearly bit into the flesh at her neck, she was fighting the collar calmly, and in doing so, Bellatrix was clearly the one directing their motion across the grass, dragging a reluctant yet helpless Andromeda along behind her, cutting off her own air to do so.

And there was Narcissa, sitting in the grass across the way, staring at her sisters with a look of truly heart wrenching sorrow, eyes brimming with despair, filled with emotion she would never have shown in reality. She made no move towards the cruel scene between her other siblings, and, upon closer inspection, Hermione could see heavy gilded manacles binding her slender wrists and hobbling her earthbound ankles. The shackles dripped strangely in the sunlight, and Hermione saw they had been carved of shimmering ice.

With a sort of indifference found only in the dreamscape, Hermione watched for another moment, watching Andromeda stumble against Bellatrix's demanding motions, watching Bellatrix scrape a red line down the side of her own neck as she fought to fit her fingernails beneath the cruel circlet of her collar, and watching a single tear drift aimlessly down Narcissa's cheek to join the small puddles of melting ice on the grass around her.

She turned away.

The dream was already fading when she woke, leaving only a lingering feeling of confusion and the knowledge that the three sisters had ingrained themselves once again into another part of her existence.
Determined to turn the kitchen into a cozy haven from the still miserable weather, Hermione cleaned the layers of both magical and earthly soot from the central fireplace. Though magic made an open fire unnecessary, she summoned logs from the cellar and set the fire purely for comfort, starting a hearty stew simmering over it for lunch, filling the room with scents of childhood while she set about her morning breakfast-making routine. Footsteps echoed on distant flagstone, but Hermione paid them no heed, not particularly inspired to engage in human contact. The steps drew closer, though, and Hermione wondered if Andromeda would be joining her for breakfast. The thought drew a heady mixture of longing and apprehension, and she quickly bustled over to stir the stew, determined to distract herself with menial tasks.

She was bent over the fire when she heard the door let out its signature creek. Turning with a greeting and the closest she could summon to a smile, she was unprepared for the shadowy figure her gaze encountered.

There stood Bellatrix, as casual as you please, leaning against a countertop, twirling a lock of untamed hair about the tip of her crooked wand, a faintly condescending smirk quirking up one corner of her mouth.

"Hello, pet."

Though Hermione had been frozen with blinding, instinctive fear, Bellatrix's words seemed to unbind her, and she staggered back a step, nearly searing a hole in the back of her robes against the stewpot. "Wha—h-how…?"

Bellatrix stepped closer, chuckling gaily. "You didn't think I was trapped up there, did you?"

Hermione's mind was racing. She still had no wand, an oversight amid the turmoil that had consumed the last day, but there were carving knives on the wall behind her, and she thought herself just closer to them than Bellatrix was to her. In a frantic dive, she clapsed the closest one in her palm, snapping around and holding it out before her in trembling fingers. "Don't come any closer!" she managed, shocked that she hadn't been cursed when her back was turned.

To Hermione's further astonishment, the older witch merely chuckled, not even leveling her wand. "Ooh, fierce, this one," she said with a smirk. "You can put down the toy; I'm just here for a friendly little chat… girl to girl."

"Why do I find that hard to believe," Hermione muttered under her breath. Still, the tension was fading from her wrist, fingers unclenching about the handle of the knife as the woman kept her distance, remaining unaggressive.

Bellatrix shrugged. "Believe what you will. In the end—" She let her wand fall to the countertop. "—I haven't got magic down here."

Hermione's breath stuttered, more at the look of untempered rage that flashed through the depths of the other woman's eyes than at the startling revelation.

"That's right," she continued, regaining her composure, voice strained with the sheer force of will it took to retain her signature nonchalance, fingers twitching despite her tone of just how much she didn't care. "The Ministry and I aren't exactly peachy, and since they only trust my little sister so far, well…" Bellatrix turned, shrugging her shoulders in a fluid motion that ended with her leaning just
too far back to be casual, elbows pressed into the counter to support the weight of her flung-back head, cocked just enough to keep a side-eyed stare on Hermione. ",…they decided she ought to have somewhere to run off and hide from me. Of course, if Andy's not here, I can't come downstairs at all."

Despite herself, Hermione was intrigued. Though Bellatrix still moved like some large predator and spoke like an overindulgent child, the degree of madness she had witnessed in her chambers was tempered slightly by the relative normalcy of the conversation. The younger witch was having trouble wrapping her mind around the fact that here stood the woman who had tried to kill her a scant day before, now chatting aimlessly by firelight in the kitchen. Hermione kept eyeing the wand nervously, worried that her flippant explanation was merely a half-hearted ruse.

"Why are you here, then?" Hermione asked, keeping a firm hold on the handle of the knife.

Bellatrix curled herself upright again and prowled forward, prompting the younger woman to hasten a pace backwards until it became apparent that her destination was the fireplace, not the other witch. She bent towards the fire and extended her hand, touching the flames for a moment before drawing back with a hiss.

Hermione stared, eyes wide, recalling the ease with which she had been playing with fire when Hermione had found her upstairs.

Bellatrix sighed. "Sometimes, I forget that no magic actually means, well, no magic." Still watching Hermione, she slipped her singed fingertips into her mouth, a hint of tongue chasing them back out, glistening and pink.

Still frightened and not the least bit confused, Hermione blushed at the oddly vulgar display.

Bellatrix moved to the table. It seemed standing still for any length of time was truly beyond her. She sprawled out into a chair, dominating the space, as if the furniture existed for no other purpose than to serve as her throne. She cocked her head, dark, endless eyes staring up at Hermione quizzically, as though the younger witch were a puzzle she couldn't quite piece together.

"Things really would be so much simpler if you'd just… disappear," she said, waving her hand as though shooing off some invisible wisp of smoke. Her tone hinted she would be quite willing to assist in such a disappearance, especially a disappearance of the most permanent sort. "But I suppose if my sisters are so determined to keep your dirty little heart beating, well, I'll just have to come up with something else."

Andromeda's words from the previous evening rang in Hermione's head, reminding her that all this was a matter of Andromeda's pursuit of her… her and her impure blood. Though part of her was still trembling and cringing away from cruel memory, another part of Hermione was determined not to spend the rest of her time here living in terror of the eldest sister, shying away from every shadow. Maybe if she just talked to her, convinced her that… what? That she wasn't a blight on the family reputation? That she wasn't just a filthy little Mudblood who had no business being courted by a beautiful, wealthy, highborn Black? It was nothing Hermione didn't already know, nothing she knew she shouldn't have already used to talk herself out of allowing anything more to happen between them. But Andromeda was her safety, and was already becoming so much more, so, hell, she had to try.

Stepping cautiously forward, keeping a firm grasp on the knife, she settled in the chair directly across from the darkly-cut figure. She had learned from a young age that the best way to face her fears was to meet them head-on, and though her fears were not often psychopathic, powerful, murderous women, she was determined to treat Bellatrix as just another trial to overcome.
"Bellatrix—ah, Ms. Lestrange, or, ah, Black?" Hermione stammered over her faux pas, unsure what name to even address this scrambled piece of history by, though her first name was presumptuous in the extreme, even if the woman had tried to kill her only yesterday.

Bellatrix looked amused. "It is Black now, seeing as the bastard's dead. Since I don't really care to have your lips dirtying my family name, I'd say you could call me Bella, but I'm afraid you might faint."

Hermione thought that was distinctly possible.

"Ms. Black, then." She couldn't bring herself to address her as "ma'am." Not after their first encounter. No birthright earned her that respect. "I… your sister and I…"

Bellatrix smirked, leaning forward and twining her fingers together to make a resting place for her chin, exposing a nearly indecent amount of fair skin on her chest, which Hermione couldn't fail to notice, as her black, corseted robes were designed for little else besides showing off those particular assets. "What has my dear sister been whispering in your ear, eh? How much of a monster I am?"

Bellatrix hissed out the word monster, accompanying it with a dart of the head and a snap of her surprisingly well-kept teeth, ending with a wild laugh when Hermione jerked back, heart racing.

"N-no, actually. She tried to, ah, explain you. I understand that you don't approve of us—"

Bellatrix silenced her with a wave of her hand and a highly incredulous look. "Always putting words in my mouth, my little Andy." She stood once again, moving back to the fireplace and dipping a long-nailed finger into Hermione's stew, tasting it with a low hum of approval. "I couldn't give less of a damn if my sister wants to fuck you." Hermione's found herself flinching, curses seeming somehow more vile, more violent, issued from these particular lips. "It's no concern of mine what she chooses to dirty her tongue on."

Hermione felt strangely vindicated. She heard no hint of artifice in Bellatrix's voice, and it suggested that her suspicions had been right, that there was some further degree to Bella's hatred towards her, something else that had triggered such a complex, well-timed plan to see her dead.

Gathering her thoughts, Hermione wondered if she dared ask why she had tried to kill her, then. Somehow, the thought of bringing up their encounter yesterday made it too real. Hermione feared that, should she mention how single-mindedly the other woman had pursued her death, it could bring the idea back to the forefront of her twisted mind.

"I… I suppose I'm relieved, then."

Before she could form any further reply, a swirl of color and displaced air signaled Andromeda's Apparation into the kitchen. She looked haggard; hair disheveled, robes askew, inky circles smeared painfully dark beneath sharp, angry eyes. Her wand was out, and she honed in immediately on her sister.

"We talked about this last night," Andromeda snapped out, voice nearly a growl.

"Oh, hello, Andy. Have to say, I'm a bit surprised to see you here." Bellatrix didn't so much as turn to face her, only acknowledging her presence with her words. "Thought you'd still be sleeping off that healing hangover. Must've been a nasty one. I'm sure this little toy was a bit more… chewed up when I returned her yesterday, so someone must have made quite the effort to… fix it. Besides—" She sauntered over to stand just behind Hermione's chair, bending down and plucking the knife from the younger witch's unsuspecting fingers. "—you know how I am." She casually hung the knife
back in its proper place on the rack, leaving it with a lingering stroke down the length of the blade. "I so often... forget the little things you tell me. So many rules..." She sighed dramatically.

Andromeda's eyes were flashing fire, yet it seemed to drip right off of her older sister as easily as the flames she had played with in the fireplace upstairs. Bellatrix's unflappable cynicism was undaunted by her own lack of magic and Andy's hissed, "Get out, Bella."

With an exaggerated pout and a cheeky little wave, Bellatrix sauntered from the room, scooping up her wand as she went and twirling it up into her mass of curls like a crooked, oversized chopstick. The door swung shut behind her, leaving only the lingering words, "We'll be talking later, pet."

Bellatrix's departure seemed to return the air to the room. Hermione slumped forward, resting her forehead on crossed arms and letting out a shuddering breath towards the tabletop. Andromeda quickly took over the space behind her, resting her hands on the younger witch's shoulders. "It's all right, she's gone."

Hermione let out her lingering fear in a pained burst of laughter. "Sure she is. For now. But she'll be back – and now I know she can find me anytime, how can I ever—"

"She can only come down when I'm here, and even then, she has no magic."

Hermione found it strange, hearing Bellatrix's own words echoing from the younger sister's lips, affirming their truth.

Andromeda paced around to take over the seat across from her.

"And every time she does come down, every time she leaves the third floor, I know. It's part of what the Ministry did to her magic, like a little alarm that goes off in my head whenever she steps off the top stair. If she were ever to leave the grounds, a beacon alert would go out across the entire wizarding world, and the Ministry could track her immediately."

Hermione felt torn for a moment, wondering at how caged the eldest Black must feel, knowing she could never so much as leave a single floor without notifying someone. Still, in a cruel way, it was a sensible precaution, and it did make her feel marginally safer.

Andromeda continued, "The only reason it took me so long to react today was, well—"

"Healing?" Hermione inquired, cutting her off. "It takes quite a lot out of you, doesn't it." It wasn't really a question.

Andromeda nodded. "There's a reason that most healers work in large wizarding hospitals like St. Mungo's, surrounded by aids and potions and all sort of things. You probably know that one of the most basic magical rules is our inability to create food. Healing is like that. It isn't possible to simply magic away an injury, though you can hide the pain or stop the bleeding. Actually convincing a body to fix itself takes energy, life energy, and, in an emergency, trained wizards can draw it from themselves."

Hermione had run into this side of Andromeda before, the side that felt the need to use every opportunity to explain some piece of magic or another to her student.

"As an Auror, I was trained to use it in battle, in the field, and I always had a talent for it, but healing any major injury... it exhausts me. I was so deeply asleep that Bella's alert barely registered as anything more than a blip in bad dream."

"I'm sorry... if I'd have known it hurt you to heal me, I never would have—"
"What? Gotten hurt?" Andromeda smiled at her to soften the derision in her voice. "You never asked me to heal you; I was glad to. It's a rush of its own, healing. Nearly addicting."

Hermione recalled the flush of warmth she had felt—the headiness, the strange joy—and thought she could see the draw.

"I'll never regret healing you, only that you were hurt in the first place," she finished softly, gazing at Hermione with unconfessed tenderness, an emotion the younger witch had not often seen from her.

Hermione decided it would do no good to ask her not to heal her again; she would just do her best to stay out of trouble. Seeing Andromeda this exhausted was pain enough. "Should you be resting?" she asked, though she didn't want her to go. "You look dreadful." She added hastily, "I mean, dreadfully tired, exhausted."

Andromeda pursed her lips. "Yes, I know, but I've gotten more sleep than my body would usually allow me, so it would be no good going back to bed." A quick smile flashed across her lips. "It would be marvelous, though, to get some fresh air. If you wouldn't mind putting that delicious-smelling stew on hold and don't think you'll melt in the rain… I think we ought to have our lunch."

Hermione felt her mood brighten, an almost physical thing, lightening her heart and drawing a real smile to her lips. Oh, it would be heaven, to get out of this house for a while, to leave behind all the many complexities it held, to put aside the fear now simmering just behind each closed door. Practicality, however, demanded she ask, "What about the others? Won't Narcissa—"

Andromeda cut her off. "Lucius and Narcissa are off somewhere arguing about Draco and which of them it was who royally fucked his life up the arse. If it were me, of course, I'd just blame the Dark Lord and be done with it, seeing as he is conveniently evil and very conveniently dead. However, the two of them can go at it for hours; no one will miss us."

Except Bellatrix, Hermione startled herself by thinking. She wondered what on earth the oldest sister did up there all day, alone save the occasional visit of one sister or the other. Destroy things, I suppose. A moment of pity flashed through her, but she pushed it aside. Even if Bellatrix deserved Hermione's pity, the young woman knew she wouldn't want it, and it did no good to dwell on a situation not of her own making and far beyond her control.

"If you give me a bit to… sort myself out, I'll meet you by the main doors and we can head over to Diagon to have brunch."

"I'd like that," Hermione answered, rising with the other witch.

Andromeda turned to go, then turned back, taking Hermione's hands and staring into her eyes beseechingly. "My sister… she… she can't be trusted, Hermione. When she isn't screaming bloody murder, she has a golden tongue; she's fooled many a bright witch with her lies."

Hermione met those pleading eyes and wanted to simply nod, to accept Andromeda's words at face value. Yet there was still that nagging sense that something wasn't right. There was something Andromeda wouldn't say to her; something she was afraid Bellatrix would reveal instead. Still, she pushed her doubts aside and gently squeezed the older witch's hands with her own. "I trust you," she said.

It was true. Despite whatever was hiding behind that imploring gaze, Hermione trusted that there was a reason she couldn't know, a need for the strange secrecy. She hardly expected any one of these women to treat her as a confidant, to let her in on all the deep, dark secrets haunting the family name. She trusted Andromeda to tell her the things that mattered, and she trusted herself to take anything
Bellatrix deigned to give her with a grain of salt. Perhaps there were truths to be found from the eldest sister, but perhaps they were truths she was never meant to know.

Andromeda nodded briskly, gaze darting back and forth between Hermione's eyes, searching for something Hermione hoped she found, then she was gone, leaving the kitchen filled once more with nothing but the warmth of the fire, the scent of garlic, onion, and pepper, and the ever present shadows lingering in the silence.

Upstairs, Hermione sat on the corner of her bed, staring at the three options she had of what to wear. She knew she was being illogical, worrying about this as though it were some sort of fancy occasion. She knew they were eating at a very casual spot, but she couldn't help it. She wanted to do something different. Her only robes were of the practical sort, acceptable for staffing a manor or walking about wizarding London, but rather depressing to wear on a date. She's left her dressier robes at home, as they were hand-me-downs from her mum and had never quite fit properly. At home, she had plenty of the more everyday sort of clothing one wore to pass about in the Muggle side of London—after all, everyone knew that it was cheaper to buy herbs at a Muggle grocery than in a potions store or an apothecary—but she had only brought a few things with her. She finally settled on the only dress she had packed; it was too light, really, for the damp autumn day, but with her cloak slipped overtop, she could hide from the rain.

Andromeda was waiting at the end of the stairs. Hermione felt her mouth go dry at the sight. It seemed that they were of similar minds, as she had forsaken robes as well, favoring instead dark, tailored slacks and a plain fitted blouse, cut to draw the eyes first to the waist, the neckline high enough that impolite glances would be merely an afterthought. She looked poised, elegant, yet the lack of robes seemed somehow more indecent than even the nightwear Hermione had found her in on that one, memorable occasion. She looked younger. She looked beautiful.

Hermione flushed, realizing she had been stalled on the third step, staring. Andromeda gave her a very genuine smile and her own appreciative look before extending her arm. "Shall we?"

Hermione smiled back. "Yes."
Hermione had a feeling she had rendered Andromeda slightly speechless at several occasions throughout their meal. She had decided that, if she were to do this, she would do it her way. She had never been a naturally shy child, or even a particularly subservient woman. When around people who she trusted, liked, and was on relatively equal footing with, she could be casual, could converse with ease, could laugh and smile and joke widely and freely. Though she still felt herself to be the courted party, and though Andromeda was clearly directing the encounter, if the older witch had been expecting to dine with the girl who was her servant and student, she was destined to be surprised. Oh, no; Hermione would do this fresh or not at all.

Thankfully, Andromeda didn't seem to mind.

While waiting for their meal, the two witches shared those delightful little stories everyone has, the ones of no real importance, the details of their lives that held no bearing on either of their futures, but which gave the other party that sense of knowing them more intimately that the average bystander. After Hermione shared her memory of another child in her Muggle orphanage catching her reading before bed… with the book floating in the air six inches above her face, Andromeda spoke a bit of her time training as an Auror and how it led her to work closely with the Headmistress of Hogwarts,
who was then no more than the Head of Gryffindor House and the enterprising Head of the Transfiguration Department.

Of course, in the more hesitant conversation over the food, there were moments when words faltered, when a line could be seen leading off into the distance where a subject stood which was not to be discussed… Bellatrix, the War, Hermione's job… The happiness Hermione found lay in the fact that Andromeda had been correct; they were able to separate it all.

It felt new.

By the time Andromeda ordered them a pot of tea to linger over, Hermione had relaxed into the booth seat, leaning in the nook between the backrest and the wall, one ear to the rain and the other to her company. Andromeda was leaning close across the space, laughing brightly, playing one fine-boned finger along the rim of her cup.

"I could get very used to this," she said, taking a lingering sip.

Hermione smiled. "That… yes." She was surprised by how much time had passed, the clock over the bar reading well past noon. "This was…" Easy, she thought. Easy to sit here, to smile, to laugh, to pretend neither of us had a care in the world. "…lovely," she said instead.

Andromeda leaned closer. "It isn't over yet," she murmured conspiratorially.

Hermione felt crimson work her way up her cheeks. There were always these sudden moments with Andromeda, moments that were so charged with that powerful, sensual energy she had, moments that made Hermione want to throw caution to the wind and kiss the older witch until she had forgotten how to breathe. The look in Andromeda's eyes hinted that Hermione's desires were more than mutual and if she didn't tread with caution, well, Andromeda wouldn't be responsible for the consequences.

Before the tension in the air could find an outlet, a silvery form, a shimmering blur with wings, flittered around the corner of the opening door and settled in front of Andromeda's face, revealing itself as some sort of small hawk. Quickly setting aside her teacup, she slipped to the edge of the booth and stood. "This is from Cissa. I need to step outside."

Hermione nodded, though she wasn't sure the other woman saw as she headed briskly for the exit, Cissa's Patronus soaring after her.

Catching the door just before it could close behind Andromeda, a group of four entered. They were student-age, perhaps, and included two figures Hermione vaguely recognized, even from behind.

There were two girls she'd never seen before: a blonde with long, wavy hair and the largest spectacles Hermione had seen outside of tourist shops and a ginger whose hair matched the first of the two boy's. It was these boys who looked familiar, and it took the dark-haired one turning around and facing her to place it.

That was Harry Potter.

And that was Ronald Weasley.

And he was the one who had kissed her under the mistletoe three years ago.

Somehow, despite the many times she had seen their pictures in the papers, it had never clicked for her. Perhaps it was the magic-touchup's in the photographs, perhaps it was just not something that would have crossed her mind, but now, faced with a visage she had seen peering out at her from
Undesirable No. 1 posters and ducking from camera flashes on the cover of the Daily Prophet, looking into the face of that freckled youth who had blushed so adorably before pecking her on the lips, now she made the connection. It was certainly something.

A wry smile twitching about her mouth, she turned back to her tea, laughing internally at the fact that she, of all people, had once kissed the Ronald Weasley, and she could hardly be bothered to care.

They chose a table well within Hermione's line of sight. She watched Harry nudge his friend in the side with his elbow and jerk his head none-too-casually in her direction. Ron visibly started when he saw her, meeting her eyes for an awkward moment before jerking around and shoving Harry's shoulder. Hermione was even more amused to see that even the most famous wizards of her generation were still little more than teenaged boys.

The girl with Ron's hair laughed at something Harry had whispered in her ear and the two of them proceeded to shove Ron out of his seat, despite his visible protests. Giving in, he finally stood on his own, straightening his button-up shirt and shoving his hands deeply into this pockets. His unfortunately pale complexion was sporting a shade of red more commonly belonging on the coat of an Irish Setter.

To Hermione's further amusement, he approached her table, sitting across from her without invitation.

Hermione supposed she ought to have felt flattered, or honored, or shy, or something more fitting being seated across from a celebrity, but all she felt was more of that peculiar amusement.

"Hullo, again," he said, voice only slightly strained. "Fancy meeting you here."

A whole plethora of replies darted through Hermione's mind, and she almost decided on "Do I know you?" but decided that would just be cruel.

Instead, she merely nodded. "Yes, hello. I don't believe we've ever been properly introduced. I'm Hermione Granger."

"Ron. Ah, Ron Weasley."

Hermione smiled. "I know."

He gave an exasperated sigh and ran his hand through his hair. "Hard not to, eh? Still getting used to this whole 'famous' stuff."

His normalcy was charming, refreshing after her rather impossible year. He wasn't cocky about his fame, seeming truly embarrassed that everyone knew him on sight.

She didn't reply, unsure what purpose this conversation could have yet unwilling to end it rudely.

"Harry saw you and thought I should ask if you wanted to come sit with us?" He spoke rapidly, tripping over his words.

"I'm sorry; I'm actually just... waiting for someone. Thank you, though."

The look of disappointment on his face was almost comical. "You could wait with us?"

Hermione spared a rueful smile and shook her head.

A look of determination crossed his face. "I'll wait here, then. No use leaving a lady sitting alone."
His insistence was beginning to become less charming.

Unsure of a polite way to get rid of him, Hermione remained quiet.

He, however, started chattering.

"I know we don't know each other well or, eh, at all, but I wouldn't mind seeing you around again. I figure it was pretty rude of me to kiss you like that and not even stay and talk, but, well, mistletoe is a bugger sometimes." He looked at her pleadingly, as though expecting her to have some insight to offer into their one, distinctly less-than-memorable kiss.

"Already forgotten," she said with an accommodating smile.

If anything, he looked almost comically stricken. "But it isn't though! I, ah, I mean…" He flushed even further, the tips of his ears blending into his hair. "I thought maybe we might…"

His words were interrupted by Andromeda's reentrance, sliding into the booth beside Hermione and placing a possessive hand on her thigh with a murmured, "Have I missed something?"

Ron's eyebrows shot up for a moment, though he couldn't see the reason for Hermione's sudden blush Instead, an odd look of relief crossed his face. "Oh, hullo Andy."

Hermione glanced askance at the other witch, but Andromeda's attention was focused on Ron. "Ronald, how nice to see you." She didn't sound particularly warm. "And how is my grandson doing?"

"Oh, he's good, really, I'm sure my mum and Harry'd love it if you stopped by."

She nodded absently, glancing between Ron and Hermione with sharp eyes. "Of course. And how do you know Hermione?"

Ron had the good grace to look embarrassed. "Well… Just, you know. I've seen her around. Talked once… or twice."

Hermione bit her bottom lip to keep from laughing, but Ron seemed to take her smile for further invitation rather than amusement at his expense.

"Look, we were just wondering—Harry and I, that is—if Hermione might want to come have lunch with us, if you could maybe… ah… spare her for a bit?" Ron's words sputtered out under the cool look Andromeda was giving him. Her hand slipped from Hermione's thigh and settled instead at the small of her back, bringing them closer together.

"I already ate, actually," Hermione interjected, trying not to squirm. "Thanks, though."

Andromeda added, "We were just leaving."

To Hermione's astonishment, Ron reached over the tabletop and took her hand. "Brilliant! If you're going, Hermione can just bum around with us for a while."

Hermione withdrew her hand hastily, shaking her head. "Ron, I—"

"I'm afraid Hermione's afternoon is spoken for," Andromeda murmured, a tone of warning in her voice which Ron either did not hear or chose to ignore.

"Aw, c'mon, I'm sure whatever business you two've got can wait a while. Let her have some fun."
Andromeda's patience had worn thin. Her fingers were tracing distracted lines up and down the column of Hermione's spine, and it was wreaking havoc with her concentration. "As much as I'm sure you think you're the only one who can show her a good time, Mr. Weasley—"

Hearing the danger in the other woman's voice and feeling a spark of stray magic darting between Andromeda's fingers as her temper rose, Hermione quickly cut her off. "Ron I… I think you have the wrong idea."

Ron, however, had grown improbably more confident during their exchange. He made the unfortunate choice to turn flirtatious, arching an eyebrow as he asked, "And what idea might that be?"

Andromeda sighed. "Didn't want to have to do this…"

Turning, Hermione found Andromeda only a breath from her face, and then the breath was stolen, and Hermione was being kissed—gently, chastely, but kissed all the same—in a café full of people.

Hermione's face was burning, her lips were tingling, and her breath was short when Andromeda drew back after only a lingering heartbeat of connection.

Across the floor, Harry and the redheaded girl burst into astonished laughter after an instant of stunned silence, while the blonde's whimsical voice said, very matter-of-fact, "They make a lovely couple."

Ron's mouth was hanging open, and he seemed too stunned to be angry or embarrassed. "You… you and…"

Andromeda stood, extending her hand to Hermione as she slid from the booth behind her. She intertwined their fingers as she left a smattering of Knuts on the table for a tip.

"Do say hello to Teddy for me," she spoke, as casual as could possibly be.

As they headed to the door, Harry's raucous laughter echoed behind them. "Whoo, Ron. She's a bit out of your league, huh?"

Hermione couldn't decide if the warmth she felt at having such public acknowledgement of Andromeda's affections and the hysterically stunned expression on Ronald Weasley's face should make her feel so giddy, but she couldn't help it. Even if a hint of guilt and embarrassment needled at her gut, it was quickly drowned out by the warmth of Andromeda's hand in her own.

It felt wonderful.

Suddenly, she noticed that Andromeda's distracted expression, standing under the awning to keep out of the rain as she quickly drew her wand from the clasp which held it at her belt.

"Sorry to cut this short, but I'm afraid we'll have to hurry back."

"Is this about the Patronus?" Hermione asked. "What did Narcissa want?"

Andromeda nodded and sighed. "No one's hurt but… Bella burnt half the house down."
Chapter 8

Staring uncomprehending from her place amid the rubble, Hermione feared Andromeda had Apparated them into an impressionist painting, so surreal was the view.

There was soot in the air and charcoal all along the ground, yet even in places where the walls had burned away completely, paintings hung in midair, vases and sculptures perched on missing, ashen tables, a flickering blue haze of magic enclosing them, protecting them from the floating swirls of smoke. "At least the insurance paid off," Andromeda muttered, scuffing one foot into a heap of some blackened belonging. "Everything worth anything was protected when the flames appeared, though we'll still need to ship most of it somewhere else until we can clear away this rubble."

Even entire rooms of the house had been given their own shielding; Andromeda's study, half of the dining hall, the library. All of the family's most valuable possessions and heirlooms remained untouched. Unfortunately, it appeared that things like beds, couches, tables and chairs had been concessions of a more modern—less valued—nature, and sat forlornly covered in soot and char marks, if the fire had not consumed them entirely.

Andromeda sighed, coughing and waving her arm before her eyes. "Well. Nothing too serious; maintenance should have it fixed by tomorrow morning." Just then, a large support beam crashed to the ground, followed by a shower of rubble, leaving it obvious that the entire third floor was floating unsupported above them. "Perhaps a day or two," Andromeda amended, glowering up at what had once been a ceiling.

Hermione arched an eyebrow behind Andromeda's back. This much damage could take weeks, months to repair, though Hermione supposed something could be said for hiring expensive staff and paying some exorbitant amount of money to hasten the process.

She kept pace behind Andromeda, walking across the ruin of the main hallway, glancing up warily at the hovering floor above their heads. Soon, she could make out Narcissa amid a cluster of people Hermione didn't recognize.

"With the house in ruins, is there any chance of Bellatrix Lestrange getting loose in the community once more?"

Some nosey reporter had cornered Narcissa as she attempted to speak to the Ministry law enforcement officials who had arrived on the scene. She was bussing about the space, asking pointed questions and peering slyly over the top of rhinestone-encrusted spectacles, a shockingly green quill hovering in the air by her head, turning this way and that, as though taking in the scene, before darting down and scratching unaided at the parchment in the her hands.

"No," Narcissa snapped, clearly at wit's end.

"I find that hard to believe," the woman needled. "What other possible motive could your sister have for committing arson in her own home?"

"Why don't you scuttle on upstairs and ask her, Rita?" Narcissa remarked, finally giving up her attempts to speak with the officer in charge and devoting her full, furious attention to the irritating reporter. "After all, I'm dying to find that out for myself, and you two were always such good friends."

The woman visibly blanched, taking a quick step back.
Narcissa's eyes glinted. "Yes, that's what I'd thought. You haven't changed since Hogwarts. If you've nothing better to do than pester me about my sister, I suggest you leave." She started to turn away, but the reporter made a small, squeaking noise of protest, so she spun back. "Actually, that wasn't a suggestion. Get out of my home."

Clearly at a loss for words, she was helpless to stop Narcissa from turning her attention back to the matter at hand. When the reporter realized she was likely to be ignored at best, physically evicted at worst, she reluctantly meandered across the lawn to try to speak to the two befuddled house-elves staring in wide-eyed shock over the hedging between their quarters and the main lawn.

Some of the tension went out of Narcissa's posture when she realized Andromeda had arrived. "She swears it was an accident," said Narcissa in a clipped voice. "Yet the entire third floor was charmed against smoke and Fiendfyre."

Andromeda kicked a hunk of charred wood. "That little shit."

"What in Merlin's name did you say to her last night?" Narcissa asked, something angry flashing in the depths of her eyes despite the unflinching chill she put forward. "She's been perfectly manageable until now."

Andromeda shook her head. "Don't try and pin this on me, Cissa."

"You can't actually think—"

"—No." Andromeda held up a hand. "Bella would be thrilled to see us fighting now. It isn't worth it. Let's focus on fixing this as quickly as possible and you can lecture me all you want later."

Narcissa's scowl only deepened, but she nodded reluctantly. "Very well."

A flurry of activity just outside the blackened outline of the manor's foundation drew the attention of all three witches. Hermione recognized the man who was approaching from his frequent appearances on the cover of the *Daily Prophet*; it was the tall, dark, somewhat imposing figure of the recently appointed Minister of Magic. He'd been approached by that same irksome reporter as he neared, and his brisk words carried through the chilly air to where Hermione was standing. "This is not a public matter, Ms. Skeeter, and should I find one word about any of this in your column before our official press release, I can assure you that you will not find your stay in prison a pleasant one. Good day."

Looking almost comically affronted, she scanned the space around her before apparently deciding this story was more hassle than it was worth and scurrying off down the drive.

Meanwhile, Kingsley Shacklebolt, interim Minister and likely candidate to hold the position more permanently, came to a halt before the trio of women, shaking his head, an expression of distant annoyance on his face.

There was a pregnant pause before he finally spoke. "You do realize what a difficult situation your sister is putting the Ministry in, don't you?"

Narcissa let out a derisive snort but said nothing. Andromeda merely shrugged. "Not an insurmountable one. The house will be fixed in a matter of days."

He glanced around skeptically. "Perhaps. Convenient, though, isn't it? Her quarters remain untouched."

"Not really," Narcissa muttered. "Not even Bellatrix would burn herself alive just to make a point."
"Are you saying this wasn't an escape attempt?"

"Hardly."

Kingsley blinked, apparently unconvinced.

When Narcissa didn't seem inclined to elaborate, turning her attention instead to flicking away some sort of beetle buzzing around her head, Andromeda took over, voice placatingly matter-of-fact. "You of all people should know that Bellatrix is not a fool. This was a fit of anger, a... temper tantrum, if you will, and a matter for me and my sister to deal with, nothing more than that. Your Trace is still viable, the grounds are untouched, and she hasn't even tried to so much as walk down the stairs. If she planned an escape, it wouldn't be nearly this dramatic."

"Perhaps," the Minister said again, "but there are more practical concerns to deal with."

"Such as?" Narcissa asked dryly, sounding almost bored.

"The Ministry wants nothing to do with this... mess. You sister cannot be allowed to stay here unsupervised, not with the parts of her containment spells potentially weakened by the state of your household wards. You two are going to have to deal with this. Until the manor is fully rebuilt and my committee has time to re-lay the limits Bellatrix is under, neither you, nor your sister may leave the grounds. Starting at dusk, only one of you may leave the third floor at a time."

Narcissa bristled. "Unacceptable. Even if the fire was on the lower floors, Bellatrix made the third unlivable months ago. I—"

Andromeda laid a restraining hand on her sister's arm, squeezing gently to get her attention and shaking her head before addressing Kingsley. "As long as you extend the binding spells to the third floor for a few days," she started, voice pleasant, upbeat, "we'll make do."

Glancing suspiciously back and forth, Kingsley reluctantly nodded. "I'll see to it, but see that you do. This whole arrangement is skating on thin ice with the Wizengamot; one more incident and you could all stand trial again."

He turned and headed for the Apparation point just beyond the gates, cloak stirring up clouds of ash behind him.

Hermione did little but stand silently throughout these conversations and the many which followed, watching as Lucius stormed out from behind one of the few standing walls, lamenting loudly at the loss of his liquor collection and cursing Bellatrix's name in every other breath. A parade of official figures meandered about the space, some speaking to Andromeda about the state of her insurance claim, others negotiating with Narcissa over the price of reconstruction, the potential for restoration. Both sisters repeatedly turned away the Aurors who arrived to investigate the source of the fire, insisting that Bellatrix wasn't fit to talk to anyone and, besides, everyone with half a mind knew just what had happened here.

Hermione did her best to stay out of the way and to keep from being underfoot, eventually joining the house elves across the lawn and attempting to reassure them that everything would be back to normal in a matter of days. While Rommie and Atcham attempted to be their usual deferent, professional selves, Hermione could tell by the gradual relaxation of their nervously twitching ears that they secretly appreciated her presence.

Andromeda joined her just as the sun was beginning to set, and the elves faded away without a word.
She sat beside the younger witch on the low stone bench, sighing deeply before running an agitated, soot-stained hand through her hair. "Not exactly how I pictured this afternoon ending," she muttered, attempting a strained smile.

Hermione shivered as a gust of wind sent a flurry of crimson leaves to stain the ground at their feet. She clutched her cloak more tightly about her. *No, it certainly isn't*, she thought, trying to summon the light, airy mood that had accompanied their earlier brunch. Yet the morning seemed as distant as last summer, every moment of peace she'd had in the past two days shattered by Bellatrix's presence. She found herself missing the time when her only awareness of the oldest sister had been of an invisible presence somewhere above her head, but she'd entered Hermione's life with all the subtlety of a Bludger to a broomstick, and there was no way to lock her back out again.

Andromeda's head came to rest against Hermione's shoulder, drawing her out of her musings. It was the most vulnerable she had seen the older woman, eyes closed, forehead streaked with black powder from the path her hand had taken, breath shallow and strained. As if with a mind of its own, her hand raised to stroke through Andromeda's tangled hair, drawing a slower, more contended breath from her lips. Eyes still closed, she spoke so softly Hermione could hardly hear. "Don't leave."

"Leave?" Hermione asked, hand stilling, genuinely confused.

She could feel Andromeda nod her head. "I… Don't let her chase you away. Please."

Hermione stiffened, finally realizing what Andromeda meant. Before she could find words, Andromeda had raised her head, pulling Hermione closer and finding her hands, clasping them tightly between her own. "I'll keep you safe. I promise. I swear it." Her eyes were exhausted, wild. She sounded close to tears.

Hermione tried to sort through her own emotions, but everything felt strangely deadened. There was a mild sort of dread, an ever-present twinge of fear, but it was less than even the surprise she felt that she hadn't even considered leaving. It hadn't so much as crossed her mind.

She met Andromeda's eyes, feeling lost. When had this become what she wanted? When had the feelings she had for this woman become the only thing she could ever imagine herself needing? When had this safety—and the inescapable desire that lingered even in a moment like this—replaced all of her common sense? When had she stopped holding hope for all the childhood dreams of white weddings and two perfect children and handsome grooms without psychotic sisters? Had she ever wanted that? Had she ever wanted anything besides this, besides the woman pressed to her side, besides the long, slender fingers claiming her own, besides this glimpse of beautiful, poignant vulnerability in those deep, dangerous eyes?

"Andy," she whispered out, shortening her name for the first time, despite the permission she had been granted so many times before. "I'm not going anywhere."

A strangled sound escaped from Andromeda's throat, and she pulled Hermione closer, burying her face in the younger woman's throat and wrapping her arms about her tightly. Hermione's arms hung uselessly in the air for a moment before slowly returning the embrace. Even through the sharp scent of burning that lingered over the both of them, Hermione could smell that delicate scent she associated with Andromeda. It triggered a wellspring of emotions in her, and she couldn't help but whisper, "Even now, I feel safe with you."

She felt Andromeda stiffen, hands forming claws against her back. Andromeda's shoulders started shaking a moment before she felt dampness against her neck, and she realized the other witch was crying.
No knowing what else to do, she held still, not sure what level of comfort to offer when she wasn't sure exactly what sort of tears were being shed. The tears only lasted a moment before Andromeda pulled back, a pained expression on her face, wiping frantically at her eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I—I've made you all these promises and I…" Her voice seemed to fail her for a moment, and her eyes were blinking rapidly, clearly trying to press back more tears. In a visible effort of will, she composed herself. "I'm afraid I'm a bit of a fraud," she said, voice oddly empty. "I haven't always been able to protect the people I… care about… from Bellatrix."

Hermione's eyes widened a fraction, and she started to ask what had happened, what had left such emotional scarring behind, but Andromeda wasn't finished. "It's going to be different this time," she said, voice hard.

The tone brooked no further discussion, and though Hermione felt an almost desperate curiosity, Andromeda was standing, the light was fading, and her questions could wait until tomorrow.

Two figures approached, silhouetted against the last rays of sunlight. They met halfway, Lucius looking quite as disheveled as Andromeda, while Narcissa had somehow retained a semblance of cleanliness, only the distinctly dulled glint of the metal buckles on her shoes illustrating that the soot affected even her. "We'd best get upstairs and sort out just where we're staying tonight," Narcissa said, pointedly ignoring her sister's red-rimmed eyes.

In silent agreement, the four trekked across the lawn, Hermione staying as far from Lucius as possible, as this was the most she'd been around him since her first day. Some sort of white tarp had been hung over the floating paintings, artwork, and other valuables to protect them from the ashes, giving the peculiar maze of half-burnt walls a ghostly appearance in the dying light. The implications of the damages began to sink into Hermione's exhausted brain as she realized that none of the three or four fully-insured rooms had been anything suitable for sleeping in.

A single stairway had been reconstructed in a manner clearly designed for functionality, not aesthetics, but it led them safely up to one corner of the eerily floating third floor. Hermione hesitated at the threshold, but Andromeda was behind her, and slipped a comforting arm about her waist before gently pressing her forward into the dark.

"Lumos!" Narcissa muttered, summoning light to the tip of her wand before flicking the ball of illumination at one of the sconces on the walls. Hermione watched in detached wonder as the light spread from one light fixture to another, until each of the main halls had been lit up. She'd never seen the traditionally simple spell do that before.

A glance about revealed Bellatrix standing at the far end of the left corridor, leaning against a wall, a distinctly amused smirk on her lips. "Welcome to my most humble abode," she called out mockingly, spreading her hands wide in a gesture of pseudo-invitation, voice crude and unnecessarily loud in the empty space.

Hermione felt herself flinch reflexively just from seeing the eldest Black again, and Andromeda drew her into the circle of her arms. "Remember," she whispered, lips against Hermione's ear, "The Ministry's keeping her magic suppressed completely until we've finished repairs. She can't hurt you."

So that's what she was asking for; the binding, Hermione realized. It left her feeling… marginally safer. The key word being marginally. Then, it occurred to her that it hadn't been Bellatrix's choice to stand creepily at the end of the darkened hall; rather, without magic, many of the manor's most basic functions were denied her, including light.

Narcissa hadn't stopped with the rest of them, continuing down the corridor to stand before Bellatrix instead.
"So sorry I didn't invite you to the bonfire, Cissy. We could've toasted marshmallows."

Crack.

Hermione startled at the sound, Narcissa's motion so quick she hadn't even seen her raise her hand, and had Bellatrix's cheek not flushed an angry red, she wouldn't have quite believed the slap to have happened. "If you ever do something as idiotic as this again I can guarantee I will personally welcome the Dementors into the house myself, am I understood?"

Bellatrix stroked her cheek, a thoughtful expression on her face. She hadn't even flinched when her sister had struck her. "Hmmm," she started, contemplative. "I can't say that threat works quite the way it used to, Cissy. I know you hate the creatures as much as I do. Might even say you fear them more." She spoke softly, yet there was a hint of taunting challenge in her tone.

Narcissa twitched, but didn't step back. "You forget. If they come here, it isn't me they'll feed from."

Bellatrix shrugged. "Pity. You'd be a tastier soul." She brushed past her sister and started towards the space where Hermione, Andromeda, and Lucius stood. "Lucky for the both of us, I tire quickly of even my own games," she called over her shoulder. "Don't worry, the fire and I have had our fun." She laughed, a shrill, affected sound, echoing behind her as she turned down the middle hall. "For now."

Though all of the sisters often seemed larger-than-life to Hermione, there was a degree of presence to Bellatrix that the others didn't quite have. Whenever Bellatrix was in a room, she may well have been the only one there, so thoroughly did she command attention. It reminded Hermione a bit of the theatre; the over exaggerated lines, the sprawling, space-consuming postures, the way she seemed to type-cast herself in her own role, dressing the part of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's closest servant, even after his death… Acting the part of madness? While the thought occurred to her, Hermione dismissed it immediately, ignoring the niggling voice at the back of her mind that wondered if, perhaps, this home was merely the stage upon which Bellatrix was putting on her latest show.

Regardless of its origin, the presence Bellatrix possessed left the hallway feeling distinctly larger, emptier, once she had moved on.

It took Hermione a moment to realize Lucius was staring at her… at her and Andromeda… and she quickly tugged herself out of the little safe-haven Andromeda's arms had offered her. While Andromeda seemed quite content to act as though there wasn't a thing wrong with her many-faceted interactions with the younger woman, Hermione knew there was a line between courage and stupidity, and antagonizing Lucius needlessly certainly fell closer to the latter.

He sniffed dismissively, turning his attention to his wife. "Where are we sleeping?" he groused, peering intently down the two visible corridors.

Narcissa bark of laughter was near glacial. "We aren't sleeping anywhere. I will be taking the eastern guest chambers, and you can do what you will."

And she was gone, disappearing down the same hallway Bellatrix had taken before the sound of a doorknob turning signaled that she had claimed her space.

Lucius was livid, his pale skin a distinctly unflattering shade of angry puce. As he made to follow his wife, Andromeda intervened, noting, "There's another set of rooms at the end of the other hall."

He stopped walking, but seemed snared by indecision, unable to choose between pursuing his wife to regain a semblance of his pride or cutting his losses and sleeping peacefully alone. He turned, and
Hermione breathed a sigh of relief, but it was misguided. His eyes strayed from the direction Andromeda had indicated and landed on Hermione. "Where's the girl sleeping?" he asked pointedly, eyes glinting.

Hermione could sense Andromeda tensing up behind her, but wasn't sure how to defuse the situation.

"Once I know you're settled," Andromeda started, voice low, cautionary, "I'll be sorting that out with her."

He stepped closer, but something he saw in Andromeda's face made him hesitate. "Fine," he snapped, spinning on his heel and storming down the hall, door slamming shut behind him.

This left Hermione alone with Andromeda and her thoughts.

"Where exactly am I sleeping?" she asked warily, echoing Lucius's inquiry.

"With me," Andromeda said.

Hermione's eyes widened almost comically, and Andromeda flushed, hastening to add, "Ah, that is, there's only one other bedroom on this floor, and even if there were two, I… well… I wouldn't leave you alone up here."

Slowly, Hermione nodded, trying not to think too hard about the emotional responses those words had triggered. "I… thanks. But… I don't want to cause trouble… I could always… stay back at home. Just for a few days."

"No!" Andromeda snapped. Hermione flinched. Immediately, the older witch's eyes softened. She hastened to add, "You don't need to do that; it's no trouble." Seeing the uncertainty in Hermione's expression, she amended, "If… if you feel uncomfortable staying with me—"

"—Oh, I didn't mean… I wasn't implying… Oh, never mind," Hermione stammered, finally laughing a bit at the absurdity of the whole thing. "This is ridiculous."

Andromeda's lips quirked at the younger woman's mirth. "It is a bit." She gestured down the only hallway none of the others had taken. "Shall we?"

Much like the rest of the floor, Bellatrix seemed to have made a royal mess of the bedroom Andromeda led her into. Both witches stood in the door for a moment, each staring at the senseless destruction, wondering where they would find the energy to repair it into something livable. "Damn Bellatrix," Andromeda muttered. "Damn her and damn Kingsley and damn the Wizengamot. Here," she added, apparently non sequitur, digging around in the small bag she'd been carrying all day. "I meant to give this to you this morning, but I'm afraid, with all the insanity, I forgot."

She finally found what she was looking for, presenting Hermione with slender stick of pale, polished wood. "Vine," Andromeda said, handing it over. "Dragon heartstring, ten and three-quarters inches." Hermione held it reverently. The wand had no obvious handle, yet the delicate spiral clearly tapered at the casting end, and it fit near perfectly in her hand, her first and second fingers locked on either side of the subtle ridging. It felt sturdier, too, despite its delicate nature. "It's a bit old," Andromeda continued. "When I brought in your broken one, the charm the apprentice used to activate your magical signature and attract a new wand didn't seem to work at all, but Ollivander himself came out of the storage room with a shaking box." She looked into Hermione's eyes. "He made it eight years ago."
Hermione was momentarily stunned by the implications, only just managing to say, "Thank you. Thank you so much." Her voice nearly trembled with gratitude. The wand meant so much more to her than merely a replacement for something broken. It meant protection in a way Andromeda herself could never provide. In this world, it meant self-sufficiency, independence, and the ability to stare Bellatrix Black in the eyes down in the kitchens without fearing for her life. It also put her that much more into Andromeda's debt, but the warmth in that smile made it impossible to feel regret.

"As always, you're quite welcome," Andromeda replied, and the heated glint Hermione saw in the other witch's eyes brought a flush to her cheeks.

They began working side-by-side, charming away dust and repairing the abused furniture. "Why did your sister do this?" Hermione asked at one point. "Target practice?"

Andromeda chuckled. "Quite possible, actually."

Another pile of clutter was banished.

"And… the fire?" Hermione asked hesitantly.

Andromeda stopped cleaning for a moment, clearly weighing her words. "The fire… was many things. But in the end, all of them merely come down to one."

When Andromeda didn't immediately elaborate, Hermione spoke again. "What sort of one?"

"She's Bellatrix. She doesn't need a reason to do anything."

The simmering anger in Andromeda's voice made Hermione shiver.

Soon enough, the room resembled a bedroom rather than a warzone, though they had ignored the various gouges in the floor and walls in favor of repairing the essentials.

The essentials included one chair, one bed, and one table, as well as the bathroom Andromeda had disappeared to take care of while Hermione finished up in the main chambers.

Andromeda only popped back in long enough to say she was taking a quick shower, and Hermione was trying to not think about the etiquette required to ask whether she should be attempting to transfigure something into a second bed or just summon a blanket and pass out on the floor. Instead, she summoned up a particular shade of cleansing charm in her mind and cast it on herself, unwilling to remain this filthy even long enough to wait for a real shower. A second charm took care of the state of her clothes, and she hung her cloak over the back of the single chair. Glancing mournfully at the state of the dress she had worn on their date, even as charmed-clean as it was, she proceeded to slump backwards onto the bed, planning to just shut her eyes for a moment… just until Andromeda finished up… just for a moment… just a few… just…

She was woken by the feeling of another person sliding into the bed from the far side. She rolled over slowly, blinking heavily at Andromeda's sleep-blurred face. She started to sit up, clearing her throat to apologize, but Andromeda gently tugged her back down. "Shhh," she whispered. "It's alright. Go back to sleep."

Hermione was too exhausted to resist as those gentle hands steered her back onto her side, facing the wall. Andromeda tugged up the covers, and the last thing Hermione felt before passing out once again was a warm body settling along the curve of her spine, an arm pulling taut about her waist, and the rhythmic pulse of calm, even breath against the back of her neck.
Chapter 9

If not for the sun poking at her from beyond her eyelids, Hermione wasn't sure she'd have ever woken up. Everything was warm, her limbs leaden with sleep, another pair of legs gently entwined with her own…

Another pair of legs!?

Startling awake, her eyes quickly focused on Andromeda's smile. She was already quite awake, her head propped up on one elbow, gazing down at Hermione with the sweetest, most unassuming smile she'd ever seen on the woman. Her hair was falling across one side of her face and spilling onto the pillow on the other, mingling with the morning light which the shredded curtains did little to deter. "Hello," she murmured, reaching down and tucking a strand of hair behind Hermione's ear.

Hermione blushed at the tender gesture, feeling disoriented but improbably content. "Good morning," she said back, voice rasping with the passage of sleep. She found herself more than a bit self-conscious. Her hair must be a fright, always impossibly bushy when cleaned with magic, not to mention the state of her dreadfully wrinkled dress, nothing she would ever normally sleep in. She began to untangle her legs from Andromeda's, only then noticing that the other witch had slept in only a short, silken robe which must have escaped Bellatrix's wrath in the bathroom.

She tugged insecurely at her dress, attempting to smooth out the wrinkles and escape the startlingly electric feeling of her bare legs slipping free from where they had lain between Andromeda's. "I'm sorry," she started to say, feet pushing insistently at the covers which had somehow managed to only entrap her ankles, leaving the rest of her nearly bare. "I—ah—didn't mean to steal your bed." She started to sit up. To her continued astonishment, the other witch didn't make any attempt to rise. Instead, she chuckled at Hermione's antics and, without further ado, tugged her back down beside her and stole a quick peck on the lips.

"Don't you ever stop apologizing?" she asked lightly, face hovering inches above the younger woman. Gone was the weighty mood of the previous evening, replaced by a quite playful Andromeda and a bemused Hermione.

"Sorry, I—" Hermione started, then blinked, realizing what she was doing. She bit off an apology for the apology for the apology only with considerable effort. "Oops."

Andromeda laughed brightly, turning Hermione towards her so they could lie face-to-face. "You're precious," she murmured, leaning forward and placing a gentle kiss on the tip of Hermione nose.

Hermione couldn't help but think that she wouldn't mind waking up like this more often.

Andromeda sighed, gently tugging Hermione's head down into the crook of her neck. "I suppose you had the right idea; we really ought to get up. Narcissa’s a bit of a control freak. I'm sure this situation is driving her up a wall but... I'd rather not deal with it at the moment."

Hermione quite agreed. It was a luxury she hadn't often had, being able to see a problem looming on the horizon and just choosing not to deal with it. Every time she made the decision to put something off, it wasn't just herself she would deprive of some needed thing; it would be her mum and dad, too. Now, however, Andromeda could make the decision for her, could keep them warm and languid and tucked away in this little corner of the world. Curled up like this, Hermione felt small, but with Andromeda next to her, she couldn't imagine anything would dare interfere.
Then, memories of every other intimate moment she'd shared with this particular sister pierced the happy, half-asleep bubble she was luxuriating in, reminding her just how often their interactions ended badly. Being summoned by Patronus to find their home half destroyed was about all the proof needed to show her just how illusory this sense of safety was.

Andromeda seemed to sense the change in Hermione's mood, turning her hand to run soothing fingers through her sleep-destroyed hair. "It's always something with you, isn't it?" The words were said teasingly, but there was a hint of sorrow beneath them. "Something's happening in that mind of yours that won't let you enjoy a peaceful moment."

Hermione tried to relax, tried to convince her mind to sleep in a bit longer, but she found her thoughts stuck instead on yesterday… on the end of their date.

"Can… can I ask you something?"

"I suppose it would be cliché to say, 'You just did,' so yes, of course."

Hermione smiled weakly. "The hawk, your sister's Patronus?"

Andromeda waited for Hermione to continue, but when the pause threatened to stretch into perpetuity, she prompted, "Yes?"

Hermione pulled her head up, looking down into Andromeda's eyes as she mused, "I thought—I can't remember where I heard it—but I thought Death Eaters couldn't conjure a Patronus."

"My sister was never a Death Eater," Andy hissed, startling Hermione with the vehemence of her denial.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know," Hermione was quick to placate her. "I suppose I thought… because of Lucius…"

Andromeda sighed and shook her head, tugging Hermione down once again. "Thankfully, no. It takes the Mark to make a true Death Eater, and even then, there were a few who broke that rule. A few Death Eaters still had enough happiness in their soul to conjure the silver… or at least one that I knew of. The late Headmaster of Hogwarts."

Hermione blinked, struggling to connect the dots from what she had read in the newspapers and overheard at the Ministry during that time. Somehow, Voldemort's reign seemed impossibly distant, like a bad dream. "Headmaster Snape?" she asked. "I never heard much about him other than at the end, some column debating whose side he had really been on at different points in history."

Andromeda shrugged. "Harry says it was always ours, and for me, that's the end of it. To be honest, if I weren't still living under the same roof as a constant reminder of those strange years, I would rather just… stop dwelling on it. The past is the past and all that."

There was silence, then, each witch lost in her own thoughts of just how incredible it could be to throw out years of unhappiness in exchange for some simple, peaceful life.

A knock on the door brought an end to fantasy. Lucius called out, "If you plan on lounging around all day, I need someone to go down and tell the bloody contractors that I can sign off on their work so far."

Andromeda sighed, reluctantly pulling away from the center of the bed and sitting up. "You can't sign off on anything, Lucius. You don't own the property."
A derisive sniff could be heard from the other side of the door, and Hermione supposed she was glad he hadn't just decided to barge in. "I'm quite aware. It was merely an offer of… assistance."

"Assistance my ass," Andromeda mumbled, just loud enough for Hermione to hear. "I'll be right down," she added at a more carrying volume.

They both slipped out of bed as Lucius's footsteps and unintelligible grumbling faded down the hallway. "Should I go with you?" Hermione asked as Andromeda snatched up her wand and quickly transfigured her robe into a fabric more suitable for public.

"Hmm?" Andromeda muttered as she slipped on the shoes she'd worn yesterday. "Oh, no, this should only take maybe fifteen minutes." She glanced over at Hermione, chuckling as her eyes took in the state of the younger witch's hair. "Something tells me you would enjoy a shower more than a discourse on the pros and cons of reconstruction versus remodeling."

Feeling her fingers getting stuck in every direction as she attempted to pat down her hair, Hermione bit her lip and nodded. Andromeda smiled at her, stepping closer and capturing her lips in a quick but thorough kiss. "Don't miss me too much," she said with a smile, and then she was gone.

Hermione was quickly coming to the conclusion that Andromeda was a truly remarkable kisser. Granted, her prior experience was rather limited, but she was pretty sure she could make a call on this by now.

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Even after a luxuriously long shower and a deliberate transfiguration of her poor, abused dress, Andromeda had yet to return, so Hermione decided she may as well wander. After all, it wasn't as though Andromeda had told her to stay put, and now that she had a brand new wand, exploring some of the places she hadn't seen suddenly seemed much less daunting than it had on her first unfortunate visit.

Roving through the halls which so closely mirrored those now burned away below them, Hermione didn't discover all that much. Unlike the lower floors, many of these doors were locked, and other hallways had been turned into dead-ends by piles of broken furniture. She found one entirely unexplored hallway, but hearing Narcissa's voice raised and berating an indignantly responding Lucius sent her scurrying off around the corner, still unwilling to put herself in the midst of whatever storm was constantly building between those two.

She paused when she realized where she now was. This hallway was familiar; dark even though lit by torches, still windowless, still carpeted by tatters of once-gaudy fabric and framed by walls heavy with unoccupied portraits. This was the heart of Bellatrix's domain.

Though hesitant, the fact that Hermione couldn't imagine anything worse happening now than had happened last time made her bold, and she started down the hall with confidant—albeit very, very quiet—footsteps. That particular door was already open, no less strange than her last welcome, though perhaps a bit less eerie. She walked past on tiptoe, almost holding her breath, but the room seemed empty as she peered in, the fire unlit.

Hermione sped up once she had moved past Bellatrix's chambers, continuing to the end of the hall and turning a corner to find a small alcove with a tall, thin window. She pulled back the slightly musty curtain keeping the daylight out. Peering down over the grounds, she spotted her pitiful attempt at resurrecting the vegetable garden, wondering aimlessly if this was the curtain she had looked up at a scant week earlier. Remembering that moment, a chill ran down her spine, and she let the curtain fall back into place, starting back towards the hall where she had last heard Narcissa's voice.
Walking past Bellatrix's rooms once again, Hermione felt an echo of the last time she'd been here. No magic, no compulsion, just a ghostly déjà vu, a lingering pull that battled with the fear she still felt. She managed to walk past, but stopped just on the other side of the door. *It's empty,* a little devil on her shoulder seemed to taunt. *You've walked by twice and haven't heard so much as a rustle.* Slowly, she turned back, stepping closer, peering around the doorframe. When nothing happened, she felt a rush of confidence, that giddy, heady rush of *getting away with something,* doing something she shouldn't. Slowly, quietly, she stepped into the room.

She could see a bit better now that she was inside, as the torch-lit hallway had made peering into the unlit chambers somewhat tricky. Hermione took in the room more fully… now that she wasn't in immediate danger of her life. The fireplace dominated one wall, the floor around it dusted and scarred with ash and soot stains from fires long since extinguished. There was a dark, canopied bed pressed into the corner opposite the door, but the curtains were drawn back and tied at each post, and it was clearly empty. In fact, the sheets were neatly tucked at the head, the blanket folded at the foot, the pillows perfectly symmetrical and unmarred by any hint of a head or elbow; it seemed that no one had slept there at all.

Just as she was about to turn towards the next wall, Hermione caught a glimpse of something just behind her, tucked into that single patch of room which she hadn't been able to see from the hall.

When she realized what she was seeing, she couldn't help but gasp, quickly covering her mouth and biting her own hand in an attempt to keep silent. There, perched haphazardly on a thinly cushioned armchair, Bellatrix was still sleeping.

Heart pounding, Hermione stood frozen, but when it was apparent her squeak hadn't woken the sleeping witch, she slowly lowered her hands, forcing her breathing to slow.

*That can't possibly be comfortable,* Hermione thought, trying to make sense of the painfully crooked posture, one foot tucked up into the folds of blanket draped over her, the other peeking out where it rested on the floor. Her spine seemed impossibly rigid, too straight for any semblance of comfortable rest, yet her head was tipped sideways against the cushioned side of the chair's backing, eyes closed, face more relaxed than Hermione could have thought possible. If not for a pained furrow in her brow, Bellatrix could have looked almost peaceful in that moment, yet even in the dim light from the torches in the hall, Hermione could just see the shadowy ridges of pupils twitching behind her eyelids, her right hand clutching that crooked wand in a death grip on the armrest of the chair. Bellatrix looked haunted.

Realizing how long she had been frozen there, Hermione began to ease her way back towards the door, carefully starting to tug her wand from her sleeve. Just a few steps from safety, one of the floorboards betrayed her with a long, low *creeeaaak.*

In a flash, Bellatrix was awake, eyes wild and entirely vacant of humanity, wand raised and pointed directly at Hermione before her head even turned to see who had dared disturb her rest. *"Crucio!"*

Hermione couldn't move, couldn't run, couldn't breathe, paralyzed and waiting for the pain she knew must follow that word. Yet when a single scream pierced the air, it wasn't she who had uttered it.

Bellatrix had crumpled to the floor, the blanket pooled around her knees. She was gasping, teeth clenched, wand lying forgotten beside her as she clawed at her own forearm.

*"No, no, no!"* she rasped out, practically hissing the word through her teeth. The black robe which covered her arm bunched at her elbow, allowing Hermione a glimpse of black and red between Bellatrix's fingers.
Hermione stared, uncomprehending, at the ravages of Bellatrix's arm. Blood dripped from a single fresh red line amid a multitude of black ones, piled up one over another up and down her arms like tattooed railroad tracks engraved in her skin… like tally marks. Even as she watched, the newest cut began to blacken, as though the blood itself had been set on fire and turned to charcoal before her eyes.

The sheer animal pain in that woman's expression finally freed Hermione's scared-stiff form. Something was wrong, something horrible was happening and she couldn't just stand there and watch her bleed. Already standing far too close for her own comfort, Hermione allowed herself to slowly kneel beside the form on the floor. "Can I help?" she whispered.

"No!" Bellatrix hissed again, piercing Hermione with a glare of pure fury. The younger woman flinched back.

"What h-happened?"

Finally, the cut had visibly healed, if the blackened line left behind could ever be called "healed". Bellatrix seemed to gather herself, the tension in her body still showing unspeakable pain, but regaining a degree of her strength. She let go of the blackened wrist, shoving it towards Hermione, letting her see the ravages of flesh just inches from her face. "This? You want to know what this is? You did this, you filthy Mudblood."

As Hermione flinched away, Bellatrix drew back her arm, a dark laugh cutting through the air. "You and them and everyone else who called themselves the good ones."

"I don't understand," Hermione said softly, part of her wanting to run but more of her failing to put aside curiosity.

Bellatrix laughed again, and there was more pain in that sound than Hermione had ever heard before. "These are my chains, girl," she growled. "This arm—" she held out the same wrist once again, "—is for torture. This one—" she swapped hands, yanking back her other sleeve and revealing similar black scars, "—is for control. And if you could see my back, you'd know just how many I've killed."

Hermione was stunned, trying to piece together what she was seeing and hearing but unable to find any logical answer.

"They took away that magic from me…" Bellatrix continued, staring down at her own arms, lost somewhere in her own world, not even seeming to see Hermione there in front of her anymore. "They laughed when they came up with it, those Ministry bastards. We'll brand her with her crimes. One mark for every Unforgivable Curse she ever used. But that couldn't be the end of it… no… they weren't satisfied. Let's see how many times she breaks, they said. Let's see her try not to use Unforgivables. And just in case she fucks up! We'll make sure she can't forget it."

Hermione felt sick. "That… the Ministry did that to you? That's… that's inhumane, that's…"

When Hermione spoke, Bellatrix fell silent, slowly raising her head as she seemed to remember that she wasn't alone. "That's justice," she spat, but there was little venom in it now, and even though it seemed most of the pain had gone, her eyes looked dead.

For a moment, Hermione completely forgot herself. Staring down at the brutality before her, she reached out, reflexively, and took one of Bellatrix's hands in hers—this one is for the Imperius Curse, she realized with vague wonder—and gently traced her thumb across the faintest of the lines, those just across the pulse point. "All this for spells you can't take back and spells you can't even cast?" she whispered to herself. Suddenly, she realized what she was doing and froze, slowly
looking up while still cradling the wrist of Bellatrix Black in her hands.

The witch was staring at her, the expression on her face one of abject shock. Bellatrix looked stunned, confused, and... lost. In a moment of illumination, Hermione realized that this was quite possibly the first time in decades that someone besides her sisters had touched her for any other purpose than to inflict pain. *It's a bit like petting a feral animal,* Hermione mused, reminding herself, *no sudden moves.* Slowly, she lifted her thumb from the blackened veins, setting down the wrist and pulling back. Bellatrix remained frozen, staring at her with that same wary confusion, as though waiting for the betrayal, waiting for a slap or a curse or fifty years in Azkaban. Instead, Hermione said, "I'm sorry."

Heart in her throat, Hermione stood, still moving slowly, afraid to provoke whatever burst of energy was sure to follow Bellatrix's stillness, but she backed from the room uncontested, no curse or cry of "Mudblood" broke the silence, and no footsteps followed her down the hall.

She meant to ask Andromeda more about it, but between all the hassles of trying to rebuild, her mishap with the oldest sister never quite seemed to work its way into the conversation. Andromeda had met her in their temporarily shared room just a few minutes after she returned, and since the other woman looked as frazzled as Hermione felt, she decided mentioning that odd little encounter might best be saved for a calmer moment.

Of course, somewhere in the back of her mind, she couldn't help but remember just how harsh Andromeda's reaction had been to their last encounter, and if whatever had transpired between the two sisters had actually led to the house burning down, she wasn't sure she wanted to be the cause of any further grievance. After all, she hadn't been hurt this time, and she had... well... learned something new. For all the Ministry's claims of superiority for not killing their criminals, they sure had a dark streak to match their lofty ideals. Cursing a woman to bleed and scar every time she lashed out in fear was... harsh to say the least. It would be one thing if the tallies were meant as some sort of rehabilitation, meant to remind her never to use her power that way again, but since she had no hope of ever being reintegrated with the rest of the world, since there was no danger of her ever misusing the spells again, those torturous marks ended up being nothing more than... revenge.

It haunted Hermione all day as she went about carrying messages between Andromeda and Narcissa as they struggled to agree on how best to work with the contractors when one of the two had to be upstairs at all times. Dashing in and around the mess of empty flooring and cluttered stairwells, her mind kept returning to those brutalized wrists. It felt different from the rest of Bellatrix's punishment. There was certainly a need for keeping her confined, and even the alarm trigger whenever she went somewhere she was not supposed to serve a purpose in keeping everyone safe. The particular bonds on her magic were, again, a safety precaution, something to make Andromeda's role here as jail keeper more bearable. But *this*? This medieval cruelty? Burning her alive every time she made a mistake, branding her forever for her crimes as a death eater? It seemed so... childish, so vigilante. And the way Bellatrix had reacted to it... the way a woman who hadn't so much as flinched at burning herself in the kitchen fire just yesterday... the pain they must have put into that curse would probably have *crippled* anyone else. Hermione shuddered as that single cry of pain seemed to echo in the air around her.

After the third meal the house-elves delivered from Diagon, Hermione once more found herself in the chambers Andromeda had claimed for them. Unsure how to broach the topic of sleeping arrangements now that she wasn't tired enough to accidentally pass out on the bed, it wasn't until each of them had already showered off the grime of a destroyed building and changed into the temporary nightwear Andromeda had purchased that Hermione managed to ask, "I, um, I know I fell
asleep here yesterday but should I… should I go somewhere else? Make another bed?"

Already reclining against the pillows, Andromeda arched an eyebrow. "Do you want to sleep somewhere else?"

Hermione blushed, stammering, "I—no—I mean… I don't want to..." she paused, tongue-tied for a moment as Andromeda tugged aside the sheets next to her and patted the mattress, "… presume anything," she finished dully.

Andromeda smiled, sitting up and physically tugging Hermione down beside her. "Enough, you. Sleep."

Just like that, Hermione found herself once more curled up against this witch—this woman—she had known only for a short time, and feeling more at home than she ever had anywhere else.

It was starting to look like a building again. All the outer walls were back and clean, and even the most blackened of the inner chambers were – though still mostly empty – at least no longer charred. Narcissa spent most of the day downstairs avoiding Lucius, leaving Andromeda to insist on resuming Hermione's lessons.

It was wonderful, her new wand. She connected with it. It wasn't just the bit of wood that the spells came out of, no; it felt like part of her. It was as though a barrier had been taken away in her spell casting, some wall between her magic and the world, and things which had once required concentration and determination now came effortlessly. Not everything, of course. She still wasn't casting at nearly the level she could have been if she'd gone to school, but Andromeda continued to praise her unbound work, looking positively ecstatic with the new degree of success the wand allowed.

With little else to do, Andromeda spent almost the entire day teaching her, pausing only for an occasional update from Narcissa or a bite to eat. Once, close to dusk, Hermione caught sight of Bellatrix watching them from the shadows, directly in her line of vision but hidden from Andromeda. Bellatrix didn't seem to realize Hermione had spotted her, gaze focused on the last place sparks of magic had just vanished, and the oddest expression had taken over the eldest Black's face. Her eyes were narrowed; contemplative, yet her nose seemed crinkled with distaste. Eventually, they made eye contact, and Bellatrix faded away into the shadows.

Hermione didn't see her again that day.

Waking up beside Andromeda on the third morning in their upstairs room felt a bit too… natural. She was getting used to this, to falling asleep wrapped up in warm arms and waking to a gentle kiss and soft conversation. It was too easy, being with Andromeda. Almost too easy to feel real. Being thrown into this particular stage of a relationship by circumstance was interesting to say the least, because falling into the pattern of sleeping and waking together felt like… skipping a few steps.

Still, the work was scheduled to be finished midafternoon, everything still protected in storage would return by dusk, and then everything would be back to normal. Or, at least, whatever semblance of normal existed in this household.

Whenever Hermione was left alone, she felt… she felt old. It wasn't any single thing she could put her finger on, but for as long as she could remember, silence and lack of contact seemed to age her beyond her years. Oftentimes, even when there was noise and bustle all around her—at her job at the Ministry, or as a child at the Inn—she would still be the invisible one, and it made her tired.
That was what made this new life so impossible to turn away, more than anything. Andromeda made her feel like she would never be alone again. Even now, sitting alone, waiting to hear footsteps return to their room and tell her she could start bringing things back downstairs, she knew that Andromeda would be back, would walk in, carrying with her a presence as clear and fresh as a draught from the fountain of youth, and Hermione could feel herself flush with the waiting, heady as elf-made wine.

In the end, everything took a bit longer than expected, the final Magical Maintenance van not leaving the drive until well past dark, but the house was back to normal.

As Hermione finished bringing her few belongings down from the third floor, she stared once more up from the landing. She could practically feel it, that veil of secrecy descending yet again between where she stood and Bellatrix's corner of the world. She had been granted a brief glimpse into it; now she was being locked out again. Though she'd only seen her two times, she had an eerie feeling that Bellatrix had been watching far more often that Hermione had caught her, and couldn't help but wonder if the third sister would miss all the constant commotion... or would she be glad to be left to her own devices once again?

After those three nights with Andy, three stunningly intimate yet perfectly chaste nights, Hermione could hardly sleep a wink downstairs. Her room was almost exactly the same as before, the bed just as comfortable, the sheets just as soft, but it was no longer warm, not the way Andromeda's arms had been. She missed that closeness at a soul-deep level, a place she could hardly understand but felt in every part of her. She tossed and turned for hours, visions of burning buildings and blackened arms dancing in the darkness every time she closed her eyes.

Andromeda noticed her exhaustion the next morning, reaching out and stroking her cheek when she found her drinking tea in the kitchen. "Why so tired?"

Hermione tried to brush it aside with a feeble attempt at humor. "Haven't you heard it's not polite to tell a woman she looks bad?"

Andromeda sat beside her, reaching out to take the teacup from her hands and set it back on its saucer. Leaning in, she gave Hermione a quick kiss, just a feather-light brush of lips, followed by a soft murmur of, "You can look beautiful and exhausted at the same time."

Hermione flushed with embarrassed pleasure.

"If it makes you feel better," Andromeda continued, "I didn't have my best night, either."

She was staring directly into Hermione's eyes. It was clear to the younger witch that those words were an invitation; an invitation to acknowledge why she slept so badly, an invitation that said Andromeda would welcome her if she would only admit that she needed her.

"I missed you," Hermione whispered, casting her eyes down towards the table.

"Glad to know I'm not the only one," came the soft reply.

Hermione's chambers were empty that night.

Fall courted winter so subtly that the change snuck up on the unsuspecting occupants of Black Manor, settling over the house in a blanket of heavy snow and forcing the elves to scurry about at all hours to keep the fires running.

The interactions of the occupants had changed as subtly as the weather since the fire, yet everyone
seemed to be willing to ignore all but the dynamics they themselves were part of.

Lucius and Narcissa hadn't spoken one word to each other since the return to their own rooms, as far as Hermione could tell. Instead, Narcissa spent more time in the library than Hermione, though she still tried to make time for a spot of cleaning and a moment of companionable reading when she could. It didn't feel as simple anymore, their strange connection over literature which allowed the two to ignore the differences in all other aspects of their lives. Now that Narcissa was aware that her sister was seeing the young witch, the conversation often died before it could begin, leaving only the quiet turning of pages and a tension that made it difficult to ignore wandering thoughts and follow the words instead.

It took Hermione a few days to convince herself that spending every night in Andromeda's bed wasn't practical for either their working or educational relationship, and it took her a few days more to convince Andromeda of it. When she first mentioned going back to her own rooms, Andromeda responded with a degree of blatant seduction; kisses almost bruising in their intensity, hands slipping down her sides and hips pressing her against the nearest wall, eyes bright and intent, daring Hermione to push her further, to make her lose control.

She almost did. She wanted to. Despite the reluctance she still felt nearly every other moment of the day, the reluctance Andromeda seemed to sense and fully respect, she nearly gave in to the pure heat of that daring second.

"Andy?" she managed to squeak out, knowing that the rare shortening of her name would get her the instant of attention she needed.

Those impossibly desirable lips quirked to the side, fingertips gently ghosting up her arms to drift across a cheekbone and cup her face. "Hmm?" Andromeda hummed, questioning.

Hermione used the pause to turn and press a kiss to the other woman's palm, a curl falling into her eyes. "Nothing. I—nothing."

It had worked, changing the dynamic from one of passion to one of tenderness, and Andromeda had the tact to look mildly embarrassed by how strongly she had been coming on to the younger woman.

Since talking hadn't changed anything, Hermione took a chance and didn't return that night, sleeping back in her own rooms. Andromeda took the hint, and gave her time.

Their lessons continued uninterrupted, however, and the things Hermione learned, the ways in which her magic grew, convinced her that, no matter how strange things had become, she had made the right choice.

It was neither Andromeda, nor Narcissa, however, with whom Hermione's relationship changed the most. Where once Bellatrix had been a silent shadow somewhere above her head, now she was a near constant presence on the lower floors. The first time Bellatrix had come downstairs, Andromeda had reacted to the alert immediately, but when she started spending less and less time on the third floor and didn't seem to be doing any damage, Andromeda stopped responding and let her be.

Once she was no longer being babysat by her younger sister on each of her visits, Bellatrix started finding Hermione alone.

"Hello, pet," became a common greeting each morning when Hermione walked into the kitchen. The first few times she found Bellatrix leaning against a counter or table, waiting for her in the unlit room, Hermione had been scared near out of her skin. Her first startled yelp seemed to give Bellatrix some
strange pleasure, but when her mere presence was no longer enough to terrify the young woman, Bellatrix changed her game. Where once she would leave after the first moment, laughing maniacally as she Waltzed from the room, soon she began to linger, watching Hermione with eerie intensity, waiting until the most inopportune moment to stand and leave, often accompanying her departure with a lilting, haunting warning such as, "Watch those knives, Mudblood."

She thought about going to Andromeda, letting her know what was going on, but ever since that day, kneeling on the floor beside the scarred, broken woman who hid beneath Bellatrix's cruelty, Hermione had felt a strange fascination towards her. Beyond that, the kitchen was her space, her domain, the piece of this house in which she felt the most comfortable. Ever since she had stopped spending the night in Andromeda's room, the older witch had stopped seeking Hermione out in the kitchens as well, offering her a working space of much needed peace. Just when the small, practical room was beginning to feel like a place that belonged to her, Bellatrix had decided to mess that up, and Hermione knew, she just knew, that going to Andromeda and complaining would be admitting defeat.

Bellatrix's taunts did not stay passive for long. Where once, it felt as though the eldest sister was simply messing with her for her own amusement, it soon became clear that there was something much darker going on. She began actively taunting Hermione, her warnings changing to those of a more personal nature, insisting that if she stayed any longer in this house, she was going to die. It wasn't a subtle message.

Still, through every taunt, every Mudblood slur, every threat of harm or death, Hermione was able to just… ignore her. There was no point in trying to engage her in conversation, she had quickly learned, but if she went about her tasks as though there were no one else present, Bellatrix would eventually give up… leave. It was a peculiar battle of wills, and as long as Hermione didn't react, she felt she was winning.

Eventually, though, she was bound to lose.

It was a bad morning, a mix of sleet and hail keeping her awake as the ice threatened to pound its way through not only Hermione's window, but her skull as well. She was exhausted, she had a headache, and Bellatrix was sitting behind her playing with a knife and muttering, "Don't you ever worry what will happen to your poor parents when you die here?"

Finally losing her temper, Hermione spun around and cried, "Don't you like to do anything besides torture people?"

Bellatrix looked startled, eyes narrowing. "No," she said flatly, but Hermione could hear an odd uncertainty in that single word that intrigued her.

"No?" she asked cautiously, setting down the pan she was drying. "Did you ever like anything else?"

Bellatrix glowered and scoffed. "If you're trying to ask me if I played with dolls when I was a little kiddie pure-blood, I used to torture those, too."

It wasn't a surprising vision. The impression Hermione had gotten of this witch over the past few weeks was—when not entirely terrifying—a childish one. Her taunts often reminded Hermione of a child desperately trying to get more attention, and it was an image which had helped to chase away some of the healthy degree of fear she still had for the clearly unstable woman.

Still, an odd, pained look crossed Bellatrix's face after that brief pause. "I used to plant stuff," she
said, voice soft for a heartbeat. "Then I ate half the gardener, and that was the end of that."

Hermione's jaw dropped, appalled. "You what?"

Bellatrix cackled outright. "Ooh, scared the girl with that one, did I?" She paused, her expression growing thoughtful. "If you come upstairs, pet, I could tell you a story…"

Unsurprisingly, Hermione refused.

Later, though, the image wouldn't leave Hermione alone. *I ate half the gardener.* Her first thought was *werewolf,* but it didn't take long to talk herself out of that one. Even on the full moon, the third floor was as eerily silent as ever. She took her second thought to Andromeda.

"Have you ever wanted to be an Animagus?" she asked at the end of their next lesson.

A shadow seemed to cross Andromeda's face, but she shook her head with a smile. "No, it never really held any particular draw for me."

"What about your sisters?" she pressed, hoping for a bit more.

Slowly, Andromeda nodded. "Bellatrix. She's a crow, now. She wasn't always, but Azkaban changed her."

"A crow?" Hermione asked skeptically.

Andromeda chuckled weakly. "Yes, I know, not a particularly regal creature, but it is a proud one; sneaky, sleek, intelligent… likes shiny things and dead people."

Despite the morbid nature of the words, Hermione couldn't contain a burst of laughter. "Oh, Merlin, that really shouldn't be funny but…"

"It's too accurate not to be, hmm?"

Before Hermione had a chance to ask what Bellatrix had been before that, before "Azkaban changed her," Andromeda had quickly steered her back to the lesson, and it was clear the subject was closed. Still, knowing that Bellatrix could, indeed, become an animal at will added a new degree to her suspicions about the gardener's demise. It also only furthered her curiosity.

Just at the start of December, Andromeda went away for a week.

"It's Ted's birthday, and I… I feel like I should spend it with his family," she explained a few days before her departure. "They're Muggles, mostly, so I have to travel a bit more carefully, but I'll be back as soon as I can."

It was an odd feeling for Hermione, thinking about Andromeda's dead husband and daughter. It wasn't entirely unusual in wizarding culture for those who lost a partner to entirely remake their lives, as the aging process between twenty and sixty was always either belated and abrupt or hardly noticeable, but picturing that earlier life made Hermione uncomfortable. To keep herself occupied, she spent more and more time in the library, doing research.

Ever since Andromeda had revealed that Bellatrix was an Animagus, it had become a topic of some fascination for Hermione, though the readings she found about the process were rather dry and often filled with dire warnings about the level of skill needed to accomplish it. The phrase "*do not attempt without the presence and tutelage of a licensed, Ministry-registered Animagi instructor*" was pretty
firmed into her head.

Still, one text was discussing the connection between Animagus form and Patronus, so Hermione found herself eying Narcissa's arrival in the library with some degree of interest. Narcissa noticed, setting aside her own book before joining Hermione in the chair opposite. "Why on earth are you staring at me like that?" she asked.

Hermione offered an embarrassed smile. "Sorry, ma'am, I was just… thinking."

"Oh?"

It was the most words they had exchanged in quite some time, and Hermione grasped on to the hope that, with Andromeda away, Narcissa might grow less cold towards her again. "I was… remembering and… wondering about casting a Patronus."

Narcissa's response both stunned and pleased her. "I could teach you, if you'd like. It's well within your range of ability."

"Really?" Hermione asked, almost afraid to sound too hopeful.

Narcissa looked mildly amused. "Certainly. All it takes is a happy memory."

"Really?" Hermione asked again, realizing too late she was starting to sound like a broken record. "I know they were designed for use by wizards who worked closely with Dementors, and I've seen them used to send messages, but I don't know much else."

Narcissa nodded, shrugging her cloak off her shoulders and picking up her wand. "It's the closest you can find to a spell that's made of pure good will. Hope, joy, love… the very things that keep us wanting to live." She gave Hermione an appraising look. "It may be difficult depending on what sort of mood you're in now. It only works if you concentrate everything you have within you on one happy moment. Watch."

The wand motion was simple, and Hermione watched as Narcissa said firmly, "Expecto patronum!" There is was, that lovely silver hawk, dancing from the tip of Narcissa's wand and soaring up towards the library ceiling, illuminating the swirls of dust with the trail of glowing light left in its path.

Hermione wondered if it wasn't the most beautiful thing she'd seen in her life.

"I'll be impressed if you even manage an incorporeal Patronus on your first few attempts, so don't be disappointed if you can't make an animal for several days. Do you have the incantation?"

Hermione nodded, repeating, "Expecto patronum" once under her breath before saying it loud enough for Narcissa to hear.

"Good. And a memory?"

Again, Hermione nodded, thinking immediately of the first time Andromeda kissed her. She tried not to blush.

"Let's see, then."

"Expecto patronum," she tried, flicking her wand. Nothing. "Expecto patronum!" She dug herself into the memory, remembering the rush of joy she had felt. "Expecto patronum!"
Frowning, she stared at her wand. Ever since coming here, Hermione had felt that no magic was denied to her. She had been successful, if not perfect, at everything Andromeda had taught her. "Why isn't it working?"

"It could be any number of things, but usually it's the memory. Often, the first thing that comes to mind isn't the best. Something it's too much of one thing—too much joy or love but not enough hope—or the memory may just not be as happy as you think."

For some reason, Narcissa's matter-of-fact dismissal of what Hermione was sure was one of her most pleasant memories irked her. "Well, what do you think of, then?" she asked peevishly.

The look Narcissa gave her sent chills down her spine. She backtracked quickly. "S-sorry, I didn't mean—I'm sure that's private, I just—"

Narcissa waved off her apology. "It's alright. Actually, it's a memory of my son, Draco, when he was very little." A sad smile drifted across her face for a moment, but her implacable mask quickly dropped into place. "It's grown bittersweet over the years, but it's still the most powerful one I have, and it hasn't failed me yet."

Hermione felt she had stepped into something very private and wasn't sure how to take a step back. There was silence between them, weighty with some past Hermione had not lived. Narcissa's words, however, had sparked something in her, and this time, as she lifted her wand again, she thought of the look on her mum's face when she told her she had been promoted at the Ministry. It had been a lie, of course, but the pride and love she had seen each time she brought home "good news" had been the only thing that kept her going through the hardest days.

"Expecto patronum!" she said, soft but sure, and a mist of silver light bloomed from the tip of her wand. Bittersweet, indeed.
Chapter 10

Two days before Andromeda was scheduled to return, one of the things Hermione had been predicting with dread finally came to pass.

Lucius cornered her alone.

It was rather astonishing that it had taken him this long, all things considered, but Hermione supposed it had more to do with being unwilling to venture into "servant places" like the kitchen than anything else.

It was nearly midday and still bitingly cold in the manor's more open chambers, so Hermione hadn't stepped one foot from the kitchen since making breakfast that morning, choosing instead to fill the smaller room with all the heat and warmth she could possibly eke out of the roaring fire and the giant pot she hung over it for soup. She wistfully planned on having enough leftovers that she could have hot soup every day all winter, even if no one else wanted the homely dish.

The Malfoy patriarch entered the room already in fine form, pushing the door open with far more force than necessary and muttering to himself, "Filthy elves can't keep one thrice-damned office warm!"

He paused in the doorway when he realized he was not alone. Like a cold-blooded reptile—a lizard, perhaps—he had been drawn to the warmth but appeared unappreciative of the lesser creature already occupying the sole patch of heat he had found.

If not for the soup, Hermione would have been willing to give up the kitchen for a few hours, but she couldn't very well leave it unattended.

"Isn't it a bit early for lunch?" Lucius snapped when it became apparent that she wasn't scurrying away as she usually did when she spotted him in the halls.

Watching the soup as she stirred so as to avoid either having to look directly at him or look down in a demonstration of deference she didn't feel he deserved, Hermione replied matter-of-factly, "Just thought I could do my part to warm up the place, sir; I wasn't expecting I'd be in anyone's way."

She was nervous—he had approached and was standing just that unnecessary bit too close for comfort—but she tried not to show it, waving her wand to regulate the heat of the fire before returning to a slow, methodical stirring.

Lucius made a noncommittal noise in acknowledgment of her words and Hermione expected he would either leave or, at the very least, sit at the table with the letters he was carrying. Instead, he set the pile down on the nearest countertop and just… stood there, an intrusive figure just close enough to bother but not too close that an accidental bump could push him away.

Feeling cornered and irritable, Hermione cautiously stepped towards him, gesturing behind him as she said, "Pardon me; I need to get to the salt."

Not only did Lucius not move, he seemed to entirely ignore her words. "Perhaps you can be of some assistance to me, girl," he mused, folding his hands over the top of one of his many gilded walking sticks in a motion of almost theatrical contemplation. The silver snake's head seemed to stare at her malevolently with its chilling emerald eyes.

She tried not to let her irritation show. "Yes?" she asked, making an attempt to sound neutrally
interested.

"My wife hasn't been around much in the past few weeks and I've noticed... I almost never catch so much as a glimpse of you when I'm trying to find her." There was a pointed pause. "You wouldn't happen to know where she secrets herself off to, hmm?"

Hermione could feel the blood abandoning her face and hoped the heat of the room was enough to disguise how pale she had become. "No, sir, I try not to be in anyone's way," she said, terrified of accidentally revealing some part of Narcissa's secret. She was immensely relieved at the degree of calm she had managed to summon and mentally prayed that her classic servant's response would satisfy him.

Unfortunately, it did.

A dark grin flickered up over his thin lips and a cold gleam lit his eyes. "Well then," he mused. "Isn't that fortunate. If you haven't been spending time with my wife... that means she won't be looking for you if I... borrow you... for a few hours."

Hermione felt her stomach threatening to rebel at the sickening look she suddenly became aware of in Lucius's eyes. She had wondered if she had imagined a few earlier moments of taunting flirtation since that first day, but now she faced it once again, finding herself dreading the fact that she was now significantly healthier and more well-filled-out than she had been upon her malnourished arrival. The look wasn't one of desire, no, not desire; desire would be reserved for someone Lucius saw as a person. This was not desire, this was greed. He was standing too close and she was frozen with indecision. If I hex him, even if it's just a simple spell, I could lose everything. No witnesses. It's his word against mine as to any grievance, and even if Narcissa is angry with him, I doubt a servant is worth destroying their entire marriage over. She desperately wished Andromeda were still here. Andromeda would believe her.

"I—the soup—I need to—"

"—I'm not in the mood for soup," he interrupted her, cutting off her feeble attempt to extricate herself from the conversation with his voice as surely as he cut off her attempt at a physical escape with another step forward. His tone was a clear attempt at being suggestive, seductive, but it felt to Hermione like something oily and disgusting crawling down her spine.

Hermione flinched back a pace when he reached towards her, earning a temporary reprieve that lasted exactly as long as it took him to take one more step. She was rapidly running out of ground and her wand still trembled with indecision at the end of a limp wrist.

"What my wife doesn't know won't hurt either of us."

The level of revulsion she felt in that moment had never been matched. Poor Narcissa. No wonder she's so... Any number of words could have finished that thought: cold, distant, on edge, angry at him all the time... but the one which immediately came to mind was tired.

It was a bad habit of hers, this sharpening of her thoughts during moments of crisis. It wasn't even mildly useful, because her thoughts always narrowed in on the wrong thing, focusing in with clarity on some puzzle she was musing over to allow her to escape from whatever negativity was going on around her. It worked, back then, when she was a child, when she could listen to her dad chase another man out of the kitchens drunk on their cheapest wine and all she had to do was hide out of the way and think of something else so she couldn't hear the cursing or listen to something being broken. She could pretend her mum's crying didn't eat away at her inside if she just listened to her own thoughts instead of those tears. Here, though... now she couldn't turn it off. She wanted to bury
herself in thoughts about Narcissa or Andromeda or cooking and ignore the looming danger right in front of her and, unfortunately, she was quite good at it. In this particular moment, it was not a useful self-defense; it was a vulnerability.

When he reached out for her again, her step back was more of a startled jerk and she staggered, letting out a yelp and nearly dropping her wand.

"Shush!" Lucius hissed angrily, glancing worriedly towards the door, pressing in even closer as though his presence could muffle the sound. Instead, his walking stick slipped on a slick patch of the kitchen floor and knocked solidly into Hermione's ankle, causing her to stumble back against the solid surface behind her.

She heard the hissing before she felt the heat and had only a heartbeat to feel the heat before she felt the pain.

Hermione screamed, jerking away from the cauldron of soup she had been unwittingly backing towards all along, unable to stop the sounds of pain that seemed to be driven directly from her scalded back and up out of her throat. Lucius mistook her cries for an attempt to get him in trouble and he reached out to slam a hand over her lips, pressing her back again as he yelled, "Be quiet, dammit! I didn't even touch you!"

The hand over her mouth would have been a mere distraction but the arm pressing down on her shoulders forced Hermione too close to the open fire once again. Even though she managed to arch away without touching the searing metal, the heat rising up and sliding along her already scalded spine was too much to take. She bit down solidly on Lucius's hand in pain and fury. Unable to form even a semblance of coherent thought, she stabbed him in the gut with her wand, a half-formed intention of a spell somewhere in the back of her mind. Sparks seared through his robes and sprayed out around his stomach and he jerked back with a curse, leaving Hermione to crumple to the floor in a sobbing heap.

Finally, Lucius caught sight of the burnt tatters of the back of her robe and realized what he had accidentally done.

The door banged open and Narcissa whirled into the room. "Hermione! What's happened? I heard you scre—Lucius?" She caught sight of her husband leaning against the table holding his side and staring at Hermione with a look of pure horror. "Hermione!" Narcissa gasped, finally seeing the younger woman sprawled on the floor. "Oh Merlin, Lucius, what have you done?"

Through the cloud of pain she dwelled in, Hermione could hear Lucius stammering, "I didn't mean—I wasn't going to—I didn't mean to half kill her, dammit!"

Narcissa rushed over to the fallen witch. "Oh bloody… oh, no, no," she muttered, tugging the ruined back of Hermione's robes further apart with trembling hands and gasping when she saw the full extent of the damage.

Hermione tried not to move. She tried not to breathe.

"Can you heal yourself?"

"W-what?" she gasped out, the word scarcely leaving her lips before it was chased away by a whimper of pain.

"Can you draw off me? Did she teach you? Andromeda, did she teach you to heal, yet?" Narcissa's voice was shrill with panic.
After how much pain talking had been, Hermione tried to shake her head this time instead. The motion of her neck tugged viciously at whatever mess had been made of her back and she cried out, trying to stay still.

"Dammit," Narcissa cursed. "Oh, hell. This is going to hurt."

Not giving Hermione time to think or even consider what that might mean, Narcissa reached out and grabbed hold of Hermione's arm, quickly pulling her side-along as she Disapparated. The instant of travel was so disorienting that it seemed to steal the pain for a moment, but the landing was so jarring that she finally, blissfully, passed out.

The first time she came to, she was lying on her stomach and staring at a pair of black shoes. She could feel fingertips on her back, just on either side of a now-dull pain. Even as she felt her eyes closing again, she could feel the what little pain still lingered begin to disappear, and her last thoughts were to wonder where the warmth was she had gotten so used to in Andromeda's healing touch.

The face she saw upon waking was not what she expected. Bellatrix loomed over her, completely upside-down from Hermione's vantage point, glowering at her with that expression of almost uncertain disdain she so often wore in her presence.

"Bella-Bellatrix? What, where—"

"—Oh thank heavens." Suddenly, dizzyingly, Bellatrix's face was shoved aside to be replaced by that of the youngest sister. "You're awake," Narcissa said.

"Where?" Hermione tried again, throat painfully dry. Narcissa understood enough hand her a glass of water and offer an answer.

"You're upstairs. I'm sorry to do that to you, but Merlin knows I've never been a healer. I never learned. Luckily enough, Bella can."

By this point, Hermione was feeling a bit more herself. Cautiously, she started to sit up, feeling her back protest with only the anger of stiff muscles, not of burned flesh. She glanced past Narcissa to where Bellatrix still stood, facing away from them like a child pretending she didn't care what was being said. "Bellatrix healed me?" Hermione asked cautiously.

Narcissa shrugged. "It only took a handful of threats and my wand at her throat, but yes."

Hermione stared into those pale, not-as-cold-as-she'd-once-thought eyes, remembering the fear in them when she'd found her in the kitchen. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you so, so much."

By this point, Hermione was feeling a bit more herself. Cautiously, she started to sit up, feeling her back protest with only the anger of stiff muscles, not of burned flesh. She glanced past Narcissa to where Bellatrix still stood, facing away from them like a child pretending she didn't care what was being said. "Bellatrix healed me?" Hermione asked cautiously.

Narcissa shrugged. "It only took a handful of threats and my wand at her throat, but yes."

Hermione stared into those pale, not-as-cold-as-she'd-once-thought eyes, remembering the fear in them when she'd found her in the kitchen. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you so, so much."

Narcissa helped her to stand when she seemed unsteady on her feet, lending her an arm. She tried to steer Hermione towards the stairs, but Hermione shook her head, stepping aside and holding out her hand in a silent stay motion. Cautiously, she approached the other sister. "Thank you. I know you couldn't care less but... I'm grateful all the same."

Bellatrix didn't face her, but her shoulders rose and fell in a dismissive shrug. Still, it wasn't an insult, and it was more acknowledgement than Hermione had expected, so there was a small smile on her lips as she followed Narcissa downstairs.

They paused together outside of Hermione's chambers, standing still for a moment, neither woman sure how much of what had just happened should be spoken of aloud. Finally, it was Narcissa who broke the silence. "He'll pay for that," she said, voice soft but chilling in its strength.
There was a moment where Hermione considered any number of possible responses. She could demand severance pay and get away from all this, but she couldn't help wonder what it said about her life that she still considered this madhouse a better choice than her previous existence. She could try to use what Lucius had attempted in her favor, but Hermione didn't think she had a manipulative bone in her body. She could break down again, could recall the pain and the helpless feelings that had overwhelmed her more than even the physical agony, but something in Bellatrix's cool, sure, emotionless healing had created an almost tangible barrier between that moment in the kitchen and the place she stood now. In the end, knowing she didn't want to leave, didn't want to lash out at Narcissa in misguided retribution, and didn't want to cry anymore, she finally said, "I trust you."

The brief flash of astonishment and relief that passed over Narcissa's face made Hermione certain she had chosen those three words wisely.

The next morning, Hermione woke completely free of pain but filled with the dissatisfaction of questions she wanted answers to. Unfortunately, she knew of only one place she could find them: with Bellatrix.

She almost talked herself out of it, knowing her curiosity was perhaps her greatest weakness, but leaving her musings untended was sure to drive her to distraction.

She convinced Rommie to let her deliver the eldest sister's breakfast in person. The poor elf made a halfhearted attempt to dissuade her, but the relief on her tiny face was palpable. Already, neither of the two elves would venture past the top stair, but even sliding the tray across the landing to where Bellatrix could retrieve it was apparently more than Rommie was comfortable with.

Hermione cautiously made her way up. She wasn't completely brainless; she held her wand out in front of her with a protection spell ready just behind her lips.

Bellatrix was waiting for her just at the top of the stairs, sitting on the floor against the wall, grinning at her with that feral smile she so often favored. She didn't appear even mildly surprised at the change in breakfast-bearer, and when she saw Hermione's wand, she laughed. "You can put that away, pet," she cooed. "I'm not in the mood to play."

It wasn't the most reassuring of statements, but Hermione… believed her. To a point. Keeping the wand firmly in her grasp, she edged sideways from the top stair and slowly lowered herself to the floor, sitting opposite the dark witch, mirroring her. Once seated, she pulled her feet in, knees up, and wedged her wand between her legs, still trained on the figure across the small sliver of hallway.

For a moment, they sat in silence, Hermione feeling rather strange just staring at her across the floor's width of space that separated them as the other witch ate her French toast. Finally, Hermione decided to chance it. She had a question, and though Bellatrix had always been less-than-forthcoming when she'd tried to engage her during the other witch's ventures to the kitchen, she had a feeling that Bellatrix was in a rare good mood and perhaps not a bit bored, now that she'd gotten used to having her run of the place. With Andromeda away, this might be her only chance to ask.

"You… you healed me."

It wasn't a question, so though Bellatrix stopped eating, she made no verbal reply, merely cocking her head.

"Why, why didn't it…" Hermione trailed off, unsure how to ask what she wanted to know. Why didn't it feel … nice? Why wasn't there any warmth? Why wasn't it comforting? Why wasn't it… addictive, the way it is when your sister heals me?
When it became apparent that Hermione wasn't going to finish her question, a strange gleam entered Bellatrix's eyes. "You're thinking about Andy, aren't you?"

Too quickly for Hermione to even think, why haven't I learned my lesson, yet? Bellatrix had her wand out from wherever she had hidden it in her mess of dark robes. Some wordless spell froze Hermione in place just as it had before, but this time, Bellatrix murmured, "Shhh, pet, don't scream."

She walked towards Hermione very slowly, palms out. Hermione knew, in the back corner of her mind, that the instant she panicked and called out for help, even if only with her thoughts, Narcissa could race upstairs and find her. She knew intellectually that it would be okay, but the memories from the last time she had been paralyzed in Bellatrix's domain had even her mind petrified in a strange bubble of almost preternaturally calm fear, trapped in a cycle of don't hurt me, don't hurt me, please and what on earth are you planning?

Yet the look on Bellatrix's face this time was... different. It wasn't the pure, unadulterated hatred and rage that had filled her as she tried to kill her before. This was a look of... purpose, of concentration. Very slowly, deliberately, she raised her wand and pressed just the tip to the top of Hermione's cheek. "It'll only hurt for a moment," she said softly, voice lilting, childlike, and Hermione could swear she felt her mind shudder.

Bellatrix was right; the thin cut she made with her wand only stung. It was an almost surgical motion, and the control Hermione could sense behind it was oddly... comforting. "See? I can still hurt you, as long as my intentions are—" she giggled chillingly "—pure." With that, she pressed her finger just below the cut she had made, and it instantly healed.

Just as before, Bellatrix's healing was faster than Andromeda's and entirely perfunctory, leaving Hermione nearly nauseous with the whiplash of there again, gone again pain.

Staring up at Bellatrix in confusion and fear, she found her tongue no longer frozen. This time, she managed to ask, haltingly "Why doesn't it... feel like... anything?"

Bellatrix laughed, and a muttered word brought the slice to prominence on her face once more, drawing a pained gasp from the girl before the feeling was suddenly replaced by a stunning, mind-numbing heat.

It felt incredible, though still nothing like the healing warmth of Andromeda's magic. This was a flame, an inferno, burning, searing through her not with comfort or a light, heady joy, but with desire. This heat was dark, heady, and so blatantly sexual that Hermione could hear herself panting as though from very far away, eyes rolling back, feeling her body strain against the spell holding her in place as she tried, not to get away, but to get closer to the source of all that passion. She could feel her thighs trembling, strength deserting her completely as every nerve ending between the cut on her cheek and her suddenly-straining clit was seared by Bellatrix's power. She was out of her mind with need.

She never wanted it to end.

In an instant, the older witch drew back her hand with a wild laugh, leaving Hermione trembling and gasping and incredibly, impossibly, agonizingly turned on.
"Because, pet, we can make it feel however we want," Bellatrix said, staring down at the still-frozen girl leaning against the wall with that signature Black look of haughty disdain. "And my sister knows just how to make you crave her."

With that, Hermione found herself freed, crumpling in a heap on the floor as Bellatrix strode from the stairwell in a whirlwind of swirling fabric.

She didn't move for quite some time; her legs wouldn't hold her up. Bellatrix's words echoed in her mind. "My sister knows just how to make you crave her." She could still feel the lingering aftereffects of Bellatrix's power, the purely sexual heat she had forced into her blood through the small scrape on her face, and she couldn't help but feel differently about Andromeda's soothing touch. Bellatrix must have thought Andromeda was doing that to her, seducing her with her healing. In a way, Hermione supposed, Bellatrix was right. But Andromeda had manipulated her much more subtly than Bellatrix's blatant demonstration. Andromeda must have realized just how much Hermione craved that comfort, that safety, and just as Bellatrix had said, it was the perfect touch to make Hermione never want to leave.

Hermione wasn't sure if she should be irritated or not. She wasn't sure she could be.

After that... enlightening encounter, Hermione was ready to do just about anything to take her mind off of the rush of sexual heat that kept returning to the center of her awareness as a now-dulled throb between her legs. Just the way Andromeda's soothing magic had kept her calm for hours afterwards, so too did Bellatrix's hedonistic taunt continue to linger, simmering just below the surface of her skin as a dark arousal that she was helpless to push away.

She wasn't ready to brave the kitchens after what had happened there yesterday, and Hermione hadn't seen Narcissa since she had marched Lucius at wandpoint into a side room with a heavy wooden door that morning and sealed them inside. She stayed in her chambers for a while, writing to her mother, but something about the events of the day and the day prior were simply not conductive to keeping a casual tone in a letter to her mum.

Just as she was about to give up and head for the library alone, the door burst open and Hermione found herself swept up in a whirl of arms and robes and it wasn't until her back was against the wall and she was being kissed within an inch of her life that she realized Andromeda was home.

The fire that had been cooling to embers just beneath her skin since her encounter with the darker side of healing suddenly sparked back to life, roaring up inside her and demanding she yield to Andromeda's possessive hands that clutched her close and the warm, deadly lips which threatened to consume her alive.

"You—you're home early," she gasped out when she was finally granted control of her own tongue.

There was something raw about Andromeda in that moment. She was dressed in Muggle clothing: a clinging crimson sweater and a pair of jeans that were far more attractive than Hermione could have ever imagined. Her hair was loose and brushing across the skin of Hermione's neck and shoulders in a thousand tiny silken kisses, but her eyes were sharp and just a bit wild.

"Oh, Merlin, I missed you," the older witch breathed, staring into Hermione's eyes with an intensity that stole what little breath she had left. In the space of a single heartbeat, Andromeda's mouth was at her neck, pressing kisses along the column of her throat until she reached the soft skin just behind Hermione's ear, nuzzling there for a moment before she whispered, "I want you."

There was a part of Hermione that tried to take an emotional step back, to look rationally at why she
was feeling so desperate for Andromeda's touch, to fight against the lingering traces of Bellatrix's magic still heating the very blood in her veins, but it was a small part of her. Very small. Far too small to make a difference when warring with the parts of her that had been falling for Andromeda for weeks, wanting nothing more than to finally know what it would be like to let the other woman have her. Paired with her already heightened arousal, her common sense stood no chance.

"Y-yes," she whispered, voice breaking as teeth nipped at the side of her throat, a playfully possessive motion that quickly turned into warm lips and tongue to soothe the mild ache.

"Yes?" Andromeda asked, sounding as though she hadn't expected Hermione to be nearly so eager.

"Yes," Hermione gasped out in response.

"Yes?" Andromeda prompted one final time, almost growling out the request for affirmation.

Instead of repeating herself, Hermione pulled Andromeda directly into another kiss, gaining the upper hand for just long enough to tug at the other woman's bottom lip with her teeth. Drawing back and trying not to look as desperate as she felt, Hermione's vision seemed to narrow until all she could see was Andromeda's face, full lips lightly parted, eyes dark, gaze heavy.

Hermione could feel herself leaning into every point of contact between them, melting against the fingers on her waist, legs struggling to hold her up on suddenly weak knees. Andromeda traced her thumb along the edge of Hermione's jaw as the younger witch's gaze traveled once more over the odd beauty of the Muggle attire; the long legs sleekly encased in dark-washed denim seemed to call to her like a snow-fresh mountain pool on a hot summer day.

It was torment to resist the urge to touch her for even a moment, so Hermione gave in, allowing Andromeda to pull her in closer just so she could set her hands on those taunting hips. Hermione could feel power in the way Andromeda moved, always controlled, tightly coiled, and having all that energy at her fingertips, focused directly on her, was a heady thing.

A single quick motion had her backed up against her bed, Andromeda's mouth on her neck once again. She arched her spine, gasping.

"Off," Andromeda muttered, tugging futilely at the middle of Hermione's robes. When the clothing ignored her spoken command, Hermione saw the flick of a wand in her peripheral vision before feeling goose bumps break out across her suddenly bare skin. "Better," Andromeda rasped, eyes searing along her body, only barely covered in her functional undergarments.

"You too—you too, please," Hermione whispered, feeling exposed and vulnerable and not minding in the slightest, but wanting desperately to be granted more access to that pale, provocative skin. Arguing, Andromeda took half a step back and tugged her sweater over her head. "If there's one thing Muggle clothes were made for, it's taking them off before sex," she muttered wryly. "Robes just get in the way."

Watching the slow reveal as Andromeda unzipped the denim and slid her legs free, Hermione was rather inclined to agree.

When Andromeda stood before her, though, naked aside from two slashes of dark silk providing an illusion of propriety, Hermione felt her throat catch with desire... but also with a rush of nerves. No longer entirely in the moment and at the direct mercy of Andromeda's fingers and lips, the fact that she had never done this before caught up to her in a flash of almost debilitating panic. "Can, can we... take this slowly?" she cautiously asked.
The desire in Andromeda’s eyes was suddenly softened with a look of compassion; the smile which tugged up one side of her lips was the exact one whose kindness Hermione had fallen for so long ago on the floor of the Ministry lift. "Of course," she said, voice soft, stepping close and taking Hermione's face firmly between her palms. "Trust me?"

Hermione nodded helplessly, melting into another kiss. Andromeda had one hand wrapped around the side of her neck and Hermione could feel her own pulse fluttering wildly against it. The kiss started soft but quickly grew demanding, the intimate claim Andromeda seemed determined to stake on her lips was heady, dark, and sweet.

Hermione slipped both hands up along Andromeda's bare back, reveling in the shivers she could feel her touch creating. When she reached the clasp of the bra, she froze, unsure if she should take that particular initiative.

Andromeda distracted her by pushing her gently back onto the bed, shifting to straddle the younger witch. In a quick movement, she took that task out of Hermione's hands, reaching behind herself and shrugging out of the bra. Andromeda rocked slowly against Hermione's stomach, the wild look returning to her eyes. "I promised you slow," she groaned, "But I want you too much."

Seeing this beautiful witch undone with desire for her finally fragmented the last of Hermione's fears. "No," she said fiercely, tugging Andromeda's hands down to her chest and pressing them tightly against her. "Not too much. Never too much. Anything you want." At the look of pained, uncertain hesitation on Andromeda's face, Hermione added a final order. "Touch me."

It was the last command she needed to give that night.

Andromeda's fragile resolve broke and she quickly slipped her palms beneath the cloth still trying unsuccessfully to hide a pair of hardened nipples, to hide the evidence of Hermione's arousal. A muttered word banished both of the last garments she wore. Bending at the waist, Andromeda didn't pause to tease, immediately finding one painfully tight nipple with a swipe of her tongue before capturing it between her lips.

"Merlin," Hermione gasped, but the usual phrase of astonishment felt inadequate in that moment. When Andromeda let the nipple slip free from between her lips with a final tug of teeth, Hermione whimpered out, "Andy," instead, and she knew she would be saying it again and again if the dark gleam in the other woman's eyes was anything to go by.

"You like that," Andromeda murmured, sounding incredibly pleased. She captured both nipples between thumb and forefinger and squeezed, chuckling softly when Hermione jerked and bit her lip. "Mmm, you do like it, don't you?"

It was almost too much for Hermione in her current state. She had never felt her body this awake, this aware, this wired and on edge and desperate for any touch the other woman would deign to give her starving skin. "Please," she gasped out, unsure what she was asking for but trusting Andromeda to know. She could feel the first teasing of orgasm shimmering along the skin of her thighs and couldn't decide if she wanted to be finished now, to come fast and hard and desperate and now, or if she wanted Andromeda to force her not to give in to her pleasure yet, to be teased and dragged up as high as she could possibly get before she could crash down. She'd rarely come for herself, not finding any great satisfaction in what little experimentation she had tried, but she already knew that this was going to be different.

With a force of will, she convinced her nails to stop clutching Andromeda's shoulders so tightly. Instead, she fanned her fingers lower, just daring to graze the tips of Andromeda's nipples, eliciting a quiet whimper that did delicious things to both her arousal, and her confidence. When she slid lower
to take the soft weight of each breast in her hands, Andromeda sagged against her, pressing her forehead to Hermione's shoulder.

"I need—I need to have you," Andromeda hissed. "Now. Now, before I'm too far gone." She slid farther down Hermione's body, tugging apart her thighs and settling on her knees between them. Gently drawing Hermione's hips closer, encircling her waist with her fingers, Andromeda pressed a kiss to her stomach.

"Oh!" Hermione could feel her thighs trembling and she grasped hold of one of the other woman's hands to anchor herself. She gripped harder as Andromeda kissed lower, brushing teasingly against the delicate skin that connected her thigh to her center. When the lightest breath blew teasingly across Hermione's hypersensitive flesh, she couldn't keep her eyes open any longer.

"Your skin is on fire," Andromeda marveled as she slid a palm up the inside of Hermione's thigh. "Have I done that to you?"

Hermione felt a weak laugh slip from between her lips, knowing from the cat-that-ate-the-canary grin on the older woman's face that she knew very well just what she had done to her.

"I love the way you feel," she continued, brushing just the backs of her fingers against Hermione's center. Hermione bit back what was sure to be an embarrassing noise but Andromeda wasn't having it. "Don't hold back." A single finger traced through the proof of Hermione's need. "I can feel how close you are and I've barely even touched you. It's driving me mad."

Hermione could feel muscles in her abdomen tense and twitch in ways she hadn't known them capable of. She heard an urgency in Andromeda's voice as that single finger continued to torture her with its faint presence. "Keep your eyes open."

Hermione caught her lower lip between her teeth as the first gentle stroke of Andromeda's finger over her clitoris threatened to send her eyelids crashing shut once more. "Open," Andromeda hissed, and Hermione felt the force of the word all throughout her body. When she was sure Hermione was going to obey her, Andromeda dipped her head down once again. Her fingers slid lower, gently curling upwards and inside as the searing heat of her tongue slipped over Hermione's clit.

Hermione couldn't remember how to breathe, much less how to keep her eyes open with any degree of surety, but seeing Andromeda's head bowed between her legs, eyes looking up at her from beneath the signature heavy lids that marked a deeply seductive trait of the Black family, it was impossible to look away.

"Good girl," she whispered as she began moving her fingers with more purpose, pacing her, pushing her, teasing her closer and closer until Hermione knew nothing but this blinding edge of agonizing pleasure and then, with one sure, deep thrust, bringing her over.

When she could finally speak, she was cradled in Andromeda's arms, still shivering with the lingering effects of that skilled touch. She was exhausted, mentally, physically, and emotionally, but the draw of the heat she still saw shimmering just beneath the surface of the other witch's skin had Hermione determined to offer her some small piece of what she herself had just experienced.

When she slid a brave palm down Andromeda's body and beneath the scrap of silken underwear still clinging determinedly to her hips, the look of surprise on her face was priceless.

"Hermione, you don't have to—"
"—I want to," Hermione insisted, nervous and uncertain but knowing that she was not the sort to take pleasure and offer nothing in return. "I'll admit you've… got me feeling a bit ragged, but I need to feel you. I need to know you, to know that you…" In this heated moment, Hermione wasn't sure she was ready to give voice to her insecurities, but Andromeda seemed to sense them and wasn't at all reserved when she was certain it was what Hermione wanted.

She slid her own palm down over Hermione's, steering them down together and pressing two of Hermione's fingers inside of her along with one of her own. With a feral sort of lust, she began to move herself against their entwined hands, and Hermione could do nothing but watch in awe as the woman took her own pleasure from the both of them.

She didn't last long, but the intensity of the look on her face as she came was one of the most painfully beautiful things Hermione had ever seen. Hermione was afraid to so much as blink, afraid to shatter the connection she felt between their hands and between their eyes, but eventually Andromeda pulled back.

Tugging aside the covers, Andromeda steered them underneath, drawing Hermione close and whispering in her ear, "Sleep now, you beautiful creature. I'll be here when you wake."
Chapter 11

Hermione woke slowly the next morning, feeling her body protest in delicious ways to the previous evening’s activities. When she noticed that she was alone, however, she was a bit quicker to rise. A moment of worry flashed through her before she caught sight of a scrap of parchment sitting on the pillow still bearing the indent of Andromeda’s head. When she reached over to pick it up, the scrap came to life, folding itself quickly into a pair of paper lips and speaking in Andromeda’s clear, easy voice.

“I’m so sorry that I didn’t remember to tell you last night, but I’ve got to be at a Wizengamot meeting today to explain the fire; Lucius and Narcissa, too. If it were up to me, we’d be in bed all day. As is, I’ll be thinking about you, and I’ll be back as soon as I possibly can.”

The scrap flitted over and gave Hermione a quick kiss on the cheek before falling shapelessly into her open hand. She felt herself blushing and grinning like a fool at the adorable bit of magic and carefully smoothed out the parchment before slipping it into the desk drawer for safekeeping.

It was disappointing that her new lover would be gone all day, but in some ways, Hermione was a bit grateful. As much as she would love to stay mindlessly happy between the covers for the entirety of the near future, she needed time to think.

Hermione’s stomach reminded her that she had skipped dinner last night. Feeling a bit guilty over having slept in, she decided that this would be the best time to brave the kitchen again—when Lucius was not home and Bellatrix could not leave her floor—and make something simple for both herself and the eldest sister.

She was thrilled to find the pantry freshly stocked with her latest requests, including the weekly fresh pastry treat, croissants this time. Having the new supplies allowed her to entirely ignore every heating-required cooking option and stick to the cabinets and tables, and she soon had a satisfactory set of breakfasts prepared.

It was only once the food had been made, however, that she realized she was unlikely to see Rommie this morning. Her own late rising paired with her choice to bring Bellatrix’s meal herself the day before gave little indication she had expected the elf to fetch it today. Despite her own misgivings, she had a feeling that, even should she try to find Rommie, the look of disappointment on her face at finding out Hermione’s bravery had been a one-time occurrence would probably be enough to have her volunteering again. Feeling her stomach drop at the sudden rush of nerves, Hermione hesitantly pulled down a tray and started towards the stairs.

At the landing, Hermione couldn’t bring herself to just set the tray on the floor and leave. It felt a bit too much like feeding an animal, or like slipping food through the slot on the door of a prison cell. It wasn’t the way you treated a human being. “Madam Black?” she called tentatively. There was a moment when the words echoed down the hall, but soon the sound of her words faded and was replaced by the sound of footsteps.

Bellatrix waltzed around the corner. Catching sight of the younger witch, she paused for a moment, her eyes narrowing. "My food is late… and there’s something a bit fishy about the Mudblood today," she muttered as she approached, staring directly into Hermione’s eyes but seeming to talk to herself.

She scooped up the tray from Hermione’s fingers in a motion too quick for her to even flinch. Hermione started to back away down the stairs, but Bellatrix wasn’t finished with her observation. "That’s what it is. Practically dripping in the stench of blood traitor." She laughed as she walked a
few paces down the hall before settling onto a window ledge, one foot up, the other dangling down, calf peeking jauntily out from the odd angle of her skirts. "Come now, pet, don't hurry off."

Hermione was quite ready to do exactly that. "Sorry about the late breakfast," she said hastily, ready to make her exit, but Bellatrix gave a childish pout that, even in its insincerity, made Hermione pause. "Did… do you need anything else?"

The woman gave a childishly dramatic shrug. "Course not. Here I was, though, thinking you might still be interested in that story I promised you…" She trailed off with a flippant wave of her hand. "Guess not."

There was a threat in that voice as much as there was a promise, something dark and ominous taunting beneath the playful lightness of her tone. Still, the words instantly brought all of Hermione's questions about Bellatrix's youth to the forefront of her mind, and it felt impossible to ignore the chance to answer a few of them. She had almost forgotten that cruel taunt, the promise of a peek into her past, but now it was back once again. She paused just a second too long, and Bellatrix could clearly tell she had caught her. "Look here, Mudblood. I'll even set down my wand."

Sure enough, that wand Hermione had grown to dread the sight of was withdrawn from Bellatrix's waistband and kicked nonchalantly towards her, lying on the floorboards like a dark claw severed from the paw of some great beast.

Hermione stared at it for a long moment, sure there must be a trap somewhere, something she wasn't considering, especially in light of the taunting gleam in Bellatrix's eyes, but against all better judgment, she found herself nodding. "Alright," she whispered, and she took up her place on the floor just beside the stairwell. "I'll admit I'm rather curious."

She found herself waiting somewhat impatiently as Bellatrix finished her breakfast, but the pause was enough for her to put aside some of her nerves. She tried not to stare, but couldn't quite help it. The contrast between Bellatrix and Andromeda was so… disarming. They shared so many superficial features; the refined bone structure of their faces, the heaviness of their stare, the aristocratic breeding ingrained in every fluid motion. Yet the differences were fascinating; the shared curls lighter and impeccably groomed on one while darker and untamed on the other, yet both equally striking, the degree to which Bellatrix seemed more solid, boasting a strength about her that Andromeda had only a subtle possession of, and, of course, the way Bellatrix had been so scarred by her years in captivity. Though the most blatant ravages of Azkaban had been healed by time or fixed by magic, there were things which healed more slowly. Her face was still more lean than that of either other sister, her cheekbones standing out in stark relief against the more hollowed space below. Besides the strain on her appearance, Azkaban seemed to have changed the way she moved as well. While her motions still spoke of high breeding and the poise of her station, the smaller motions were more… twitchy, and the hands which held her fork and tray were clenched impossibly tight, as though reflexively fearing someone would try and steal them from her before she finished.

Bellatrix seemed unaware of Hermione's scrutiny until the last bite was gone, setting the tray down on the floor before meeting the other witch's gaze once again. "Well then. Where were we?"

Hermione thought the question rhetorical, yet the pointed look she was on the receiving end of spoke otherwise. "Ah, you… you told me that you… um… the gardener…" She couldn't quite bring herself to say Bellatrix's own cryptic words back to her, and certainly couldn't summon the degree of nonchalance she possessed. Luckily, Bellatrix didn't seem in the mood to demand word games.

"Ah yes, that's where we were. I suppose I could tell you the story but… there's an easier way."

Before Hermione could make sense of her intentions, a hand gesture and a wandless, whispered spell
sent Hermione's reality spinning around her.

It took Hermione a moment to get oriented in the foggy world in which she found herself. She had fallen into a pensive once in the little antique shop just around the corner from the inn, drifting for a while in some old man's fragmented memories until her dad came along and fished her out. That experience cued her in to what Bellatrix had done; this was a memory.

Unlike the pensive, however, these images were sharp, clear, and direct, only fogged about the edges by virtue of her being a stranger in this place.

The location was familiar, as she would be hard-pressed not to recognize her current place of residence. This was Black Manor. The time, however, was clearly long passed, as the grounds were perfectly groomed.

Ah, there she was, Bellatrix, standing on the lawn of the manor with her back turned. As she spun on her heel with a laugh, Hermione's breath caught. She was stunningly beautiful, here, hair gleaming with health, eyes wide and lit from within with the innocence of youth, teeth flashing in a dangerously carefree grin, already somewhat wild, somewhat feral, but wild with joy, not madness. She was so young, younger than Hermione, though perhaps not by much.

There was a man beside her, older than her, but old enough to be a brother, not a father. He seemed a bit faded in memory, features hard to discern, but he had skin tanned and weathered from working outdoors and his hands were protected by neon green gardening gloves.

As Hermione watched from her voyeuristic perch beneath a single peach tree, Bellatrix laughingly plucked at the fingers of one bright glove until it slid free from the hand beneath. After she had stolen one, the gardener handed over the other willingly.

"Go ahead," he said with a grin, "but if Druella catches you in the dirt again I won't take the blame for it."

Hermione could see Bellatrix's lips moving in reply, but the memory was fading, changing, and she was gone before she heard anything more.

Bellatrix was alone this time, still working in the garden, elbow-deep in a flowerbed. The sun was setting, staining the light fog that had rolled in with shades of crimson and purple. Hermione smiled as she watched Bellatrix wipe the back of her arm across her forehead, leaving behind a streak of dirt. Just as she finished pulling out the last of the weeds she could reach from where she knelt, a figure approached from the direction of the house, too far away to be clearly seen beyond the outline of a stocky, masculine physique.

"Bellatrix! How many times does your mother have to call before you come in for dinner?" The voice was low and clearly impatient, brusque with an anger that seemed a bit excessive for Bellatrix's apparent offense.

"Coming, father," she quickly called, frantically yanking off her gloves and attempting to pat down her hair, waving her wand briskly along her skirts to remove the worst of the specks of dirt.

Hermione followed along as Bellatrix approached her father. When she was close enough to get a clearer look at him, he was close enough to see the dirt on Bellatrix's forehead. So quickly that Hermione yelped and jumped back, his hand flashed out and slapped Bellatrix across the cheek. "What have we told you about gardening!" he thundered, glowering down at his daughter. "You aren't a child anymore." Bellatrix had barely flinched at the slap, and even as her head was bowed against the onslaught of words, her spine was rigid and unrepentant. "If I catch you at servant's
work one more time I'll see to it you act as my personal house-elf until it's time to go back to school! Your mother and I have raised you like a lady and by Merlin you will conduct yourself like one."

When Bellatrix didn't react, he reached out and grabbed her chin in his hand, yanking her head back to make eye contact. "Have I made myself clear?"

Bellatrix's gaze was defiant and her tone was glacial, but the only words she spoke were, "Yes, father."

The memory changed again.

The next moment was indoors, some room in the Manor she couldn't immediately identify from within. There was Bellatrix, still just as youthful, lying on her stomach with her feet kicked up behind her, wand at her side, propped up on her elbows as she read from a thick scroll half unrolled in front of her. She was muttering quietly to herself as she read, and when Hermione peered over her shoulder, she could see the diagrams of an Animagus transformation. The writing was old, however; some language she didn't recognize written in ink faded with time. There was no way that was a Ministry-sanctioned text. Bellatrix was teaching herself, and Hermione had read enough horror stories to know that it was not a good idea.

Then, though the scene stayed the same, a whirl of memory-fog rushed between them and Hermione's perspective changed. In a flash, she was no longer standing beside the young Bellatrix but was looking out from inside her, staring out directly through her eyes. It felt even more voyeuristic this way, Hermione thought, as she could feel shadowy half-thoughts forming as Bellatrix read, thoughts which belonged to the other witch. It was eerie, these glimpses of emotion and concentration being fed to her through the tenuous connection of memory. The longer she watched the scroll through Bellatrix's eyes, the more difficult it became to keep a firm grasp on which thoughts were her own and which belonged to the woman whose mind she was unwittingly sharing.

After a moment, she—no, Bellatrix—set down the scroll and stood, approaching a floor-length gilt mirror and—Hermione felt her ghostly cheeks flush—starting to undress.

Hermione had no control over where Bellatrix's eyes looked, and for that she was grateful, since it meant she stared directly into the eyes of her reflection rather than anywhere Hermione might have found blushingly difficult to avoid seeing. Then, fully naked, her lips started to move, muttering some strange spellwork beneath her breath.

Before her eyes, a transformation was beginning. Her nails lengthened, her teeth pressed painfully against each other in a mouth still too small, and her entire body seemed to be losing height. Suddenly, a flash of pain brought her—brought Bellatrix—to her knees. Something's wrong, Hermione thought frantically. This is too slow, too painful; this isn't how becoming an Animagus is supposed to work! She felt a cry ripped from her throat, an inhuman sound, and she wanted desperately for Bellatrix to turn, to face the mirror so she could see what was happening, but she felt something else wasn't right, something besides the agony of the change.

Those shadowy half-thoughts she had been feeling within the memory … they had stopped.

By the time she realized Bellatrix was no longer thinking, the pain had gone. She was hunched over on the floor, breath heaving in and out of her in an entirely unfamiliar way. Before she could make sense of the fluidity of her motions or even catch a glimpse of whatever sort of legs her arms had become, Bellatrix had launched herself at the single lamp in the corner, knocking it over and plunging the room into darkness.

The memory was jagged after that. Her thoughts and vision both were fragmented and sporadic,
leaving Hermione struggling to piece together how they she had left the room, how she was suddenly outside, and what small, hapless animal she had just snapped her jaws closed around. Bellatrix seemed completely absent from her own body, Hermione’s thoughts completely alone in this instinct-driven shell.

She could see almost perfectly in the sparse moonlight, though everything seemed oddly flat, warped by the placement of her eyes in her new skull. When a bright light suddenly flooded out across the lawn to where she crouched, she could feel her ears flatten to her skull and a rattling growl issue from her throat, shaking the entirety of her chest.

"Hey!" a voice called. It was the gardener, wand raised, silhouetted against the light from his room behind the shed. He had clearly heard something large rustling around, but it was impossible to tell how much of her he could actually see. "Get out of here, shoo!"

Feral-Bellatrix didn't like that idea. Her growl deepened.

A flash of red sparks shot from the tip of his wand, striking the ground just inches from where she crouched. Bellatrix, however, was too far from human in that moment to be afraid. Instead, it made her angry. In a flurry of motion, she launched herself towards the light, ignoring the pain when a second volley of red sparks clipped the fur on her shoulder. Too quickly for him to cast again, her claws were in his chest and her teeth in his throat. The sound of tearing flesh faded away as the memory went hazy once again.

For the next moments, Hermione was desperately glad to no longer be watching directly through Bellatrix’s eyes. Instead, she looked on as an impossibly young Andromeda found a now-human Bellatrix kneeling over the bloody remains of the gardener, keening as she held his upper body to her naked, blood-stained chest.

"Bella!" Andromeda shrieked. "Bella, what happened? Are you alright?"

"Go away Cissa," Bellatrix barely whispered, voice hoarse and empty.

Cissa? Hermione thought, doing a complete double take when she realized that the sister she could have sworn was Andromeda did, in fact, have a narrower face and appeared far too young to be the middle sibling of Bellatrix at this age. It wasn't Andromeda who had approached; it was Narcissa, but in the memory, Narcissa’s hair was brown, as dark as both of her sisters'.

"Bella!" this young, dark-haired Narcissa cried out again, standing frozen a few feet away from the carnage.

For a moment, it seemed Bellatrix was entirely lost, that she wasn't going to respond. Then, Hermione realized she was whispering something, practically chanting her words in a broken mantra, and it was getting louder. "I can fix this. I can fix it. It's okay. I didn't mean to. I'll make it better. I can fix it."

"Bella he's dead!" Narcissa whimpered, stepping closer and trying to tug her sister away from the corpse. She was crying, too young to fully understand. "Bella let go!"

"No!" Bellatrix yelled, and there was magic in it. The word left her in a wave of anguished power, knocking Narcissa on her back and sending a flock of starlings screeching from the nearest trees.

Before Narcissa could even stand, Bellatrix was pressing her hands against the bloody chest she held, just over the gardener's heart, eyes wild, chanting in the same old language she had used in the bedroom before. After seeing the mess that language had made of Bellatrix's first Animagus
transformation, Hermione was terrified of what this next spell could do. She swore she could feel the hair rising on the back of her neck. Whatever Bellatrix was doing was dark. She could feel the power in it, malicious, greasy, dripping out of the young Black's palms and into the body beneath them.

She could feel when it went wrong, too. The spell seemed to break, a flash of sickly green exploding from under Bellatrix's hands and passing into the land around her in a shuddering wave. It was instant chaos. Every animal in sight was suddenly screaming, running, fleeing as quickly as possible from whatever she had done. As Hermione watched, the ones that didn't run fast enough fell dead, crumpling to the earth in limp heaps. Staring at a rabbit which had fallen just beside where Hermione stood, she gaped in terrified awe as all color faded from its fur before its skin seemed to collapse in on itself, shriveling into something completely unrecognizable. When the pulse of death seemed to have passed, the body of the gardener was completely gone, every trace of him, even the blood that had stained Bellatrix's skin.

Bellatrix finally jerked away, gasping, staring down at her hands with horror. She stood, turning frantically to where her sister had fallen. "Cissa!"

"She didn't move, still lying prone where Bellatrix's initial anger had flung her.

Hermione waited with bated breath, irrationally terrified even though she knew intellectually that Narcissa hadn't died this day.

This young Bellatrix, however, didn't know that, and she was sobbing, shaking her sister's shoulders. "Cissa wake up! Wake up!"

Hermione swallowed thickly as she saw the color draining from Narcissa's hair and eyebrows, bleaching slowly from roots to tip, a haunting, unstoppable progression.

"Please!" Bellatrix whimpered, and—just as when she had flung her sister away from her—Hermione could feel power in that single anguished word. Bellatrix had given up on trying to shake her awake and had instead pulled her sister into a hopeless, crushing embrace, and Hermione watched over Bellatrix's shoulder as Narcissa's lips parted in a single shuddering gasp.

Slowly, her eyes cracked open, and Bellatrix's sobs turned from those of fear to those of pure relief.

Snapping back to reality was less than pleasant. Hermione felt ill. She could feel the haunting ooze of dark magic all over her skin and she could still taste him, the gardener, a lingering meaty darkness at the back of her throat likely to turn her vegan. "Oh, Merlin," she whispered, staring up at Bellatrix in a new mixture of horror and a pity she knew the elder witch would not appreciate, but was unable to keep from feeling. The glimpse she had felt of Bellatrix's mind had been a frightening place even before that incident, a place of brutal ambition and damaged pride, already scarred by her father's cruel discipline and the all-consuming drive she felt to protect her sisters and better herself, but she had still felt human to Hermione's rather naïve observance. After that moment, though, Hermione had seen something break inside of the dark woman's mind, something irreparable, and something that must have only been spreading and growing in the long years of death, imprisonment, and torture that had followed.

As she tried to catch her breath, to gather herself, she met Bellatrix's stare with her own. "That's more than enough of that, eh?" There was a peculiar glint in the dark witch's eyes. "Dreadful stuff, really."

"I… I'm... I don't even know what to say," Hermione stammered, wondering what on earth had possessed Bellatrix to let her that far into her memories. "I'm incredibly sorry that happened to you —"
"Sorry?" Bellatrix hissed, rising without warning and stalking towards Hermione. She scuttled backwards from the burning anger she saw in the other woman's eyes. "The Mudblood's sorry again; always sorry, you are," she spat. "I can't do anything with 'sorry.'" She was right up in Hermione's face, bending over her, their noses inches apart. "You're supposed to be terrified, little girl. You're supposed to be cowering, cringing away from me as you picture me ripping out your throat just like I did to him. You're supposed to be thinking about how easy it would be for me to string you up again and snap your pretty little neck. You're supposed to think of how easy it would have been for me to kill my own sister and it's supposed to take you right out that door."

Just when Hermione was about to use a spell to get Bellatrix away from her, the looming figure leant back of her own accord. "Instead, all I get is 'sorry.' I'm beginning to think you've got a death wish."

Hermione stayed on the floor for a moment, once again feeling vulnerable and lost in the mess of trying to make sense of Bellatrix's words. Did she really think I'd be scared of her more after that? she wondered. In a flash of almost painful insight, she realized Bellatrix probably did. After all her time in Azkaban and running around with no one but Death Eaters and the Dark Lord for company, Hermione supposed it wouldn't be all that surprising if she had forgotten what sympathy felt like. Hermione was frightened of Bellatrix—anyone sane would be—but she wasn't going to judge any more harshly now that she had been offered some small insight into the life that had shaped the fractured woman across from her. It must have been a long time since anyone had offered anything other than blame and condemnation for the events of Bellatrix's past.

Slowly, Hermione picked herself up off the floor. "I… I think if you were going to kill me you'd have done it already. Why are you so determined to run me out of here? I though… I thought you'd given that up."

Bellatrix, back still turned, laughed. "Well, you're half right, pet. If I were able to kill you I'd have done it already." She faced Hermione again. "Unfortunately, Andromeda isn't nearly as foolish as you are. I think she enjoys it; asking the Ministry to give her tighter control. After we had our first little chat, I can't do anything to you with 'bad intentions.'" The last words were said in a dreadful impersonation of Andromeda's voice.

Hermione recalled the words Bellatrix had muttered yesterday after cutting open her face for the… healing demonstration. See? I can still hurt you, as long as my intentions are… pure. She supposed she should feel relief that killing didn't constitute pure intentions, but instead she found herself swallowing nervously at just how many loopholes that particular rule left open. She also found herself distinctly less than fond of the underlying message of those words: the only reason I've been civil towards you is because it's the last way I have left to hurt you. She thought she'd been making some sort of unspoken progress towards becoming a nonperson to the eldest Black; not someone she willingly associated with, but not someone she wanted dead, either. Now she realized she had been poking at a caged tiger all week, and only whatever extra control Andromeda could exert over her sister had kept her alive.

While Hermione had been gathering her thoughts, Bellatrix had apparently been doing the same. "I'm sure I'll find the right buttons to push eventually," she muttered, stepping closer to Hermione once again. Now even more on edge than she had been during the memory, Hermione raised her wand between them. Bellatrix pouted. "Now that you're all cocky with your pretty little stick it doesn't seem my magic frightens you very much. Violence makes you ill… but not terrified. Death… much of the same." The sing-song tone in which she spoke was unnerving, setting Hermione even further on edge. "Now that I think about it… there's only one thing I ever did to you that really seemed to make you uncomfortable. Make you squirm."

Hermione was sure she looked more than incredulous. Of course nearly killing her had made her
uncomfortable; uncomfortable was the understatement of the century. Everything Bellatrix did made her uncomfortable. It just didn't make her want to run away. As she'd argued to herself many times, she'd lived worse.

"Hmm... yes, I do think I got... under your skin—shall we say—once already."

The gleam in Bellatrix's eyes was completely disturbing.

"I think I should go," Hermione said, keeping her wand pointed at Bellatrix as she began to inch around her, back to the wall.

"No, I don't think you should," Bellatrix countered, tracking Hermione's motion with her eyes as she tapped one finger against her bottom lip. "I think we should play a little game."

Hermione moved faster. "I'd rather not."

"I don't believe you. After all, you had so much fun in my head just a few minutes ago, hmm?"

Hermione's eyes widened. She had absolutely no desire to return to Bellatrix's memories. Whatever else the witch planned to unsettle her with was not something she wanted to experience. Taking a chance that it would get her to the stairs safely, she finally gave in to the urge she'd been fighting since Bellatrix first approached and quickly flicked her wand. "Stupify!"

Bellatrix blocked her spell wandlessly with a casual wave of her hand, redirecting the flash of red to strike the ceiling in a puff of crumbling stucco and dust. She laughed, as though Hermione's attempt at stunning her was the funniest thing she'd seen in her life. "Silly Mudblood. I've been dueling since you were in the cradle. Even if you were as old as England, my blood status would guarantee my magic could overpower you in a heartbeat."

Before Hermione could protest, Bellatrix cast another spell and she felt herself falling back into memoryscape.

She tried to ignore her surroundings for a heartbeat, trying to find some color of magic that would break her out of whatever powerful mind-sharing spell Bellatrix had cast on her again, but before she could figure out how to break free, the situation she found herself in the middle of stole her full attention... and every ounce of breath from her body.

She was inside Bellatrix again, peering out through the other witch's eyes, but this time she was not alone. There was a woman beneath her, staring up at her with eyes at half-mast, lips parted, and body completely naked. The sheer whiplash of being dragged out of one scene of painful grief back into the real world before being thrown into this study in pure carnality had Hermione reeling.

"Oh, fuck," spilled from the lips of the woman beneath her.

Bellatrix clearly held her passion in her hands, her fingers the key to the release the woman so desperately needed, resting to either side of her trembling, straining clit. Being inside of Bellatrix as she made love to this fair-haired stranger left Hermione as breathless as the woman writhing beneath her—no, Bellatrix's—fingers. Yet, where before, Bellatrix's mind had been a maelstrom of young, turbulent thoughts, here, in this moment, her mind was achingly empty, as though this brutal pleasure she inflicted on the woman beneath her was her only escape, as though she could pump her very being out through her fingertips and into the hot, wet, tender flesh so willingly exposed beneath her.

Hermione could only imagine what it would feel like to be so entirely at the mercy of the dark witch in a way so impossibly pleasurable. The woman was gasping, crying, and she screamed as she
came around four of Bellatrix's fingers, the piercing, soul-rending pleasure finally pushing Hermione out of the dark witch's head.

By the taunting quirk to Bellatrix's lips, that had been less than accidental. Her hooded gaze seemed to challenge Hermione to call her out, to make any comment on what she had seen, but the younger witch was far too shaken to respond. She staggered away from the other woman and nearly stepped backwards off the landing, never taking her eyes off of the dark witch. As she fled down the stairs, she vaguely wondered if that little display hadn't been intended as more than just another attempt to scare her away. That had felt a bit too much like a taunt, and she tried not to wonder if this was in direct response to what she'd been doing with Bellatrix's sister last night.

Later, despite repeated attempts to try and start a conversation with Andromeda, she found herself in bed again instead, unable to protest the greedy hands and lips that had greeted her upon return from the Ministry. Far too quickly, she found herself naked and beneath her beautiful lover for the second time, and the heat of the moment was enough to drive most of the darker worries from her mind. Still, as Andromeda's fingers pressed inside of her, taking her so softly, achingly thorough, she couldn't seem to fix them in her mind. Just there, just inside of her, superimposed over Andromeda's fingers, she swore she could see another hand, one with slightly longer fingers and a harsher touch, and Merlin help her but the image made her gasp all the more, and oh, how wrong it was, to see Bellatrix's fingers knuckle-deep inside of her as she came, Andromeda's voice coaxing her so tenderly through the highest point of her pleasure.

And maybe Bellatrix was right. Tearing out a man's throat hadn't sent her scurrying, but if she could corrupt Hermione's time with Andromeda, well… if she couldn't put aside the older witch's cruel, taunting sexuality, if a touch of healing or a vision of rough pleasure was enough to unsettle her this much… Hermione couldn't imagine what she was going to do if Bellatrix upped the ante.

Even as her thoughts whirled, she took Andromeda's fingers into her own mouth, cleaning them with all the sensual insouciance she could muster, all to be sure Andromeda wouldn't later taste the guilt she could feel pour out of her along with that raw, stunning orgasm.
Chapter 12

It wasn't until the next morning that Hermione managed to attempt a conversation. "Andromeda, we need to talk," she said softly, staring down at the sleep-bemused face of her just-waking lover.

Andromeda rolled over, stretching languidly and causing the sheets she was under to suddenly cover much less of her body. Hermione had to turn away to avoid the distraction.

"Hmmm, can it wait?" she mused, sitting up slowly. "There's someone I'd really like you to meet today, and if we're going to make it we ought to be heading out."

Unable to find it within herself to deny her, Hermione allowed herself to be steered out of bed without further protest. In the bathroom, however, she learned that "We really ought to be going" actually meant, "We really ought to leave time for me to get distracted when I decide sharing our shower is a good idea."

Then again, it was hard to complain.

Still, the timing was all wrong. Hermione could feel the weight of all the things that had happened this past week pressing in around her, making the air feel heavy and suffocating. As easy as it would be to lose herself in this new reality, there were so many things still out-of-place. She wanted desperately to see Narcissa, to find out where things stood between them and what had happened between her and Lucius. She wanted to reclaim the moment where she cast the start of her first Patronus, to reconnect to the tenuous sense of normalcy she had begun to build in her life here. More than that, though, she wanted to talk to Andromeda. One of the most compelling parts of her relationship with the older witch had been in their communication, in the determination she had to not hide anything from the middle Black. Without being able to let Andromeda know what was happening, what had happened while she was gone, the safety she usually felt with her was fracturing. She wanted to ask about the three sisters' past—now more so than ever—but was beginning to feel afraid that acknowledging where the few things she had learned had come from might be met with an anger she wouldn't be able to calm. Andromeda had been amazingly tolerant of her mistakes and impossibly compassionate about the things over which Hermione had no control, but how would she react, knowing Hermione had actively sought out Bellatrix while she was away and had allowed herself to be completely made a fool of, not just once, but twice now? Mentioning the sexual taunts seemed a suicide wish in the face of Andromeda's possessiveness. Everything was a disaster.

She made a half-hearted attempt to start an explanation in the kitchen as she and Andromeda worked together to make a hurried breakfast, but Narcissa interrupted them. Hermione couldn't help but stare; it was the first she'd seen of Narcissa since she had disappeared with Lucius, and the youngest sister was looking remarkably… at ease.

"Going somewhere today?" she asked lightly.

Andromeda nodded, smirking knowingly at Hermione.

"Can I ask where?" Narcissa added.

Andromeda tapped the side of her head and Narcissa arched an eyebrow. For a moment, the younger sister's eyes lost focus, and as she cast a quick glance towards Hermione, her lips twitched up for just a moment into that same knowing smile.
"Ah. Excellent. Do say hello for me, won't you?"

Had they been alone, Hermione might have acted playfully annoyed that Andromeda let her sister read her mind rather than give up their oh-so-secret destination, but with Narcissa in the room, she felt tense and uneasy. She needed to talk to the both of them, but not together.

An odd look unexpectedly passed over Narcissa's face. "Could I borrow a moment of Ms. Granger's time?"

Distractedly, Andromeda nodded. "Go ahead. I do need to grab my coat, but make it quick."

Mildly surprised that Andromeda didn't question her sister's request, Hermione blinked nervously at Narcissa as Andromeda left the room.

"My sister's in your head."

Of all the things she had thought Narcissa might need to say to her, that wasn't even a consideration. For a long moment, Hermione was sure the look on her face must have been some priceless combination of horror, embarrassment, and guilt, but Narcissa had the good grace to shake her head and quickly add, "No, I don't mean… not Andromeda, and not like that. I promise I haven't been wandering the house reading your mind for the fun of it. I've just gotten in the habit of following around and cleaning up Bellatrix's messes, as she has been known to be a bit… heavy handed with other people's thoughts."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, wondering if this had anything to do with the memories she had seen the day before.

"I'm not sure when she would have had the chance to do this, but Bellatrix likes to... put herself into other people's minds. She leaves a little piece of her magic inside of you and it latches on to some weakness or another and, well... she drives people mad. It used to be almost a hobby of hers."

Narcissa's cheeks were touched with a gentle flush of embarrassment as she added, "This though… this is different. I haven't seen her do it this way since before she was married. She preferred giving people nightmares during the war but this..." Narcissa's eyes seemed out of focus, as though looking at something Hermione couldn't see. "...this is sexual."

Finally, realization dawned, remembering the frightening, inescapable phantom touch last night, and the completely out-of-character way she had reacted to it.

"I must say… I thought she'd given up on getting rid of you. I suppose she just decided to try something different."

"Is this ever going to end?" Hermione mused aloud, trying to overcome her own embarrassment.

The corner of Narcissa's mouth twitched into a shadow of a sad smile. "I'm afraid not. Bellatrix is nothing if not resourceful, and I guarantee that when this doesn't work, she'll try something else. I can, however, fix what she did to you. If you'd like, I can even show you a trick or two to keep her out in the future."

Hermione tried not to look as surprised as she felt. This was the second kind offer in a few short days from the youngest sister. Compared to the cold welcome she had received on her first afternoon at the manor, this was a side of Narcissa which seemed almost... congenial, if not really warm. "I would be... incredibly grateful if you would."

Narcissa nodded and drew her wand, raising it deliberately to rest against Hermione's temple. She felt dizzy and disoriented for a moment, as though someone had tickled the inside of her skull with a
feather, and then there was the impossibly odd sensation of something tugging just behind her ear until she swore she could hear something pop. It took a moment for her to feel balanced again, but she could tell immediately that something had changed. The oddly alluring preoccupation with the eldest Black she had been dwelling on all morning had faded into only the same lingering curiosity she had felt since she first found out she would be living with the infamous Bellatrix Lestrange, though now tempered with a bit more fear… and a bit more sympathy.

The twisted sensuality, however, was gone. Hermione sighed in relief, just starting to thank Narcissa when Andromeda popped her head around the corner. "I'm beginning to think I've missed some sort of conspiracy in my own kitchen. Are you coming, Hermione?"

Narcissa motioned her away, and Hermione mouthed a quick, "Thank you!" before she was steered from the room by the still stunningly cheerful Andromeda, seemingly too excited over their mysterious destination to care what the detour had been about.

For that, Hermione was grateful, since she was beginning to feel she had dug herself so far into this hole of accidental secrecy that she would soon bury herself alive.

Hermione's mood changed to one of astonishment when she found herself outside the gates to their destination, a striking castle sprouting from the mountainside with an air of both stone-walled warning and window-lit welcome. She'd seen it enough times in the papers to know what this was.

"Hogwarts," she breathed in wonder.

Andromeda was grinning at her with all the subtlety of a cat who had eaten the canary. "I had a sneaking suspicion you might like to see the place, and while I'd love to give you a real tour, you and I have a meeting with the headmistress."

"Minerva McGonagall?" Hermione squeaked. "I'm going to meet one of the most renowned transfiguration masters in the world and you didn't tell me!"

Andromeda laughed as the pitch of Hermione's voice rose in both indignation and excitement. "Surprise?"

Too eager to be irritated, Hermione followed Andromeda up along the winding path from the gate, trying to take in everything despite the brisk pace the older woman had set. Too soon, they stood before the main entrance, the doors opening wide to beckon them in and swallow them whole.

Though most students must have been in class, it was still unnerving to Hermione to have to walk past the curious faces of the occasional robed figure lingering in the halls. That could have been me, she mused, staring at a girl curled into a window alcove overlooking a huge lake, flipping frantically through the pages of a well-worn spellbook.

After being entirely astonished by Andromeda's ability to navigate a dizzying sequence of moving staircases, their journey through the school ended before a rather unpleasant looking stone gargoyle set into an unremarkable stretch of wall. At Andromeda's utterance of some word both lovely and flowing and entirely incomprehensible to Hermione, the gargoyle turned slowly aside, revealing a torch-lit spiral staircase. "Up we go," Andromeda said, cheerfully leading Hermione onto the stair.

At their knock, a voice from within called, "Come in! I'll be with you in a moment."

The headmistress's office was perhaps less personal than Hermione might have expected, but still extruded a cordial warmth that set her a bit more at ease. The room was lined with bookshelves bearing many an age-worn spine with the occasional trinket interspersed here or there, and the walls
were ringed in picture frames, all empty for the moment, though Hermione knew better than to presume that meant anything at all. A large desk dominated the floorspace, and Hermione followed Andromeda's example in taking one of the seats in front of it.

A moment later, a door in the far wall swung open to reveal a woman Hermione had seen more than once on the cover of *Transfiguration Weekly* at the local newsstand. She was taller than Hermione might have expected, taller than Andromeda, and her tight bun and square spectacles lent her face some degree of severity, but despite her intimidating appearance, she greeted Hermione with a smile. "Ah, Miss Granger. It's wonderful to finally meet you."

"Likewise," Hermione managed, rising to shake the proffered hand.

"When Andromeda told me she'd found someone skilled in unbound magic, well... I've been insisting on an introduction, and here we are. Tea?"

Andromeda nodded. "Please tell me you've got some of that incredible blend I had last time.

The headmistress smiled, "Of course, but I'm still not going to tell you my supplier. If I do, you won't have any reason to visit." She drifted back behind the far door for a moment.

It was strangely unnerving for Hermione, watching Andromeda interact with someone as a friend. She realized how small her world had grown since she started working for the Black household, her contact limited to four other people and two elves. It was equal parts refreshing and disturbing to be forced to make normal conversation with someone else, and given that that someone was a world-renowned Transfiguration Master, Hermione thought her nerves were warranted.

McGonagall returned with three floating cups of tea, and Hermione took hers with a faintly trembling hand.

"Do I make you nervous, dear?" McGonagall asked lightly. "I'm used that from my students, but I can guarantee you aren't here for a detention."

The gentle teasing helped, and Hermione felt herself smile. "Sorry, ma'am."

"No apologies necessary. Now then." McGonagall settled behind the desk with her own cup of tea. "Tell me a bit about how you came to work with unbound magic. Andromeda has been incredibly tight-lipped."

Hermione took a sip of tea, trying to wrap her mind around the idea of being in the same room with Minerva McGonagall and talking about herself, of all things. It was, in fact, quite delicious tea. "I'm not sure what Andromeda has told you about me, but 'skilled' is more than a stretch. I had no idea there was any such thing until this year."

At further prompting, Hermione gradually relaxed into the tale of her patchwork magical education, and she eventually found herself watching in awe as a debate developed between the two elder witches, centering around the range of possibilities for her magic and the extent to which her existence contradicted some theory in some book Hermione had never heard of. Much of the conversation was technical to an extent she could hardly begin to comprehend, but she was more than content to sip the dark tea, absorb what new knowledge she could, and muse over how incredibly attractive Andromeda was when her eyes were lit up with the fervor of magical theory. It was all rather fascinating, really, especially when she noticed that Andromeda seemed to be growing increasingly nervous with the direction McGonagall's questions were taking.

"How much work have you done with raw magic?" McGonagall asked.
Andromeda stiffened. "None," was her blunt response.

The headmistress pressed her further. "She's had so much success with everything else yet you haven't tried going to the source?"

Hermione was somewhat amused to keep hearing her bumbling attempts at unbound magic described as "successful," but now that she had more than just Andromeda's word for it, she was beginning to believe that maybe these past months had been more productive than she had believed. It was true; she could now nearly always perform any given basic task even without knowing an exact spell for it, and she was making slow but clear progress in performing more than one spell in a single casting. It all felt very slow and rather simple to Hermione, but since she had little to judge her advancement against, perhaps this was more impressive than she knew.

"No," Andromeda finally murmured, having offered McGonagall a lengthy pause before replying to her last inquiry.

"I'd be more than willing to allow her to work with me, if you're afraid for your own safety," McGonagall continued, pressing on insistently.

Now Hermione was more than curious. Raw magic? The source? Why were the headmistress's questions making Andromeda so ill at ease?

"Could I… speak to you alone for a moment?" Andromeda asked McGonagall, glancing worriedly at Hermione.

One dark eyebrow arched in surprise. "You haven't discussed this with her?"

"Please," Andromeda insisted through gritted teeth.

"Very well," McGonagall answered. She allowed Andromeda to usher her though the far door and Hermione was left alone, feeling awkward and small in the high-ceilinged room. She tried not to be distracted by the fiery whispers drifting from where the two witches had departed.

A bit bemused at being left to her own devices in the office of the headmistress of Hogwarts, Hermione tried to wander only with her eyes. Eventually, the bookshelf in the far corner proved too tempting and she moved closer, tracing her eyes along the spines of quite the eclectic collection of both novels and reference material. On the second shelf from the bottom, Hermione spotted a curious lump of brown fabric, looking a bit worn and out-of-place amid the spines of carefully tended texts on either side.

She jumped when she felt a hand on her shoulder, not having anyone approach. "Would you like to try it on?"

Headmistress McGonagall had returned without Andromeda. "Hmm?" Hermione asked, confused.

"That's the Sorting Hat." McGonagall paused, a sad smile turning up one side of her mouth. "I must say, I'm incredibly sorry to have missed the opportunity to have you here at Hogwarts. That being said, if you'd like to know anything about the school, feel free to ask, and if you'd like a… a taste of how things might have gone, I'm sure the hat wouldn't mind letting you know what house you would have been placed in."

Realizing now what the scrap of cloth actually was, Hermione felt inexplicably nervous, afraid to even ask to try it on, afraid that… that nothing would happen, that the hat would somehow know she had never been meant for this world, for this school. Still, some hint of longing must have shown in her expression because the headmistress scooped it up off the shelf and gently shook it out, smiling
reassuringly at Hermione as she said, "Here we go."

With that, the now marginally more hat-shaped piece of cloth was plopped down on her head, and Hermione could have sworn she heard a slow, deep yawn.

"Well aren't you quite the lost one," said a small voice in her ear. Hermione's eyes widened. "Tricky, too. What a mind you've got, eh? Hmm, Hogwarts lost real brilliance from you, I see. There's something, oh my goodness, yes—not a small bit of self-destructive courage, now that's interesting... Where shall I put you? Vision or valor, brains or bravery..."

Hermione was fascinated at the hat's evaluation of her, but she couldn't help thinking that, as much as she enjoyed learning, she would rather be sorted for her character than her intellect.

"Character, eh?" said the small voice. "You know, you're the second witch to surprise me in turning down Ravenclaw. Well, if you're sure—better be Gryffindor!"

The hat called the last word aloud, and Hermione shakily handed the hat back to McGonagall, who was beaming at her.

"Oh, how wonderful. You're one of mine." A flicker of regret flashed across her face. "Or, would have been, I suppose." She sighed. "A lost lion."

Andromeda chose that moment to reenter the room, glancing nervously between the headmistress and Hermione.

"No matter," McGonagall finished, returning the hat to its shelf and turning to the other witch. "I trust you found what you were looking for?"

Andromeda nodded, hefting a rather weighty tome she now carried at her side. Apparently whatever argument they had left for had been resolved. Hermione wanted to ask questions, but she didn't want to spark another conflict. It could wait until they were home.

"I let Hermione have her Sorting," the Headmistress said as she gathered up the three now-empty teacups with a wave of her wand. "Care to guess?"

Andromeda laughed. "I would have said Ravenclaw, but judging by the smug look on your face, she's actually a Gryffindor." She turned to Hermione. "We're mortal enemies, you and I; would you believe it?"

Hermione chuckled weakly, but wished she knew more about the nuanced history of the Hogwarts houses and what they stood for. She recalled the hat's musings of bravery and valor and self-destructive courage, but she knew little about Slytherin's traditional traits, only the dark murmurs she had heard around Diagon during the war, none of which she could imagine applying to Andromeda.

"Have we taken up too much of your time?" Andromeda asked as she packed away the book in the bag she had carried with her.

"Not at all," McGonagall replied. "In fact, I'm using your visit as an excuse to avoid a dull meeting at the Ministry. Just as well, since Filius always has been better at bureaucracy."

Andromeda laughed. "In that case, is there any chance I could ask you a bit more about—" She hefted her now book-burdened bag. "—this?"

McGonagall was silent for a long moment, offering Andromeda a disapproving stare Hermione didn't understand, but she eventually nodded. "Of course. You know I always enjoy discussing
theory with you."

"Hermione isn't going to want to sit through all that."

Hermione nearly protested Andromeda's words, quite ready to defend her own interest in a conversation clearly about her magic and which she was just as clearly not meant to hear, but McGonagall replied before she could gather her words. "Of course. I was thinking she might want a brief tour of the school... I think I could steal Miss Weasley from class to show her around."

Sure enough, after a quick note was sent off by a wave of the headmistress's wand, it took only a few minutes for a vaguely familiar figure to enter the room. It took Hermione a moment to place the girl, but ginger hair and a self-assured smile quickly brought to mind a certain day in a certain café... and the two girls sitting with Harry Potter.

"Miss Weasley, this is Hermione Granger. I was hoping you might show her around the school for a bit."

"All right, Professor." It was clear Hermione wasn't the only one to recall their encounter, as the Weasley girl offered her a fleeting smirk of recognition.

"Hermione, Ms. Weasley is our Head Girl this year, so if you have any questions, she is more than qualified to answer them. Have her back in... an hour?" At Andromeda's nod, McGonagall affirmed, "An hour."

With no further ado, Hermione was ushered from the room, left to stand awkwardly on the stairs as the door closed on a conversation Hermione really would rather have been privy to. This whole situation felt off, and as many times as Hermione had forgiven Andromeda for keeping secrets, it was one thing to do so about her family; it was another entirely to do so when Hermione herself was the subject of them.

After passing through the gargoyle, Hermione reluctantly followed the Head Girl down the hall. "It's Ginny, by the way. Any idea what McGonagall wants me to show you?" Ginny asked. "I usually only give tours to families. With, ah... kids."

To her own surprise, Hermione was fairly candid with the slightly younger witch. "I'm pretty sure they were just trying to get rid of me," she replied. "Sorry you got caught up in it."

Ginny arched an eyebrow. "Trouble in paradise?"

"Excuse me?"

Ginny laughed. "Oh, you know. I saw you that day. I know you two are together."

At the complete lack of judgment in the girl's tone, Hermione smiled reluctantly, even though she was a bit taken aback. "Yeah. It's a bit... complicated."

Hermione was grateful when Ginny dropped it. "I know a thing or two about complicated."

"When I saw you that day, I thought you were older. How come you're still at Hogwarts?" Hermione asked, genuinely interested.

"Oh, I'm a seventh year, but I'm only staying until the end of winter term; got recruited to the Holyhead Harpies." Hermione had just enough sporting knowledge to be aware of the excellent women's team. "I'm a year younger than Harry. Ron's my brother, you know?"
"I had guessed," replied Hermione, glancing at the red hair.

"Sorry he was such an arse to you. He's really an alright guy, but all this fame business has kind of gone to his head."

Hermione could now see that they were approaching the massive mess of moving staircases. "That's alright. Honestly, I felt a little bad for him."

Ginny chuckled. "He really doesn't know how to take a hint."

At the top of the stairs, Ginny gave Hermione an appraising glance. "Look, you seem alright, and if you don't mind missing out on the tour, I could actually use your help with something."

The conspiratorial whisper was intriguing, and Hermione couldn't help but wonder if the two of them might have been school friends, had her life gone differently. "What sort of help?"

"Bit of a long story. C'mon; I'll fill you in as we go."

As a staircase finally arrived at their landing, Hermione learned it wasn't just a long story, but a bit of a strange one as well.

"There's a stray cat loose in the school; he's been around for years. I think two of my brothers might have brought him in as a prank, but they won't fess up. The cat's an ugly little bugger, but we've all gotten a bit attached to him, and now, ever since he got into a fight with Mrs. Norris, Filch wants him dead."

"Mrs. Who?" Hermione asked, a bit overwhelmed by both her surroundings, and the rapid-fire pace of Ginny's explanation.

"Sorry. Filch is the Hogwarts Caretaker and Mrs. Norris is his cat. The two of them are pretty much the bane of the school. Now, the stray's smart—we think he might be half Kneazle—but Filch is getting pretty serious about catching him, and while he's on his crusade, it isn't exactly safe for all the actual pets around. A bunch of us decided we ought to do it first and get him out of here while he's still alive. My mum will probably kill me, but I'm going to try and take him home, since break starts in three days. It's good I intercepted McGonagall's message before it got to Professor Flitwick." She grinned guiltily at Hermione. "Since I already planned on ditching this block to try and catch the cat, and I told him I'd be out of his class for a meeting with the Head."

As the account came to an end, so did their progression through the corridors. They had gone down so many flights of stairs that Hermione could only assume they were now underground, and she was rather confused to have stopped before a giant painting of a bowl of fruit.

"I talked to the house-elves and found out that he usually comes to the kitchens just before lunch. They give him scraps from the cooking leftovers, so I figure it'll be the best time to catch him."

"Is he friendly? Will he let you pick him up?" Hermione asked.

"Not exactly. Sometimes he lets people pet him, but only if he really trusts you." Ginny tugged a packet of something tan and powered from her pocket. "I came prepared. Three-minute sleep powder. My brother came up with it for a prank, but never got approved to sell it, and I nabbed the test batch. I've got a carrier right here."

With a wave of her wand, the oddest cat-carrier Hermione had ever seen slowly faded into visibility in Ginny's other hand. It was entirely made of metal, with only little slits at either end to let air through. "Have you been carrying that the whole time?"
Ginny shrugged. "I'm pretty good at invisibility, but it was kind of hard not to walk funny and clang into things."

"And the cat is going to be in that for three days?" Hermione asked skeptically.

Ginny stared at the cage for a long moment. "I know, it's not ideal, but Charlie uses it for baby dragons, and it was the best I could come up with on short notice."

"Alright," Hermione finally said. It really was none of her business. She felt bad for the cat, but she supposed a few days in a miserable cage would be better than whatever fate apparently awaited it at the hands of this evil caretaker.

"What I need you for is to watch the door once I go through. From the inside, it opens whenever anyone gets near, even a cat. I don't think I'll have any trouble, but just in case he gets by me, this is the only way out."

Nervously picturing a furious ball of fleeing fur and claws and still wondering where this so-called door was, Hermione asked, "Have any more of that powder?"

Ginny reached in the pocket of her robes, then let out a muffled curse. "I must've left it with Luna. She was supposed to help me with this, but her dad pulled her out early to chase some crumpled-horn snort-beast. Think you'll be okay without it?"

Not wanting to let her down, Hermione managed a nervous nod, working in her mind to think of the proper color for a sleep charm… and the proper strength to subdue a potentially magical creature.

"Excellent," Ginny said with a grin. Stretching out a hand, she ran her fingers over the yellow pear in the painting, and Hermione watched in fascination as it let out a mildly disturbing giggle and turned into a door handle. "Wish me luck!"

Once Ginny disappeared, Hermione cautiously maneuvered the metal cat—or, er, dragon—carrier right up against the side of the "door" she now knew would crack open, hoping any frantically fleeing creature would just run right into it.

Instead, after perhaps the longest three minutes of Hermione's life, the door knocked the cage aside as it swung wide and a fluffy streak of ginger and tan leapt over the top of the metal and directly into Hermione's chest, digging its claws into her robes and clambering wildly up to perch on her shoulder, hissing furiously at the rather disheveled Ginny emerging in his wake. "You got him!" she gasped.

Wincing as she felt claws flexing against the surface of her skin, Hermione muttered, "I think he got me, actually."

Ginny laughed. "Better than I did anyway. He knocked the powder right out of my hand and I was so busy trying to keep it out of some poor first year's soup that I had to banish it."

As she spoke, Ginny was approaching the quivering feline with an outstretched palm. The cat revealed exactly how he felt about the gesture of peace by taking a swipe at her with a paw. She backed up. "Think you can get him in the cage?"

Hermione was somewhat preoccupied with trying to keep an eye on those deadly claws in her peripheral vision, but she crouched down near the carrier. The claws dug in and Hermione cursed. "Apparently not," she muttered, standing again. To her astonishment, the claws retracted completely, and the orange beast stretched calmly out across her shoulders, lying down and purring loudly against her ear.
"Blimey," said Ginny. "He likes you!"

Hermione reached up a tentative hand to scratch behind the cat's ears, and the purring increased. "I guess he does."

"Why don't you take him, then?"

Hermione's eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

"I just want him out of the castle, and if he leaves on your shoulders that's fine by me."

"That's not going to be possible," she answered dryly. She imagined the raggedy orange beast let loose on all the pristine new furniture in Black Manor and laughed aloud. "Let's just say I don't live in a pet-friendly home."

Ginny offered an appraising look. "Do you live with Andy?"

Blinking at the casual shortening of her lover's name, Hermione figured it wasn't some great secret, and nodded.

"Let's ask her, then!"

Despite her protests, Hermione soon found herself standing outside the gargoyle once again, weighed down by a pile of slumped cat still purring despite a rather bumpy ride up the series of staircases. "This is never going to work," Hermione hissed when they stood outside the office doors, but Ginny merely grinned and knocked.

Not even waiting for an answer, Ginny strolled in. McGonagall was caught in the middle of a clearly angry glare at Andromeda, who looked relieved at the interruption. "Sorry we're early, Professor. I just wanted to make sure I got to say a proper hello to Andy before they left."

Hermione hovered in the doorway, now even more confused as to how this Hogwarts student was on an abbreviated first name basis with her… employer.

"It's good to see you, Ginny. Any news of Teddy?"

A few things began to click into place. She had a vague recollection of an earlier conversation about Harry Potter, the Weasley family, and a grandson named Teddy. She tried not to let the reminder that she was dating a grandmother feel too strange.

"You should stop by The Burrow and see him over break," Ginny laughed. "I heard Mum and Harry took him to the London Zoo this weekend and had to leave early because he kept sprouting a pig snout."


The cat chose that moment to make his presence known, sitting up on Hermione's shoulder and nearly deafening her with an ungodly yowl, startling everyone in the room.

"What in Merlin's name is on you?" Andromeda asked, caught immediately in a staring contest with the flat-faced feline.

McGonagall looked more amused than surprised. "Ah, the bandy-legged pest Argus has been blathering about. It seems quite taken with you, Miss Granger."

"My thoughts exactly, Professor," Ginny interjected, attempting to sidle closer to Hermione and
earning a hiss of warning. Staying a safer distance away, she added, "I actually hoped she might be able to take Filch's problem off his hands."

From the quirk to McGonagall's lips, she knew exactly what Ginny was proposing… and it probably wasn't the first time such an odd dilemma had found its way to her office. "That creature is neither my responsibility, nor my concern. That being said, it is my personal opinion that there is no better familiar than a Kneazle, and should Miss Granger be inclined to leave with it, she has my blessing."

There it was, that disapproval still simmering in McGonagall's tone as she aimed her words towards Andromeda. To Hermione's astonishment, Andromeda looked rather abashed, a hint of shame furrowing her brow before she willfully straightened and turned back towards Hermione. "If it bites me, it leaves," she said.

Hermione, prepared to explain that she had never even intended to ask if she could keep the thing at all, found herself stammering a question instead. "Wait, you mean I can keep him?"

Andromeda offered a wry smile. "I don't see why not."

Well then, Hermione mused as everyone began saying their goodbyes. Looks as though I'd better read up on how to take care of a cat.

The cat was remarkably cooperative, staying calm through their Disapparition before hopping down in the manor driveway and waddling off into the grass. It was the first time Hermione had gotten a clear look at him, and she was amused to see just how endearingly lopsided the creature was, from his crooked, bottle-brush tail to the bowlegged stride with which he walked. Crookshanks, she thought. A proper wizarding name.

Andromeda informed the elves about the newest addition to their household, and though Hermione felt bad adding anything else to their workload, the pair actually seemed quite taken with the idea of having a household pet, even if it was a rather monstrous ginger cat nearly as tall as they were. The two promised to make sure he didn't go hungry, and Andromeda even gave them permission to install an enchanted cat door in the side entrance by the kitchen.

The manor felt impossibly quiet after the bustling halls of Hogwarts, but Hermione felt more comfortable that way. She'd never been much of one for crowds, and even with everything that had happened since she arrived here, she appreciated her relative solitude. She spent a long time on dinner, stuffing manicotti shells with ricotta and kale and dusting the top with parmesan and herbs, convincing herself that the best way to brush off the burning-scare would be to make something she loved far too much to chicken out on. The elves were back on delivery duty, so Hermione was able to have a peaceful, intimate meal with Andromeda in the kitchen.

In all the cat commotion, it wasn't until Hermione was already halfway up the stairs for the night that she realized she had forgotten to ask what McGonagall had said that had Andromeda so clearly on edge. It didn't really matter, Hermione mused, since her lover had promised she'd be upstairs in a little while. So long as Hermione managed to keep her clothes on, she should have plenty of time to ask a few questions.

Pushing the door open, Hermione froze.

There, sitting on her bed as calm as could be, was Bellatrix. Petting Crookshanks.

Intellectually, Hermione realized Bellatrix must have come down sometime in the past few hours.
since she and Andromeda returned, but as she stood there, she couldn't seem to shake the idea that Bellatrix had been lying in wait all day long, a patient pit viper setting an ambush.

"Hello, pet."

For once, Hermione wasn't frightened. She was angry. "What are you doing here? No, I don't even care. Get out." This damn witch was not going to ruin another evening.

Bellatrix pouted. "Cissy came to see me today."

"I don't care," Hermione replied, stepping inside and holding the door wide open.

Bellatrix ignored her. "Sometimes I forget she plays better mind games than I do."

"Out," Hermione ordered again.

"Even while she was getting all wonderfully riled up over you, she said something… interesting."

The casual, almost playful tone was beginning to grate on Hermione's nerves.

"She said, 'You know Bella, you're an idiot. Sometimes I don't even think you're trying. If you really wanted to get rid of her, you'd just tell her the truth!'" Her imitation of Narcissa's cold fury was uncanny.

"I mean it, Bellatrix. You can't be in here," Hermione tried one last time, though she was being slowly drawn into the story against her will.

Still, Bellatrix carried on as though Hermione had never spoken. "Even if she only meant it to be rude… I got to thinking that my little sister might just have a point." Bellatrix rose and took three quick steps closer to Hermione.

"Andromeda will be here any minute," she insisted defensively, glancing towards the door. "You don't want to be here."

"You think my sister's just the perfect little angel, don't you?" Bellatrix's voice dropped low and dark. "You think she's the moral pillar holding up some teetering ceiling of Black family corruption and evil." She laughed.

Not that it was any of Bellatrix's concern, but Hermione most certainly knew Andromeda was no angel. Hermione just… hadn't found occasion to mind all that much.

"She wants to kill me, though."

Hermione's eyes widened. Bellatrix's voice had lost all inflection, no longer a childish taunt or an ominous warning. These words were flat, raw, and dangerous. "W-what?"

Bellatrix's eyes narrowed, but she seemed to realize she now had Hermione's attention. Deliberately, she turned and paced back over to the bed. "Your precious Andromeda, my darling sister… She wants me dead—" Bellatrix mimed stabbing a knife into her own heart and collapsed backwards onto the mattress, twitching. After a long moment, she sat up, staring into Hermione's eyes with a fire the young witch felt might roast her alive "—and you just fit so perfectly into her plans."
Hermione shook her head. "No, of course she doesn't. She doesn't want you dead; she saved you! She—"

Bellatrix snorted. "Indeed. And she's regretted it each day since." She rose, pacing past Hermione to stand by the door. "She looks at me every day and all she can think is why didn't I let them kill her."

Hermione was still shaking her head, protests waiting at the back of her throat for a pause, but Bellatrix wasn't finished.

"I killed her daughter, you know? I killed her precious little baby, Nymphadora. What a ridiculous name."

The protests shriveled and died before they could leave Hermione's mouth.

"Didn't find out until it was too late, of course. Not till well after the battle," Bellatrix sneered. "Took a pass at murder as soon as she did, but it takes more than a little anger to off me. After the trial, well… My Andy's not daft. She knows the Ministry would be on her in a heartbeat and it'd be off to Azkaban as fast as they could say, 'We didn't sign off on this!' You know how the Ministry bastards are about killing," she added conspiratorially, circling around Hermione towards the bed again before stepping closer. "Pussies, the lot of them," she hissed.

Hermione was still reeling at the knowledge that Bellatrix had been the one to kill Andromeda's daughter. How could she not have known that?

"She can't just kill me and she knows it," Bellatrix added, continuing to close the distance between herself and Hermione's frozen figure. "If I disappear, she's off to prison, so if she can't kill me as me… she'll need to kill me as someone else." She was painfully close now, but Hermione couldn't bring herself to step away, afraid any motion would shatter Bellatrix's revealing mood. "No one would notice if a little street urchin like you went missing; all my sister needs is a body. Even if it means seducing a pretty little Mudblood to loan me one—" Bellatrix reached out, tracing a finger up along Hermione's arm to settle against the rapid pulse beating in her throat. "—and take my place anytime the Ministry decides to come snooping around." She sniffed in derision. "Polyjuice… what a dreadful little invention."

Hermione's world was spinning about her. Her mouth hung open in denial as she staggered back a pace, away from the older witch. "N-no, she—"

"Ah-ah, pet. She doesn't need your body now, don't you worry your pretty little head about that. No, my sister thinks she's so clever. Thinks she's found something in you. No, she just needs your magic. I shan't take it, though," she hissed, voice gone from chillingly lighthearted to stabbedly cold in a matter of seconds. "I won't have your mettlesome Mudblood fingers anywhere near my magic."

"You're lying," Hermione gasped out, backing up against the door. The picture Bellatrix had painted was far more than unsettling. "Andy, she… she would never… She cares about—"

"Who, you?" Bellatrix cackled. "What, did she say she wuvs you?" A flash of old anger, old pain darted across the older witch's face. "My sister only cares about herself."

Hermione could feel something dark and ugly clawing its way up her throat and she had to get out. Her hand scrubbed uselessly against the door until she clutched the doorknob, squeezing the life out of the metal as she ripped it open and stumbled out, Bellatrix's brittle laughter echoing behind her.
She lurched down the nearest hall, no destination in mind, desperate to get away from the ideas the eldest Black had planted in her mind. Fragments of Andromeda's words echoed around in her skull and mingled with Bellatrix's laughter until Hermione's crumpled against the nearest wall, breath leaving her in gasps as she stared, unseeing, out the window into the night. "I've made you all these promises ... "She wants to kill me" ... I'm afraid I'm a bit of a fraud ... "Only cares about herself" ... I haven't always been able to protect the people I care about from Bellatrix ... "I killed her daughter, you know?" ... She's Bellatrix. She doesn't need a reason to do anything.

"Hermione?"

She wasn't ready for the concern in Andromeda's voice. She wasn't ready to look up and see compassion and confusion in her eyes. If she had more time ... more time to talk herself out of how much truth she felt in Bellatrix's voice ... more time to remind herself that there was no reason to trust a convicted Death Eater over her lover ... but there wasn't time, and Hermione was panicking.

Andromeda knelt before her and reached to brush Hermione's hair from her face.

"Don't touch me!" Hermione gasped out, jerking back. Seeing the instant hurt in Andromeda's face, she spoke again. "Just... don't. Not right now."

"Are you hurt? Did something happen?" When Hermione didn't immediately respond, Andromeda added, "Has Bella done something again?"

For a long moment, Hermione didn't speak, staring blankly into the face of the woman she had come to trust more than anyone else in the world. "Bellatrix killed your daughter," she said.

Andromeda flinched back.

"Didn't she?" Hermione amended.

Andromeda slowly shook her head, no longer meeting Hermione's eyes. "Where did you hear that?"

"She told me."

Andromeda's hand clenched into a fist. "Whatever my sister had to say on the matter is rubbish."

"It's true, then?" Hermione choked out. Part of her wanted to offer condolences, to shake off the numbing fear that lingered in every part of her mind and reach out to Andromeda, but first, she needed answers.

"It's true," Andromeda hissed out through clenched teeth, finally rising and pacing across the hall. When nothing more seemed forthcoming, Hermione started the next inquiry. "Did you... after that, were you... did you—" she couldn't bring herself to make the accusation, couldn't bring herself to verify anything more Bellatrix had said, couldn't bring herself to ask if her lover was nearly a murderer.

Andromeda answered all the same, spinning back to face the younger witch with fire in her eyes. "Did I what, did I try to kill her? Is that what she's told you? Did she tell you what she did, how she hunted my daughter through the whole battle just to spite me? How, as soon as I convinced the others not to kill her, she told me what she had done, taunting me with how many times she was able to torture Nymphadora, how many times she made my daughter scream before she killed her... laughing all the while? Did she tell you that it took six Aurors to stop me from Crucio-ing her to death?" Andromeda was shaking, and her voice broke audibly as she continued. "Did she tell you that I tried to keep Nymphadora home that night, or that I wasn't there at the battle because she
wanted to fight beside her husband, so I stayed behind, watching her newborn son? That I can hardly even stand to visit my grandson anymore because all I can see when I look at him is one more reason my daughter isn't alive?" She drew in an agonizing breath and turned away, pressing her forehead and an open, shaking palm against the glass of the window.

Hermione stood on trembling legs, crossing the distance between them but unwilling to offer comfort quite yet.

"Do you—do you still want, after all this time—"

"I hate her," Andromeda hissed. "Every day I see her I hate her for all the things she's taken away from me and… I need her out of my life. Out of this house. It—it's something I… I wanted to talk to you about it, but not like this, I…"

There it was. Everything Bellatrix had said. That image, staying here forever, playing the role of the eldest Black at any given moment to enable Andromeda to… to make it simple for her to… kill her. Get her "out of this house."

She wants me dead … and you just fit so perfectly into her plans.

For the first time, anger began to rise through Hermione's shocked confusion. "You—you've been lying to me all this time?"

"What?" Andromeda asked, flinching at Hermione's accusative tone and turning her head towards the younger woman.

"What? You wanted to talk to me? You wanted me to, to what, to take her place?"

"What? No, Hermione! I—"

"—What? You what? You've been using me! All of this was nothing but a ploy to get Bellatrix off your hands? Dammit, Andromeda, I thought you might actually have cared." Her voice broke. "More the fool I was, hmm? Why, I suppose you only kissed me that first day because you were afraid I'd run, was that it? Did I ever mean anything to you?" Hermione rubbed harshly at her eyes as though her palms could push back her tears.

"No! Oh, Hermione, no! Heavens no," Andromeda was insisting, trying to push her way through Hermione's words with vicious denial. She tried to reach out, to take her hand, but Hermione clenched her fingers into fists and turned her back.

"Leave," she rasped, voice hoarse with tears, but when the other witch made no move to go, Hermione pushed past her, moving blindly back towards her chambers.

"Hermione, please, give me a chance to explain," Andromeda implored, following her too closely for Hermione to shut the door in her face.

"Get out," she whispered, trying to put force into it despite her shaking shoulders. "Just, leave me alone; let me… let me breathe." After a weighty pause, she heard the fall of reluctant footsteps starting to retreat, but realized she wasn't quite finished.

"Is that why you slept with me?" Hermione called after her, voice broken. "Did you f-fuck me just to keep me here peacefully, so I would let you turn me into your sister anytime the Ministry came poking around? Less trouble if you didn't have to go through the mess of keeping someone locked up in your attic anymore? Is that it?"
"Is that what my sister told you?" Andromeda asked softly. When Hermione turned towards her, the older witch stood in the doorway, unable to face her, hands clenched on the edges of the door frame, head low, shoulders taut and shuddering. "No," she whispered. "I slept with you because you were teaching me to be... a person again. Because the moment I saw your face light up with joy when you cast the first spell you didn't know, I knew I could never go through with anything like I once thought I... thought I needed to. I slept with you because I fell in love, Hermione." Andy's voice was empty, hollow, but every few shuddering breaths, a tear splashed down onto the stone beneath her feet with a tiny, helpless sound, as though the floor wanted to swallow up the sorrow and regret it stood for.

Hermione stared at the back of Andromeda's head for a long time, biting cruelly at the inside of her lip to hold in her own sobs. She wanted to be angry, not sad. She could justify anger. Sorrow was too raw. Finally, she managed to speak. "I thought I was dying to hear those words from you. I thought you were everything I ever wanted. Now... now I'm dying to just be able to trust you again, but I don't know that I ever will."

As she turned away once more, she felt arms wrap around her waist, palms flat against her stomach. Hermione didn't have the strength to pull away from the familiar warmth, the safety she could still feel in that strong, sure, gentle embrace. Still, it was that very safety which felt so deceitful now, so false. "Go," she whispered, voice utterly defeated. "Leave."

"Please," Andromeda whispered. "Please, I never meant to—"

Hermione laughed, then, a dark, broken sound so utterly unlike her that it caused the elder witch to flinch.

"Oh, the bitter irony," Hermione gasped. "That in the end, even after everything your sister has done, it would be you who wanted to abuse me."

Andromeda's arms jerked back as though burned, but she slipped around Hermione's side and faced her, finding an emptiness in the younger woman's eyes that finally told her to give up. "Fine," she murmured. "I'll go. But I'm still here, Hermione. Please, if you won't hear anything else... what we had was real." She shook her head. "I meant to use you, my lovely girl, but well before our first kiss, I knew I would never do it."

She pressed a kiss to Hermione's unresponsive lips, something hard and desperate that drew nothing from the younger witch. Pulling back, Andromeda managed a light kiss to the back of each of Hermione's tear-dampened eyelids, then she was gone, leaving Hermione to slide down the wall and wrap her arms around her knees, shuddering breaths echoing through her empty chambers, tears tracing salted tracks down the collar of her robes.

"Well, well, well. What have we here?"

A gleefully grinning Bellatrix emerged from Hermione's bathroom wrapped in a fluffy robe Hermione was certain had never before been seen anywhere in the house, hair hanging long and wet, dripping audibly onto the floor.

"No," Hermione said, completely at wit's end and unwilling to deal with any more of the eldest Black's mind games tonight. "Whatever you're still doing here, get out."

"No?" Bellatrix pouted. "But I've only just taken my shower. Can't go traipsing about the house with our hair all wet now can we?"

Irritation quickly overcoming her tears, Hermione yanked her wand out of her sleeve. Bellatrix
flinched back visibly and Hermione felt a rush of power at the idea she might have actually scared the other witch, but she had no intention of hurting her. With a quick gesture, Hermione dried Bellatrix's hair in a wordless, nameless bit of magenta magic. Bellatrix looked startled for a moment, reaching up and patting her hair before shrugging and sitting on the edge of Hermione’s bed. "No matter." An entirely self-satisfied grin returned to her face. "That there was quite the little show. I'll have to thank Cissy for the tip. Haven't seen my sister that riled since, well…” She gave Hermione a conspiratorial wink. "You know. All the other times I've had fun with you."

"You disgust me," Hermione spat. It wasn't enough for Bellatrix to entirely shatter her relationship with Andromeda, but now here she was, gloating.

"Feeling's mutual, pet."

Rising on shaking legs, Hermione stormed over to the closet and ripped it open. "Fine. You know what? Fine. You win! I'm leaving. I'm done with all of this." She yanked her few belongings—though far more than she'd had upon arrival—down from rack and flung them, hangers and all, into the suitcase beneath the bed. Grabbing her cloak and ignoring Bellatrix's mocking, celebratory applause, she stormed towards the door. Halfway through, she stopped and turned back to stare at the madwoman on her bed. "I was never wrong, was I? All you even know how to do is torture people."

The smile on the other witch's face faltered.

"And of all the bollocks you spouted today, you have no right to mock your sister for being self-serving," she snapped.

Bellatrix shrugged, face expressionless. "I think you're forgetting something, girl. I'm just trying to stay alive."

For a long moment, Hermione was trapped in the other woman's stare, stunned by those raw words. There was an impossible moment between them where, for the first time, Hermione saw nothing but sanity in the depths of those dark eyes, heard her voice speak without a hint of her usual mocking, jaded, childish pride. As she broke free and hurried off down the hallway, she remembered some of the first words Andromeda had offered about her older sister. "She's insane ... illogical... unaware of common sense. But she is also the most cunning survivor I've crossed paths with."

Picturing the cold rage in Andromeda's voice when she told Hermione what she had nearly done after she heard about her daughter, Hermione almost regretted leaving them alone together. Some part of her, even now, wanted nothing more than to offer whatever distraction, whatever escape she could to this scarred, broken family. A larger part of her, however, knew she had gotten in far, far too deep, and the only way back out again was to go home.

If the blasted gate would let her leave.

Though she had hardly left the property since her arrival at the manor, Hermione had been through the gates more than a handful of times, and it was never more than a matter of waving them open with her wand. Tonight, however, every possible manner of spell had been tried and failed, bound and unbound magic alike. The darkness had crept in around her and the silent, cursed grounds were eerie in the faint moonlight, and by the time Andromeda found her again, she had resorted to pounding futilely against the iron.

"You can't leave."

"I can see that," Hermione snapped, forehead slumped against the bars. "Let me out."
Andromeda shook her head. "Can't. It's old magic. Blood magic. No one with bad intentions towards
the family can leave, not until they have no intention of harming us."

Hermione's automatic response was indignation. Even after tonight, she could never imagine actually
wishing harm on any of them. Looking farther within herself, however, Hermione slowly realized
that, in the back of her mind, she had a lingering thought of telling someone, of warning the Ministry
just what Andromeda intended to do to Bellatrix. Drawing in a deep breath, she calmed herself.

"Very well. I—I can't mean you any harm. I swear it. I can't blame you for... for how you feel
towards Bellatrix. I'm not a mother. Maybe I'd have snapped, too. I won't tell anyone, I won't try to
stop you, but I don't have as little self-respect as you seem to think. I won't be part of it, of any of
this. I'm not going to let myself be used. For murder or... otherwise."

With those final words, Hermione flicked her wand at the gates again. They creaked open for her
unhindered. Without looking back, she took two steps beyond the wall before daring something
she'd never had the courage to try, pulling up a swirl of deep blue from the depths of her mind and
into her wand, Disapparating away from the closest she'd ever felt to real happiness.

Her mother's apartment was better furnished than before she'd left, though it was hard not to make
comparisons to the lap of luxury where she'd spent the past few months. Still, it was clear whatever
part of her salary had been sent here had made a difference. There was new carpeting in the bedroom
and cork flooring in the kitchen, as well as a cheery new coat of paint on all the walls.

It was wonderful to see her mum again, to help her cook supper and listen to her chatter on about the
Muggle knitting club she'd joined. She didn't want to talk about her job yet and her mother didn't
press the matter. It was a welcome reprieve. Even if, growing up, she'd had more than her share of
moments wishing for her real parents, part of Hermione knew she'd ended up with a wonderful
family, and she was glad she'd been able to give her mum this new stability. That night, she fell
asleep in her old room, a crimson scarf her mum had knitted—"Only had to use magic a few times.
It's not cheating if it's just to work out the knots," she insisted

They paid a visit to St. Mungo's the next day. It was immediately clear the money she'd earned hadn't
done as much good here. He was in a nicer room now, with two whole windows and a full-time
personal mediwizard, but her dad was still dying, and it was clear he was going fast. He spent almost
the entirety of Hermione's visit asleep, only waking briefly to ask for water and smile up at them in
dubious recognition.

Watching her mother sit beside him, talking softly about her day and holding his hand as though
nothing had changed was one of the more painful things Hermione had seen in her life. She had
always felt there were two types of people when it came to loved ones dying: those who stood by
them till the end, holding on to whatever was left until every inch of it was completely gone, and
those who pulled back, drawing away as soon as it became clear that what remained of the person
they loved was little more than a human shell of illness and looming loss. Part of her wished she
could be the first sort, could look down at the cot and see the man who had raised her all these years,
but a larger part of her knew that man had passed away long ago, and whatever her mum still held on
to wasn't so much her husband as his memory.

Between that visit and the events of the day prior, Hermione was trapped in deep, lingering
melancholy. It was alright for a few days, sitting quietly in their worn, familiar armchair by the fire
with a book she could finally afford to buy, losing herself in magic-lore and the mundane reality of
everyday life, but too soon her mum wanted to have friends over for tea—her friends, not
Hermione's—and Hermione wasn't ready to be shown off. She didn't want to sit through prodding
questions and side-eyed stares, her life pried open and dissected a like a dead dormouse, and she
knew that was precisely what would happen. Still, she went through the motions, dashing to the store for biscuits while her mum put the kettle on, but when the doorbell rang and she heard the first half-familiar voice exclaim over the new décor and Hermione's mysterious job, she slipped out the back, standing for a long moment on the fire escape balcony before using a bit of magic to hop down to the street below.

It was a long walk from St. Mungo's to Diagon, but Hermione needed the time to clear her head. Everything had happened so quickly in the past few days. One morning she was waking up in Andromeda's arms and the next evening she was running away. Everything between was a bit of a blur, from the distinct sense that Andromeda was hiding something from her in McGonagall's office to Bellatrix's taunting words. Nothing seemed ready to pull into focus, especially since, even though Andromeda hadn't exactly denied her sister's accusations, something still didn't add up. It was such an elaborate, calculated farce. How far back must it have gone? Did Andromeda go to the Ministry that first day, not really to get permission for a housekeeper, but just for an excuse to have another body in her home, someone to help take Bellatrix out of the picture? The magic lessons… just another trick to help things appear more authentic? Could anyone really be so cold, so calculating?

As she passed the many shops she'd frequented in her childhood, Hermione was surprised to see holiday decorations in the windows. She had forgotten how close it was to Christmas. She treated herself at the chestnut stall in the hopes of putting herself in the holiday spirit, but her mind kept drifting hopelessly back to Black Manor. Would the elves decorate for the holidays, or was the Black family as entirely oblivious to the passing time as she had been? Was there any room for celebration in a nest already full to the brim with deceit?

Stopping in Madam Malkin's to find a Christmas present for her mum, Hermione realized just how few people she had in her life worth noting. Her childhood friends, as few and far between as they had been, were off in the real world, making a living for themselves that didn't involve being employed by a family of Death Eaters. With her dad nearly gone, her mum was just about the only person left in her life who would even notice if she just… disappeared. Bellatrix was right; no one would ever have noticed if she had never returned from living under Andromeda's thumb.

Despite the warming spells she'd enchanted into the lining of her cloak, Hermione felt a chill race up her spine. She'd never quite been faced by how inconsequential she was until this moment, and it wasn't a pleasant realization.

She wandered into Flourish and Blotts in search of distraction. She found something entirely different.

"Hermione!"

Hermione blanched at the sight of the youngest Black sister rounding the corner of the nearest shelf, perfectly poised as ever, heels clicking harshly against the wood. A quiet curse slipped between Hermione's lips and she took a few hasty steps away before realizing it was far too late to feign ignorance and dash off. "Lady Malfoy," she whispered, eyes darting towards the ground, the shelving… anywhere but the witch in front of her.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake; call me Narcissa."

Hermione said nothing.

"Hermione. Look at me."

Reluctantly, Hermione obeyed, meeting those pale blue eyes she had once thought some of the coldest she'd ever seen, but which had come to reveal much more to her over the past months. "Why
"Are you here?" she asked cautiously.

"Holiday shopping. Same as you, I presume," Narcissa replied. She held a single, leather-bound book in her hand. Hermione caught sight of the word "Ceremonies" on the spine before the book disappeared, tucked into the crook of Narcissa's elbow.

"Oh," Hermione replied, not at all sure what else there was to say to the sister of the woman she had just severed ties with. Theirs was hardly a relationship worthy of exchanged pleasantries. Narcissa, however, had no interest in ending the encounter at a few brisk words.

"I'll not waste either of our time. You disappeared. You left a yowling beast in our house, Andromeda hasn't left her chambers in days… even Bella is singing for joy in the corridors, and… and no one will tell me why on earth you took off."

Beneath the frank words, Hermione detected a hint of pained humor, as well as a touch of genuine concern. She winced in sympathy at the image of Bellatrix's smug singing as well as the monstrous cat she had entirely forgotten about in her haste to leave, but it was the image of Andromeda hiding from the world which hit her hardest. The questions in Narcissa's eyes deserved an answer, but Hermione wasn't sure how to give one. Reluctantly, she admitted, "You were right, you know? You were right all along." Then, to her own intense embarrassment, she started crying again. She immediately looked away, wiping furiously at her eyes with the sleeve of her robes.

"In what regard?" Narcissa asked, sounding genuinely confused.

"All of it," she whispered, voice hoarse, then cleared her throat. "The day you… the day you found out about… us, you tried to warn me. You said… you said something about Bellatrix, about how impossible it was for either of you to be free of her, about how she affected everything that happens in your lives." She sniffed, turning back cautiously towards Narcissa. "At the time I thought… All I could imagine was how she trapped you at home, kept you from having a normal moment in this world but… you were right. It was always so much more than that."

Slowly, comprehension dawned on the other witch's face. She raised a hand, hovering aimlessly in midair between them before lowering gently to clasp Hermione's forearm. "Come," she said, drawing Hermione between the stacks towards one of the bookstore's many shadowed reading nooks. "Sit. Tell me."

The moment the comfy armchair wrapped its overstuffed arms around her, words began spilling from her mouth. Disjointed, barely coherent, filled with worry over Narcissa's reaction, but words all the same. Dark, heavy with accusation and fear, but as honest as she could offer. Narcissa remained implacable throughout, sitting in silence, and in that moment, it was exactly what the younger woman needed. She needed to say it aloud, to try and piece things together, to justify the betrayal she felt, how broken her trust was. In some ways, Bella's words seemed more far-fetched in the light of day, far from the cloistered reality of life in Black Manor. "I still… even after all that, things just won't add up."

In her mind, the pieces that wouldn't fell into place hovered distractingly, but she didn't speak them aloud. The conversation with McGonagall was chief among them. Hermione couldn't picture the venerable Headmistress privy to a murder plot, which meant there was something else Andromeda didn't want her to know, something about… what was the phrase? Raw magic.

When Hermione didn't offer any more words, Narcissa finally replied. "Well then. I'm often surprised by just how determined my sister can be, but I can't say I'm shocked by this."

"Why didn't you tell me, then?" Hermione asked, voice shrill. "How could you—"

"—Would you have listened?"
Hermione quieted.

Narcissa ran her fingers through her hair, pulling it into disarray and leaving her looking distinctly more disheveled than Hermione had ever seen the fair witch. "You were happy. I could have been wrong. I wasn't going to... I didn't want to ruin either your happiness or our tenuous... friendship, not just on my suspicions."

Calming marginally, Hermione offered a slow nod, feeling a smile tremble on her lips at Narcissa's declaration of friendship. It was true. In the past few months sitting together in the library, Hermione had come to feel connected to the haughty, reserved witch in a way she never could have imagined, and hearing that the Lady felt the same was reassuring. "I'm sorry. I was lashing out, ma'am.

Narcissa spared her one of those rare, thin smiles... one of the real ones. "Please. It's Narcissa."


As quickly as the smile had come, it was gone, and in a flash, Narcissa's tone changed to something more serious. "Hermione, I need you to come back."

Hermione's spine straightened, immediately defensive.

"The situation at the manor is untenable at the moment and I can't fix it. I have—I have my own... difficulties to sort out."

Hermione shook her head. "You can't possibly think that Andromeda will want me living there again. Not after everything I said. I'm fired."

Narcissa arched an eyebrow. "She isn't the one signing your paychecks, you know."

Though she had heard a similar sentiment from Andromeda, it was Hermione's turn to offer a look of confusion. The inner workings of the Black family fortune weren't anywhere in her range of comprehension.

Narcissa gave a fragile, icy laugh. "Our mother left nothing to 'Dromeda. Despite my sister having the most freedom of us, I have complete control of the family fortune. Even with many of our assets caught up in Ministry shenanigans, I will always have financial independence. You haven't lost your job, Ms. Granger."

"I don't want it," she whispered. "Is that allowed? The three of you... I don't even know what to think anymore. Can I just, just this once, make a decision for myself? I—I'm tired of being poked and prodded along some path I can't see. I'm tired of being a pawn."

Narcissa's stare hardened, staring through the widow at the sprawling mass of homes and streetside carts that made up the east end of Diagon. "You think you can be more here? You think you have any more control of your life in a place like this?"

Hermione's stiffened again. "Wealth and blood status isn't everything, you know." Some part of the younger witch was surprised by her own audacity. If there was one thing her twisted relationship with Andromeda had given her, it was a touch more self-respect.

Something flashed in Narcissa's eyes, fiery and dangerous. "Believe it or not, girl, I know that better than most." There was a brutal honesty in those words that struck a chord with the younger witch, and she couldn't help but look away. "There is no one in this godforsaken city more disillusioned with pure-blood culture than I."
Before Hermione could pull together a response, Narcissa had risen from her seat, wrapping herself in her elegant cloak and her high-born bearing as she prepared to leave. "Stay with your family for the Holidays if you must. Say goodbye to your father. I'm aware he has very little time left. But come January, I expect you to be over this nonsense with my sister, and I expect you to come home." She gave Hermione no chance to reject the command. "You're right about one thing. You don't have the full story. Andromeda is many things, but she isn't as cold-blooded as you are imagining in the moment. You two need to talk before either of you do something you will come to regret." Narcissa started to walk away, but she paused, staring deeply into Hermione's eyes. "I know you think you've made a mess of our lives. You couldn't be more wrong. You were starting to pull things together, but if you leave now…” Narcissa's voice cracked, her poise breaking. "It's all going to hell again."

With that, she was gone, and even though Hermione felt as though all the air had returned to the room with her passing, she still couldn't breathe easy. She paid for the two books she'd found in a daze, blinking blindly when the shopkeeper took her sickles with a smile and a perfunctory, "Happy Christmas Eve."
Chapter 14

Not only was Hermione woefully underprepared for festivities, but Christmas at St. Mungo's was a study in just how impossible it was to celebrate surrounded by death and disease. The walk was bitterly cold, and trudging down near-empty streets lined on either side by glowing window-edged scenes of trees and presents and holiday joy was hardly a pleasant way to start the morning. The reception area was lit with giant glowing orbs of gold and crimson light, but the impression they created was of a half-hearted thought that tinting the sanitary glare of hospital light with shades of the season would somehow make it less sterile. Still, there were live boughs of holly in the doorways, garlands wrapped about every pillar, and snow-decked trees lining the halls to lend a touch of life to the cloistered chambers. The icicles dangling in the corners, however, were distinctly more ominous than they were pretty, clinking insistently together every time the opening or closing of a door sent a draft up to where they hung, precariously perched.

There was nothing cheerful in sitting beside her mum as she opened presents for her husband, exclaiming over them quietly as though he would ever enjoy winter boots, chocolate frogs, or Wizard's Wilderness Weekly again. He never so much as opened his eyes, breathing shallow and undisturbed throughout their visit.

Walking home after choking down St. Mungo's attempt at a holiday lunch, Hermione could feel the walls of London pressing in around her. She felt too big, the city too small, strangling her back into a silhouette of submission, into the drudgery of the mundane life she had lived before her time with the Blacks. As dark and strange as her months in the manor had been… Hermione had felt important there. Was it shallow to feel so cheated, so unfulfilled by a life she had once seen as… noble poverty? It is not wealth, but the arrogance of wealth that offends the poor. It was something her father had often said, but now… Hermione couldn't be offended by the Blacks' arrogance, nor did she covet their wealth. She just wanted… she wanted to feel that alive again. She wanted every human encounter to be weighty and rife with centuries of history and pride and war, to be surrounded by useless relics of a past she had never lived, to learn magic beyond her station or years and drift down halls amid air thick with meaning and words unsaid. Living there, it was… it was thrilling. It was dangerous. It was…

Hermione shook herself. It was not for her. She was never really part of that life. She never really belonged there, in the lives of those people, and certainly not in Andromeda's bed. Pure-bloods, she thought, but there was little venom in it.

"Not that it hasn't been nice to have you, dear, but when are you headed back to work?"

It was two days into the New Year and Hermione hadn't left. She had tossed and turned all night, almost afraid something would happen to her for disobeying Narcissa's demand, but she had slept undisturbed, albeit fitfully, and woken to another dawn much the same as those of the past week.

Drawing in a deep breath and taking the whistling kettle off the heat, Hermione replied, "I'm not going back, Mum."

"I'm sorry, what was that? I didn't quite catch it." Emerging from the pantry with an arched eyebrow, her mum's response was tense and confused.

Shaking her head, Hermione repeated herself. "I quit. Things got… a little odd. It wasn't the right place for me."
"What in Merlin's name are you on about? They pay you like a queen!"

Hermione poured the hot water into two cups with a shrug. "I need something new. Don't worry; I'll start looking again soon."

"Hermione!"

The vitriol in her mother's voice made her spill the scalding water on her robes. A wordless spell and a flash of blue banished the water before it could burn her, but she glared up at her mother all the same. "Mum! What?"

Hermione was surprised to see her mother's hands visibly shaking as she reached for her tea. "Hermione Jean Granger. I did not raise you to be a quitter. I'm astonished that you would turn your back on an opportunity like this. And with such a… prestigious family."

"They're Death Eaters, Mum." It wasn't as though her mother didn't know who she was working for. Once the money had started coming in, Hermione had been less than cautious with the names of her employers, and anyone who hadn't been living in a cave for the past year knew who the Blacks were.

She took a nervous sip of her tea. "Yes, well… not all that unusual is it? Lots of… perfectly respectable witches and wizards were… a bit misguided during the war. And look how well they've treated you!"

Hermione's eyes widened. "You haven't the slightest idea how I've been living, Mum. Just because you've been getting money doesn't mean I've had an easy time of it."

"You look well, dear. Much better than you did at the Ministry!"

Hermione couldn't deny that much. She had been fed, clothed, healed… honestly, she had been treated better than she ever could have imagined by at least part of the household, and many of the more precarious situations in which she'd found herself were entirely of her own making. But she had been lied to, emotionally manipulated… She had been working for a woman who thought there was nothing more to Hermione than what could be bought with money, magic, and sex, and she wasn't ready to go back to that.

"They aren't good people, Mum. Let's leave it at that."

"I've been saving up, you know? To buy a house. A real one. Out in Mould-on-the-Wold."

"What?"

"Once your father passes… Well, I haven't got any reason to stay in the city, have I? It would be so nice… a quaint little wizarding village. Perfect place to… to retire. To get old."

Hermione was startled. "That sounds wonderful, Mum."

"It's going to be costly, dear. I'd never be able to afford it without the money you've been sending. As is, I've got almost enough for the mortgage in the next two months or so, but if the money stops coming in…"

"Are you trying to guilt me into going back?" Hermione whispered, unwilling to make it an accusation but unable to stop the words from spilling out.

"Hermione, I—" She set down her tea and reached for Hermione's hand. "—I just wish you would
reconsider. I even bought you a brand new set of housekeeping robes; cleansing charms in every stitch… you'd never even have to wash them."

As Hermione watched in silence, she bustled over to the closet and drew out a bag from Madam Malkin's. She pulled out the nondescript black robes and displayed them with pride, smiling insistently at her adopted daughter.

"Is that all you can see me in?" Hermione asked hoarsely. "Is that all you can see me doing, forever? Keeping house, cooking and cleaning?"

"Oh, of course not, dear!" her mother was quick to reply, but the cheery tone was thin and tinny. "It's just, well… you haven't exactly got the schooling for much else."

"Whose fault is that, then?" Hermione snapped. Seeing the hurt in her mother's eyes, however, she cringed, backtracking quickly. "You know I didn't mean that. I just… I need you to hear me, Mum. I need you to listen to me when I say that I can't go back there."

"But why, dear? You haven't told me a thing about them! Did you leave or… Did they let you go?"

"No, it's not that."

"What is it then, hmm? Talk to me. You've been quiet as a mouse since you got here; I don't know what to think."

Shuddering, not meeting her mother's eyes, Hermione allowed the most abstract of the betrayals she felt to spill from her lips. "The Blacks are… they're an old family. Set in their ways. Dangerous. Andromeda… Lucius… Bellatrix—they're predatory, the lot of them. There wasn't one minute when they saw me as a person. I was… a toy, a part of their games; I was something they could use against each other. From the very beginning, Mum, my life was on the line and I didn't even know it. There were things afoot in that house that I could never come to understand in a century, and if I figured out even a few of them, you'd never have seen me again."

"Oh, Hermione, dear, don't you think you're being… a bit dramatic?"

Hermione stared at her blankly.

"Of course they have secrets, dear. Everyone does. That hardly means they were going to kill you. Were you indiscreet?"

"Was I what?"

"Is that what's keeping you, hmm? Said something you shouldn't've?"

"No! This isn't about me at all! Have you not heard a word I've been saying?"

"I heard you, Hermione, I just can't understand why you would give up all this money on some silly whim. It isn't as if you haven't been around pure-bloods before. You know what those families are like. It can't be any worse than the Ministry."

Hermione's mouth hung open in shock. In that moment, Hermione hardly recognized the woman who raised her. After everything she'd said, all she seemed able to focus on was the apparently insurmountable idea that the money might run dry. "Actually, it can," Hermione choked out. "I know exactly what 'those families' are like and I know I don't want my life anywhere near them. Not anymore."
"It's not just about your life, Hermione!"

"No, of course not. It's never been, has it? It's never been about my life, from the first time you had me clean up after the customers to the day you wouldn't send me to Hogwarts… none of this has ever been about my life!" This time, the hurt in the eyes of a woman she'd come to see as her mother wasn't enough to stop her. "I've given every minute of my life to you! Every choice I've ever made has been to help you, to protect you, to support you, and I've never once regretted it. I never saw taking care of you as a duty or a chore… I did it because I care about you! But guess what, Mum; there's a limit, and this is it." Yanking her coat off the hook by the door, Hermione drew out the key to her small Gringotts vault. "Here! Take it. Take everything I've got and go buy yourself a house in the countryside to start your new life. But that's it. That's it until I've got a new job. I've worked myself near starvation for you and I'd do it again, but I won't… I won't prostitute myself for you like this. I won't take an emotional beating every time I make a choice in my life. I won't let your need steal my sanity."

Her mother's fingers closed around the key before she started to speak. "Hermione, I—"

"—I don't think there's anything else to say right now," Hermione cut her off, drawing her wand and batting colors around in her mind until she shaped enough magic to pull her belongings down the stairs and into her luggage. "I'm sure I'll be back. Sometime." She tugged the new cleaning robes from her mother's limp fingers and shoved them in with the rest of her clothes, yanking the zipper viciously closed by hand. "Give dad a kiss for me."

The door effectively cut off any further words that might have been said.

She stood on their landing for quite some time, suitcase in hand, peering down the alley in either direction as she tried to summon a semblance of a plan. To her right lay St. Mungo's and the surrounding Muggle business center, to her left, Diagon, and straight ahead, more of Muggle London. Clutching her cloak tightly against the winter chill and the stark landscape of her thoughts, Hermione turned left.

Diagon was quiet for a Thursday afternoon. A light snow had fallen on New Year's Eve, and despite the warmer days since, the rooftops were still dusted white. Without any real destination in mind, Hermione wandered along between the stores, remembering the many times she and the other Diagon urchins had been evicted from one shop or another for "making mischief." Pausing before Eeylops Owl Emporium, Hermione mused that, looking back, she knew the only mischief that sent her back to the curb while any number of other rowdy Hogwarts students continued to shop was the fact that she wasn't going to buy anything. Now, wrapped in the robes of any respectable adult witch of means, she could walk in uncontested, peruse the owls for a bit, and depart without a fuss. It was strange how surely her place in the world had been altered by just a few months on the Black estate.

The temptation proved too great, so Hermione allowed herself to wander in, smiling up into the crowded rafters where the uncaged birds preened for potential customers. Her smile faltered when she remembered the two animals she had left behind at the manor. Crookshanks… poor creature. She hoped the elves were taking good care of him. As for her owl… she'd never even named the cursed thing. Feeling the overwhelming ache of missed opportunities, Hermione stopped and flipped open a heavy tome she spotted on the shelves of owl care books. *The Everywizard's Guide to Naming Your Furred, Frog-like, or Feathered Friend.* Amused to find a page on names for venomous creatures, Hermione's lips quirked up at the description for the name "Venze."

*From the ancient Veceslav meaning "glory at any cost," Venze is the perfect brand for a familiar who will protect his master at any expense, even the destruction of others. Please note: Everywizard's does not endorse the ownership of venomous or otherwise potentially lethal pets.*
Her massive bird was hardly venomous, but Hermione thought with a smile that Bellatrix would more than likely approve of a self-important, dangerous name like that.

Shaking her head as though the physical motion could chase away her thoughts, Hermione couldn't believe she was feeling nostalgic enough that even an image of Bellatrix of all people could bring a smile to her face. Besides, she was never going to be able to name the bird now.

She returned quickly to the street, but no matter how far and how quickly she walked, her thoughts were never far behind.

So many windows… so many panes of glass to which she'd pressed her nose on numerous past occasions. Second Hand Books… Amanuensis Quills… Madam Primpernelle's… even Twilfitt and Tatting's, the most elite of the clothing stores in the alley, had borne more than one smudge from the envious stare of the Diagon children.

Farther down, well past Potage's Cauldron Shop and Wiseacre's Wizarding Equipment, sat their old inn. Hermione was mildly surprised to see the windows boarded up, the old sign hanging crooked from one rusted chain and plastered with demolition notices. Otherwise, it looked much the same, and Hermione couldn't resist creeping closer and peering through the slats. She quickly spotted the front desk with its tacky, kitschy forest scene carved into the wood paneling in the front. She had spent so many mornings there, curled up in the little space beneath the counter as her father handed out room keys and endless unsolicited advice to his customers. Too young to help out but too old for her mum to carry her around, she had been kept from being underfoot by a toy or two and the occasional mint her dad snuck from the complimentary bowl and down to her sticky, waiting fingers. It was their little secret from Mum.

She quickly retreated from the window when approaching footsteps made her nervous, but it was just a young couple, arm in arm, headed down towards the square. She noticed the advertisement box after their passing. Inside were flyers for the building to take the place of her last real home.

Coming Soon

The Leaky Cauldron. Second Locale.

Grand Opening – March 1st – Butterbeer: Open Tap! All You Can Drink!

Staring down at the flier in her hand, Hermione remembered her time working underage for this very pub. People who thought the Blacks were the dregs of society had clearly never spent five minutes behind a bar after midnight. Honestly, maybe that was why she was angry. Because, in so many ways, her mum was right. The Ministry, her last family, the pub… all of it had been infinitely worse than her time with the Blacks… it had just never been about her. None of those jobs had ever meant a thing to her. They were, just as her mum imagined, nothing more than a way to make a living. What she had with the Blacks… it was personal. The good and the bad. Even beyond her relationship with Andromeda, Hermione had felt like she had a place inside those walls. The quiet moments with Narcissa in the library, the effort she'd made to help the House-Elves warm up to her, the moment she'd held Bellatrix's scarred wrist… the time she'd spent inside her head… Every one of those fragile moments meant something to her, something more than a paycheck and her mum's approving half-smile.

Staring up at the inn, Hermione let the flyer be carried off by the breeze. She closed her eyes on her childhood, drew in a shuddering breath heavy with magic, and Apparated away.

Outside of the gate to Black Manor once again, Hermione found herself face-to-face with an equally
startled young man. "Who—"

"Who the hell are you?" he asked before she could articulate her own question. In a flash, each had their wands out, tension rising between their outstretched arms.

"Hermione Granger," she replied with all the authority she could muster. "I work here." At least, I hope I still do, her mind insisted on taunting her. "And you?"

The wand before her reluctantly lowered. "Draco Malfoy. I... lived here."

The moment the last name slipped between his lips, the familial resemblance struck Hermione like a physical blow. Slender build, stark, white-blond hair, cold grey eyes… he was a near perfect mirror of his mother.

Quickly lowering her wand, Hermione nodded in deference. "Sorry about that. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Likewise, I'm sure," he muttered dryly. Introductions out of the way, the young Malfoy no longer appeared interested in pleasantries. "Shall we?" He gestured at the gate and it swung wide.

With Narcissa's son waiting on her to walk through before him, it was too late for Hermione to back out. Straightening her spine and gathering her resolve, Hermione crossed the border onto pure-blood soil. As the gate clanged shut behind her, the sounds of nature faded away, leaving her once more on a path between acres of cursed land. She knew the why of it, now. She had so much more knowledge of the souls who lived within these walls. Still, as the pea gravel crunched beneath her feet and another set of footsteps echoed along behind her own, she couldn't help but wonder if she wasn't just as naïve as she'd been the first time, just as blind to the life she was looking to sign herself up for once again. Craning her neck up at to greet the looming face of the manor, lingering darkness in each iron-gilded window, Hermione knew she was walking back into the fire of her own free will, and she was very likely to be burned.

If it hadn't been for a fidgety Draco ringing the doorbell, Hermione wouldn't have even known there was one. She had always come and go as she pleased, the doors never failing to open for her since Andromeda had unlocked them in that skittering show of light.

Rather than opening by magic, it was Rommie who greeted them. "Young Master Malfoy! Madame Granger! Oh, the Mistress will be happy to see you indeed." She continued to half-utter words of relieved welcome as her tiny figure ushered them down the hallway. "Come, come!"

Hermione's pulse began beating faster and faster the farther she went into the darkened hall, and realizing the direction in which she was being led did nothing to calm her nerves. That was the door to Andromeda's study, to the walls which had contained her every magical mishap of the past months, and to the room where she thought she had begun falling in love.

Hanging back as the door swung aside, Hermione had a moment to breathe a relieved sigh at the white-blond hair she found within before all hell broke loose.

"Draco!"

Before Hermione even had time to catch Narcissa's attention, Draco had pushed his way through the doors and slammed his hand down on the desk. "Dammit, Mum, what the hell were you thinking?"

Rising to greet her son's apparent fury, a steely-eyed Narcissa was quick to reply, "Is that any way to greet me?"
"You cut me off!"

"Draco, I—"

"You cut me off, Mother!"

"I need your help, Draco. Your father and I have—"

"This is not the way to get my attention. And besides, you need more help than I could ever give you," Draco pushed through her words, tone dry, insolent, and bitterly cynical.

At that moment, Narcissa's cold stare connected with Hermione's frightened one across her son's shoulder. "Hermione?" she whispered, eyebrows rising. She was apparently far more startled to see the young witch than she was to see her estranged son. "You've come back? You're back?"

It was Draco's turn to spare a confused look, staring back and forth between his mother and Hermione, clearly not understanding what was happening.

Hermione didn't want to interrupt whatever was taking place between the two of them, but she had been asked a direct questions. "I am," she squeaked out. Clearing her throat, she added, "If you'll have me, that is."

A heavy breath fled Narcissa's lungs and her spine visibly relaxed. "Oh, thank Merlin."

"What is this, Mother? What's going on?"

Narcissa had the good nature to look chagrined. "A different answer to my… dilemma." The weight of the combined stares of mother and son made Hermione squirm. "Of course I'll have you." Her voice hardened for a moment as she added, "Though it would have been infinitely preferable if you'd come two days ago as I asked."

Hermione looked down. "I'm sorry. I—"

Before Hermione could come up with any semblance of an explanation for her absence, Draco cut her off. "What the hell is going on here?"

Narcissa quickly crossed around the desk and placed a restraining hand on her son's shoulder. "Draco—"

He shrugged her off.

"I'm sorry. I would never actually… I didn't know any other way to get you here. If you'd just give me an address… if you'd stop sending back my letters…"

Draco shook his head. "I have no idea what you want from me, Mother. I never have. And I certainly can't imagine why you're still here after all this time if you're so desperate to see me."

Darting a glance towards Hermione that the younger witch couldn't begin to read, Narcissa tried to interrupt her son once again. "Draco, you know why I can't—"

"No, Mum, I haven't the slightest idea why you do or don't do anything!" He, too, gave Hermione a side-eyed look. "What's she got to do with cutting me off from the family accounts? Can you at least answer that for me?"

Looking visibly uncomfortable, Narcissa shook her head. "It isn't like that, Draco. I'll put you back in the records tomorrow, but if I could just… if you'd be willing to stay just a few days—"
Shaking his head in exasperation, Draco pushed past Hermione and out the door, but turned back to say, "More secrets. Just what I wanted to hear." His fingers drummed anxiously along the handle of his wand. "I need that money, Mum. I'm getting engaged... hopefully this month. I haven't got time to spend one more minute here than I have to. I'm not letting your nonsense mess up my life any more than it already has."

"Engaged? To... ah, to the Greengrass girl, I'd imagine." There was a stunning lack of emotion in Narcissa's voice. "I'll go to Gringotts in the morning. Just... stay the night, please? There are so many things we should—"

"I'll stay in London for the night. If you don't come after me, we can have tea in Diagon before I go. Like civilized folk."

With no further goodbyes, he spun off down the corridor, leaving Hermione fidgeting aimlessly in the doorway. Seeing the trembling in Narcissa's fingers as she clutched the edge of the desk, Hermione had a feeling she might need a few moments alone. "I... I'll just go put my things upstairs."

There was no reply, so Hermione closed the door quietly and started away down the hall. As she followed a few steps behind Narcissa's son, the sound of something breaking echoed from within the study. Ahead of her, Draco flinched and paused. "I don't suppose you'll tell me what's going on, then?"

Catching up and falling into step beside the young Malfoy, Hermione shook her head. "If only I knew."

"You too, then?" he snorted, turning to face her as they walked. "They've been playing their games with you, too, I suppose? My family's gone absolutely mad since the war, if they weren't half-gone already."

Not usually one prone to ill words about her employers, Hermione couldn't help a wry smile from appearing on her lips. "They certainly have their secrets."

He laughed, then, and it wasn't quite as bitter as it could have been. "I'd say 'get out while you can,' but from the sound of it you've already tried." They had reached the entryway and paused in silent accord, both knowing they had two different paths to tread with their next steps. "It's amazing how good my mum and her sisters are at getting their claws in people."

Thinking of her first weeks with Andromeda and Narcissa's latest meddling, Hermione was more than inclined to agree. "Are all pure-blood families like this?" she muttered to herself.

Draco gave a real laugh, then. "Honestly, all pure-blood families might as well be literally the same, and I'm not just talking about secrets."

Hermione was surprised to hear such self-deprecating humor from a member of the same family as the ever-proud Narcissa Malfoy and the bitingly pure-blood-supremacist Bellatrix Black.

He sighed. "Still, it's family, and I'd say a touch better than the rest of the rabble." He spared Hermione a closer glance, then shrugged. "No offense."

Ah yes, there it was; still the rabble. "None taken."

They stood for a moment in silent understanding, both lost in their many memories of the other witches and wizard standing somewhere under this self-same roof, but a closing door somewhere over their heads started Draco in motion once again. "Yes, well... I'd better be off. Don't really fancy
seeing my father tonight." He started away, and then paused, turning back. "It was good meeting you. Whoever the hell you are."

Hermione nodded, smiling. "Good luck with—" She almost said all of the madness, but paused, remembering just how surely the walls here had ears. "—the engagement."

He smirked, clearly hearing exactly what had gone unsaid. "Thanks." He cast a glance down the hallway where they had left his mother. "You too."

Hermione made dinner to hide from her thoughts. The house-elves were a welcome distraction, happily chasing a hissing Crookshanks into the kitchen for a furry reunion. Hermione surprised herself when holding the ugly beast in her arms brought a few tears, and she realized just how much she hadn't been ready to give all this up. She needed time; time to come to terms with the fact that her decision to Apparate here had been anything but spur-of-the-moment. Hermione often felt spontaneous, but she'd come to realize it was less impulse and more her brain's inability to catch up with her intuition. Her common sense had been fighting tooth and nail these past few days to pick the safe life, to stay with her mum and hunt down a new job, but some deeper part of her had been whispering coward in her ear, and Hermione had been many things in her life, but never that.

So much for hiding from her thoughts.

Narcissa drew her out of her physical hiding place as soon as the meal was ready. She came into the kitchen with a box of cereal hanging limply from her hand and it wasn't until she had pulled out a bowl that she noticed the room's other occupant and the pot over the fire. She was quite startled that Hermione had made a meal already, but she didn't waste long in gratitude before insisting the younger witch come and eat with her in the study.

She spared a few words of explanation as they walked. "Andromeda has fallen behind on our usual duties to the Ministry this week, so I've been filling in, but I don't know my way around our mother's study nearly as well as my sister did. I've got fifteen more things to do tonight before I'll be able to turn in, but I absolutely must talk with you. Join me."

It was a daunting invitation and a command Hermione could hardly disobey, so she found herself seated at the familiar dark-stained desk, staring at the candlelight reflected in the two dark windows to the outside world and the absolute disaster of paperwork spread from wall to wall.

"So," Narcissa started, taking the seat Hermione had long thought of as Andromeda's. "You decided to come back after all."

Now that Narcissa had gotten over her initial astonishment, Hermione was unsurprised to receive a colder welcome.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting, ma'am." Hermione didn't really know what else to say in explanation. She didn't even have one to offer herself. There were too many feelings about this place and these people bouncing around between her ears for any hope of a coherent response. "I... it had been a long time since I saw my family. It took me some time to remember... what everything is like."

Narcissa offered a wan smile. "Yes, well. While it would have been infinitely preferable if you'd come two days ago, I'm not interested in your life story. I'm prepared to let bygones be bygones."

Hermione bit her lip. "I'm sorry if I made things tense between you and your son, too. I didn't mean to turn up in the middle of... all that."

"Things between me and my son are neither your concern nor your doing."
Hermione flinched at the ice in her tone.

"Besides, some miracle notwithstanding, he'll be gone again tomorrow," Narcissa added, voice distant but not as harsh. For a moment, Hermione felt as though the other witch had forgotten she was in the room. "At least I've managed to get you back, anyway," she added, staring directly at Hermione in that piercing way all three sisters had. It was especially uncanny coming from Narcissa's pale eyes, and even more so knowing the power that rested in that mind. Hermione shivered, recalling each of the times any one of the sisters' magic had been inside of her. As confident as she was becoming in her own power, next to these three, Hermione supposed she would always feel small.

"I'm going to need your help with something," Narcissa added when the silence between them had stretched too thin.

Hermione waited for elaboration but nothing was offered.

"With what, ma'am?"

"Narcissa. Please."

"Narcissa," Hermione whispered. It was beginning to feel surreal, seeing the youngest sister sit where Andromeda had always sat, asking things of her, coaxing her to once again use a given name rather than a reflexive title of respect… When she had first come here, she never would have imagined this sort of conversation with the cold, distant woman she had first been so intimidated by at her arrival.

"I don't need it now," Narcissa continued, as though the little change in address had never interrupted their conversation. "It can't happen yet. You need to talk to Andromeda first."

Hermione flinched, unable to keep her reaction to that name from being a visceral one.

"None of that," Narcissa scolded, but her tone was gentle. "I didn't bring you back here just to have you and my sister tiptoeing around each other for months. I have my own theories about the things each of my sisters have said to each other and to you, but I'm hardly the one you need to hear them from."

Reluctantly, Hermione nodded, accepting that it would be impossible to exist here without having some interaction with her first lover. It was nothing but wishful denial to imagine otherwise. "I'll talk to her."

Narcissa's stare seemed to weigh her words and find them wanting. "You'll give her a chance to explain?"

"Yes." It was the only word she could spare that wouldn't devolve into frightened anger at the thought of just how that explanation might go.

"And you will figure out where your… relationship stands," Narcissa added pointedly.

"It's over," Hermione blurted out, unsure how that could even be in question.

The corner of Narcissa's mouth twitched up into a strained smile. "You say that now, but my sister may have other ideas."

Hermione shook her head. "She can keep them to herself."
For a heartbeat, Hermione's frank words seemed to startle the witch across from her, but when the surprise passed, that thin smile spread into something more real. "I'd forgotten the fire you have."

Hermione looked down, embarrassed to have lost her temper. The only other times Narcissa had seen her "fire" had been in conversations over literature, not over her sister.

"Don't get coy now," Narcissa muttered, then sighed, shaking her head. "It's been a long day, hasn't it? I'm going to be up another few hours, but there's no reason one of us shouldn't get some rest. Go. Get settled. We'll talk again tomorrow." As she rose and escorted Hermione back to the door, she added, "I'll be gone most of the morning, so there's no need to fix me breakfast, and steer clear of the third floor. That being said, I expect you to have spoken with 'Dromeda by the time I return."

"I'll do that," Hermione said, trying to keep her voice steady. Inside, every inch of her was crawling to get far, far away before she ever needed to come face-to-face with that woman—teacher, lover—again.

As she trudged up the stairs to her waiting bed, apparently untouched since her departure, Hermione wasn't sure where all that courage that had spurred her return had gone. Something in the empty halls had sucked it back out of her, and it was all she could do to curl up beneath the covers and try to let warmth chase out the fear.

*What in Merlin's name am I doing back here again?*
Chapter 15

Hermione seriously contemplated how hard it would be to avoid both Andromeda and Bellatrix for the indefinite future, but Narcissa was… intimidating, to say the least, so sunup saw her reluctantly knocking at the middle sister's door with breakfast.

"No more cereal!"

Hermione blinked in confusion at a reply she could not possibly have expected. "Excuse me?"

"I'll eat when there's some actual bloody food in this house again, Cissa!"

When the context of those words finally clicked for Hermione, not even her nerves and lingering resentment could keep a small smile from flitting across her face. It was nice to know at least her cooking was irreplaceable.

"It's not Narcissa," Hermione said softly. Unsure if she'd been heard, she added, "It's Hermione."

Silence lingered behind the door, too long for comfort, but eventually the soft padding of bare feet approached. The door creaked open just a sliver, catching on the lock chain with just enough light leaking through to illuminate Andromeda's eye. "Hermione?"

Hermione fidgeted. "I've brought breakfast. Not cereal. Oatmeal. Well, I guess that's still cereal, technically, but it's hot, and it's got brown sugar, and…" She trailed off, catching herself mid-ramble. "And we need to talk."

The door shut just long enough for the latch to slide free. "You're back?" Andromeda murmured as it swung wide. She must have just risen, her silken night gown hanging askew from one shoulder, tangled hair a fright. The dark circles under her eyes were as pronounced as the first time Hermione had seen her that day in the Ministry lift, but there was no hint of sleep within them. She stared at the younger witch as though seeing a ghost.

"Yes," Hermione replied, thrusting out the tray of oatmeal when Andromeda's hand started rising, crossing the invisible threshold from her room as though to touch the younger woman's face. As Andromeda was forced to take the tray, Hermione added, "Sort of. I think so. But not… not for you." In her attempt to clarify, she knew she was unnecessarily harsh, but she couldn't spend this conversation dealing with any lingering ideas Andromeda might have about where things stood between them. "Nar—Lady Malfoy told me to give you a chance to explain, and, well… she hasn't lied to me yet, as far as I can tell. So here I am."

Andromeda stared at her sadly. "You're so cold when you're angry." She turned, ushering the other witch into the room. Setting down the tray on her bedside table, she turned to face Hermione once more. The younger witch had paused just inside. "I'm afraid if I say I've missed you, you'll… turn into ice or something." She tried to close the gap between them, but Hermione shook her head, striking out on a determined path to the chair in the far corner. "Hermione, please, at least look at me."

Hermione wasn't ready for this, to see the hurt in Andromeda's eyes. The other woman was right about one thing… Hermione was cold. The walls she had put up to push through this were almost certainly made of ice, and she was afraid Andromeda had enough fire to melt them with a touch, enough force to shatter them with her words. She wasn't ready to let out any of what was hiding behind them, not the full force of her anger, and certainly not forgiveness.
Andromeda wasn't ready to give in. She crossed the room with determined steps, kneeling down before Hermione and staring directly at her. "I won't talk to someone who can't see the truth in my eyes," she insisted. "We'd just be going in circles."

Hermione's nails dug into the skin of her palms as she dropped her gaze to Andromeda's hands rather than her face. She needed to gather what she was feeling. It was too close to the surface here, in the room where they shared their first kiss. She needed to see the woman who lied to her, the one who had been scheming for months without telling her anything, not the one she'd been growing to love.

"Hermione."

One hand moved to her knee, fine-boned fingers pale against her robes and warm through them. Hermione studied it. It was a hand she had thought she could trust. She had trusted it with teaching, first, then with healing… eventually with her body. She shook her head and it withdrew, obeying her unspoken request, and in that moment, Hermione decided to trust her one more time.

The moment their eyes met, Andromeda began to speak. "I don't want to lose you, Hermione."

Hermione shook her head. "That's not what we're talking about."

"But—"

"—No. Anything you have to say right now about… us… it's only going to make things worse. Please, just… don't push me on this right now."

Andromeda closed her eyes, hanging her head, letting out a low breath clumsy with misery. It was the first sound Hermione had heard from the woman completely lacking in her impossible poise, and she felt the ache of it deep in her chest. Clinging tightly to her righteous anger, she pushed back the sudden urge to cry.

"Fine. You want me to talk about Bella? I'll talk about Bella." She looked up again. "Let me tell you about Bellatrix Black."

She rose, suddenly towering over the seated Hermione. "To understand what I am about to tell you, you need to understand some of my history. For Blacks, and for Slytherins, family has always come first. Yes, it is often born of misguided blood supremacy, but by the time we are old enough to recognize it, it is more about… trust. When someone has proven themselves worthy of our trust, has shown that they will help us on the path of our ambitions, our dreams… they have earned our loyalty, our love. It takes quite a bit to break that.

"My sister… she has always protected me and Cissa. Our parents were… not the sort to earn any awards for kindness. Bella gave so much of herself so Cissa and I could have a more normal childhood. She ate up every word our parents fed her about blood purity and allegiance to a greater, darker power to the point that she had gorged herself on so many lies she was sick with it and there was little left for us. Narcissa clung on to the scraps with everything she had, not because she wanted the life my parents promised us, but because she idolized Bella. Bella was always the strong one, the smart one… Cissa was so busy trying to keep up with her that she didn't notice… didn't see how Bella was changing. I was the only one who was watching her as she started to become the mad one instead.

"When she was married off, she couldn't be around as often, but she still did her best to keep us safe and improve the family name, but I had become incredibly disillusioned with my family's entitled cruelty. While Bella had earned my trust and loyalty, my family never had, and I was next in line for a husband, so I left. I ran."
Andromeda paused. "My sister sees that as the ultimate betrayal. Bellatrix thinks... my leaving the
family... she thought I didn't trust her to keep guiding my life. She thought I was leaving her. She
doesn't understand that it was self-preservation and the insight she had given me into my own life
that drove me out, not her. Since then, I... I thought I must be seen as the ultimate evil in her eyes;
the deserter, the coward, the betrayer. Now... now I'm not so sure. Now I wonder if she hasn't spent
the last decades of her life thinking that she was the one to break my trust, that she did something
wrong, and I've been part of some twisted scheme to try and recreate our old bond, to reunite the
family. Despite everything you've seen... Bella has been kind since she's been here. Cooperative.
Manipulative, of course, but not defiant. She's been courting the old connection the three of us used
to have and... you were getting in the way. Still, I've been starting to see her as... as human again,
rather than as a nightmare.

"I stopped wanting my sister dead a long time ago, Hermione, and I'd like to think you've known me
long enough to know I'm not a killer."

Andromeda's words had been steady, her gaze distant but intent, as though focused on a past
Hermione could hardly imagine, her words serving as a direct line between the Black family's history
and Hermione's ears. Despite herself, Hermione was fascinated, but she wasn't convinced of
anything. It was all very vague, and very much rooted in the distant past rather than anything she had
experienced since living here. "What is that even supposed to mean?" she asked. "You said just days
ago that you still wanted her gone, out of your life!"

"Gone, Hermione, yes," she insisted, gripping the younger woman's wrist. "Not dead."

Pulling back sharply and rising, putting the chair firmly between herself and the other witch,
Hermione shook her head. "Stop playing word games."

A flash of impatience darted over Andromeda's features, Hermione's continued rejection finally
hitting a nerve. "It took a while, I'll admit that, but these past few months with you, I realized I could
never be a killer... not in this life, not in cold blood... not like that. All I wanted was to start a life
with you. I... A part of me still hates her, but not enough to compromise everything I am. Realizing
that... it changed my intentions, but not my drive. I need her gone, Hermione; I need my own life
back. I crave... normalcy, more than anything else."

Hermione's defensive posture had begun to relax with Andromeda's words. Everything she'd said
earlier had felt rehearsed, staged. This felt more authentic, but all the more dangerous for it. It was as
though Andromeda had traded roles, leaving her teacher persona behind with the history lesson and
turning into her lover instead. It triggered the easy feelings of intimacy they had shared, feeding
Hermione's more trusting instincts despite her determination to take everything Andromeda said with
a grain of salt.

"And Bella... Bella deserves a second chance."

Hermione's eyes widened. "What?"

"She does. Or a first, honestly. I'm not sure she ever even had that much. Living with her these past
months... I've learned a lot about myself and very little about her, but enough to know that the only
person who can and should decide the fate of Bellatrix Black is, well, is her. I've cast so many
judgments... she's committed so many crimes... but she's always come back to me, to Cissa." A wry
smile crossed her lips. "Hell, in some ways she even brought you into my life. I want to see if she
could have that. If she could live a normal life. Maybe she'll go out and get herself killed but...
maybe she won't, and what I realized, that first day with you, working with your magic... you can
do something no one else can, something the Ministry would never imagine, never expect."
Andromeda took a deep breath before she added, "You could set her free."

Hermione was shaking her head, every moment she had survived at the hands of the eldest sister flashing behind her eyes, but Andromeda wasn't seeing her denial. Instead, her eyes brightened, her voice lifted, and the teacher inside of her seemed to emerge again.

"Your magic is so unique! The level you've been working at already is simply indescribable. Unbound magic is more than just a different way to perform the spells the whole wizarding world uses. If we go to the source, if I help you start manipulating the power itself, you could change everything."

Still shocked by Andromeda's revelation, Hermione was nonetheless slowly beginning to wrap her mind around what she was saying. "Raw magic," she whispered, connecting yet another few dots of unanswered question together in her mind.

Andromeda's smile widened. "Yes! Precisely! I've had limited success with it myself, very limited, and even Minerva's barely scratched the surface of its potential, but with someone like you, why, you could change the very essence of magic. You could—"

"—Get rid of the Ministry's restrictions on you sister, is that what you want?" Hermione asked, shaking her head once again.

"Yes! Well, no, not exactly. They'd know if you tampered with those. But you could do something far more subtle. You could change her."

"I don't think I want to hear any more about this," Hermione insisted, starting to inch her way out from behind the chair and towards the doorway, but Andromeda didn't seem to hear her.

"You could alter her magic right at the source! All of the Ministry's legal magic, from what they've done to my sister to the Trace, it only works because we've all got a completely unique magical signature. These spells are keyed to it, designed to restrict or allow access to any given magic based entirely on the idea that our individual magic is immutable, unchanging, unaffected by illness or injury… But it's still just magic, and if it's magic, we can control it. With just a little more work, you might be able to—" Andromeda stopped midsentence, finally seeming to notice just how far around the room Hermione had progressed. "What are you doing?"

"Getting out of here," she whispered, stepping up to the door. "This is insanity."

Andromeda's expression darkened. With a quick wave of her wand, Hermione heard the lock turn behind her. "I'm not mad, Hermione."

Trying to dispel her nerves as the older witch approached, Hermione shook her head again. "Whether or not you've lost your mind is beside the point. This plan of yours is insanity."

"You still don't believe me?" Andromeda asked, drawing ever closer.

"Oh, I believe you alright," Hermione muttered with a strangled laugh. "You've answered quite a number of my questions today. That, however, doesn't mean I would ever agree to any of this. Your sister shouldn't be set loose in the world. Ever."

A quick burst of Hermione's magic unlocked the door, and for a moment she was too startled at her success to open it, but when Andromeda looked like she would protest Hermione's words, she quickly stepped out into the hallway.

"You're running away again," Andromeda whispered. As suddenly as she had turned angry,
everything about her suddenly spoke of raw pain, as though Hermione's actions were physically hurting her. Hermione shook her head, finally seeing how easily Andromeda could manipulate the emotions of those around her.

"No, I'm not, actually. I'm just… leaving while things are still civilized." When Andromeda's hand caught the door before it could close, Hermione huffed in exasperation. "What did you expect, Andy?" She hardly even noticed herself falling back on the name she had once only called her in rare, intimate moments. "Your sister has hurt me. More than a handful of times. I'm just a servant, anyway; I don't mean anything at all to her. Imagine what she'd do to the people who put her here! To the ones who bound her magic! Look. I believe you. I even believe you about your past. I guess I can see why, after everything you three have been through, you might want her to have another chance, because clearly that's something you've been trying to get for yourself for… decades. But even if my magic could do this, I'm not like you. I'm not ready to risk any number of lives on the off chance your sister could fit into the world without killing anyone else."

"Listen to the Mudblood, Andy dear."

Both Andromeda and Hermione jumped as Bellatrix emerged from the shadows at the other end of the hall. When Hermione caught sight of Crookshanks perched nonchalantly on Bellatrix's shoulder, clearly leaving orange fur on her dark cloak, her eyes widened. "Traitor," she muttered under her breath. Hermione could have sworn the little beast heard her as his ears perked up and twitched. When Bellatrix approached the other two women, however, the cat made a hasty getaway towards the kitchen.

"You know how I feel about meddling, muddy fingers getting anywhere near my magic!" Bellatrix hissed, stepping alarmingly close to Hermione and breathing the words against the side of her face. "You should heed her advice and leave it alone."

Confronted with the sister she'd been most actively hoping to avoid, Hermione found herself distinctly more curious than scared. "You knew about this?" Hermione asked. "You knew about this plan all along?"

Bellatrix shrugged, ignoring Andromeda's wand emerging from the doorway to point at her heart. "Sure thing, pet."

Hermione let out an exasperated laugh, startling both of the Black sisters from the staring contest they were engaged in over her head. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised that you lied to me, too. Or that you were both keeping this from me."

Bellatrix shook her head. "Ah-ah, not me, dearie!" Her sing-song tone was entirely too perky for Hermione's level of annoyance.

"You said she still wanted to kill you!" Hermione insisted, meeting the eldest sister's stare head-on. If today was the day of confrontations and clearing the air, she might as well make the most of it.

"Ooh," Bellatrix murmured. "Little Mudblood's a lot more fearless with my Andy at her back, hmm?"

Hermione was honestly surprised Andromeda had allowed their conversation to continue this long, but when she met the middle sister's eyes, she found them darting back and forth between Bellatrix and Hermione in confusion. Blinking, Hermione realized this was the first time Andromeda had seen them interact like this since her unsanctioned visits to the third floor, the first time she'd heard Bellatrix's taunting pet names, witnessed their strange, dangerous banter. Hermione had almost forgotten that the sisters weren't the only ones who had been… keeping secrets.
"I didn't lie to anybody," Bellatrix continued with a chuckle, ignoring the tension rising between the other two women. "You honestly think you can go playing around in another witch's magic and she won't end up dead?" Bellatrix's voice rose to a violent squawk by the last word and she shook her head. "Answer's no, pet. There's a reason there are sides of magic we don't mess with. Your dirty magic wreaking havoc inside me is just as much a death sentence as if Andy finished me with her wand right now," she hissed, punctuating each of the final words with a small, taunting step towards her sister, ending up with Andromeda's wand pressing into the skin directly over her heart, exposed by the almost indecent cut of the black corset she wore.

Andromeda's hand was shaking.

Questions dripped off of Bellatrix's lips one by one, slow and thick as molasses. "Well, what's it gonna be, hmm? Is today the day you finally snap? Ready to give up the pretense? Why wait? Why depend on your little house-elf lover to off me, hmm?" In a flash, she reached up and grabbed hold of Andromeda's arm, digging the wand tip even more viciously into her own flesh. "Why don't you just finish it already!" she shouted, eyes suddenly wild.

Andromeda jerked back, pulling into her room and slamming the door. Hermione heard the distinct sound of a fist slamming into it from the inside before all went deadly silent, and Hermione was left in the hallway with Bellatrix Black.

Bellatrix didn't spare her so much as a glance. She stared at the closed door until her breathing slowed, then dragged a hand through her tangled curls as her breath shuddered out between clenched teeth. Hermione watched in astonishment as the witch struggled to regain her composure, a look of abject misery darting across her face as her eyes closed for a lingering moment. Hermione really didn't want to be there when the other witch remembered she wasn't alone.

In the end, it didn't matter. Bellatrix turned and disappeared the same way she had come without saying a single word to the younger witch, leaving Hermione once more standing alone in the halls of Black Manor, wondering yet again at innumerable ways in which these three women could continue to confuse her.

It was going to take hours to sort through whether or not she was coming away from this particular confrontation with answers... or just more questions.
Though Hermione tried to make a quick getaway to her chambers after preparing lunch, Narcissa found her there only moments after she’d settled at her desk to eat. The sure, perfectly timed set of three knocks was quite unlike anything Andromeda would have used to demand entrance, so Hermione could have guessed who her visitor was even if she hadn’t been expecting the youngest sister. As it was, she knew Narcissa would want to know what had occurred this morning and probably wouldn’t tolerate waiting. Hermione just wished she had more time to figure that out for herself.

"Come in!" she called, trying to keep the reluctance and emotional exhaustion out of her voice.

Narcissa looked, if possible, even more downtrodden than Hermione felt. She was wrapped in some sort of fur, and despite the clearly expensive material, it gave the witch the appearance of being curled up dejectedly in a fluffy blanket. Her bearing was as rigid as ever, but dark circles stood out more prominently beneath her eyes than Hermione had ever seen, and her steps were heavy as she entered the room.

Hermione offered a hesitant greeting. "Good afternoon?"
Narcissa drew in a breath as though to answer, then let it out slowly. She shook her head and finally muttered, "Hopefully better than this morning, anyway."

At her look of faint embarrassment over speaking so frankly, Hermione attempted a tentative response. "I take it your son has left again?" She asked the question partially out of genuine interest, genuine sympathy, but partially to keep the focus off of herself as long as possible.

Narcissa's lips pursed. "He has." She paced over to the frame of Hermione's bed and stopped there in an odd parody of where the average witch might relax. She stood just beside the bedpost but did not lean against it, continuing to carry every bit of her own weight. "Enough of that. How did everything go this morning?"

Hermione looked away. "I don't really know. It… it went?"

"It went?"

"I did what you asked, anyway. I talked to Andromeda."

Hermione tried to pull together a semblance of what had taken place that morning.

"And?" Narcissa prompted, clearly a bit impatient.

"Well… you were right. About a lot of things. Andromeda doesn't really want Bellatrix dead. She wants… something much more complicated and quite possibly more daft than I could have imagined." Hermione curled her shoulders in protectively. "You were also right that she… she didn't have quite the same idea of where we left our… relationship." She glanced up to gauge Narcissa's reaction, wondering if she needed to elaborate. An arched eyebrow drew another few reluctant words. "I've made it as clear as I can that we're through, though."

"No second thoughts?" Narcissa asked, question entirely devoid of emotion.

Hermione held back a self-deprecating snort. Of course there were second thoughts. And third, and fourth… every moment with Andromeda eating away at her resolve even as it was also strengthened. Not to mention how entirely surreal it was to be talking about this with her ex-lover's younger sister. "None," was all she allowed herself to reply.

Narcissa's response was a curt nod. "And this plan? I've had a feeling my sister had something up her sleeve for months now, but the two of us don't exactly talk on a regular basis. I've come close to… digging… a few times, but there is one trust I've never breached with either of them, so, aside from a few stray things I wasn't able to ignore, I've left their thoughts their own."

"Well I'm glad I wasn't the only one entirely out of the loop." She paused, trying to put the things Andromeda had said to her into some semblance of order. "I'm not even sure I'm going to explain this very well—" she muttered, "—but I'll do my best."

From the number of slow, contemplative nods she received throughout her recollection of the morning's conversation, it made at least some degree of sense to Narcissa. She was sure she was doing a terrible job of it, jumping right into the middle of the whole disaster by explaining that Andromeda actually wanted to set Bellatrix loose on the world, but she didn't feel comfortable explaining Andromeda's view of their childhood to another of the sisters who had lived it. When she mentioned the role her magic was supposed to play, Narcissa looked as though everything had come together in her mind, muttering under her breath, "I wondered why she never would stop talking about you as some sort of magical prodigy."

Hermione couldn't keep her lips from twitching into a little smile at that. She had to admit, despite
everything, she was proud of how quickly she had been learning. The smile slipped when she realized those days were likely behind her. "Yes, well… That's why."

Finally, she recounted Bellatrix's parting… intervention, though she wasn't entirely sure she understood all that had happened in those dangerous moments between the two older sisters. "Honestly, I don't understand why Andromeda could possibly think this is a good idea! Bellatrix doesn't even want it! She—" Hermione shuddered as she remembered the fierce, suicidal anger she had witnessed between the two witches. "She'd literally rather die than have me touch her magic."

Slowly, Narcissa shook her head. "I have a feeling that's not exactly true," she murmured. Pulling in the fur closer about her shoulders, she paced slowly towards the door. "I want a drink. Walk with me."

Hermione followed nervously as Narcissa led them into the kitchen. A wave of her wand unlatched the uppermost cabinet and—to Hermione's astonishment—popped out the side of it as well. Another quick motion summoned a slender bottle of something golden and shimmering from the hidden nook, and Narcissa caught hold of it with a smile. "Honeysuckle wine," she explained, summoning two glasses and popping the cork. "Quite possibly the rarest wizarding liquor in the world." She handed Hermione a glass despite her incoherent protests at the imagined cost. "We'll both need it tonight."

Clutching her fine-stemmed glass in the same hand as her wand and the bottle in the other, Narcissa proceeded to guide them to the library. As she settled into the familiar chair, Hermione realized just how much she had missed this place. The wall-to-wall press of books seemed to eat away at her nerves and confusion, and when she took a tentative sip of the golden drink in her hand, the delicate, heady flavor burst across her tongue as though she were drinking the dappled sunlight of a spring morning, and for that fleeting moment, she felt entirely carefree for the first time in her remembered life.

Narcissa was giving her one of those not-quite-smiles, the one that seemed simultaneously indulgent and calculating. "Divine, isn't it?"

Hermione could only nod in wonder.

For a moment, the two witches sat in silence, but Hermione couldn't forget her cryptic words. "You… you had something to say? About Bellatrix?"

"I did. I do. I… you didn't know my sister before the war."

Hermione's eyes widened. Was she really about to receive a second history of Bellatrix Black? Twice in one day? Apparently so.

"My sister has been possessive as long as I've known her, but she hasn't always been… mad. She gave every bit of herself to keep my sister and I safe when we were children, even going so far as to marry the worst of our suitors. Sometimes I… I can only imagine how betrayed she must have felt when 'Dromeda turned around and absconded with a Muggle-born. I was married off, Andromeda was gone, and Bellatrix was left with no one to protect, married to that monster for nothing."

Narcissa sighed, taking a long, slow drink. "You're not… wrong, Hermione. It would be near insanity to turn Bella out into the world, to leave her to her own devices, but I do think my sister means well. 'Dromeda owes Bellatrix the sort of debt one can never really pay off. Though I'm astonished any part of her has managed to forgive her for Nymphadora's death… those two have always played games I steered well clear of. I've been watching them these past months. Bella hasn't been fighting her fate nearly as hard as she could be. She's toying with the both of us, but mostly Andromeda, because living here… it's giving her a chance to work her way back into our lives, but
it's also giving Bella so many chances to… to torture her."

Between thoughts, Narcissa's glass had already been refilled twice, while Hermione had scarcely touched half of hers. The more Narcissa drank, the faster the words spilled from her lips. "I honestly believe Bella has been getting her revenge on 'Dromeda before… bringing her back into the fold, as it were. You were a distraction, an inconvenience to her, but also yet another place she could twist the knife. That's why I don't think… it isn't about her not wanting you to change her magic. Well, perhaps a bit, but it's more… she doesn't want to leave. She wants things to go back to just the way they were when we were children. She can't seem to help herself, my mad sister, from causing as much pain as she can manage without tearing us apart forever." The wine in Narcissa's glass was shaking. "Not to mention how cruelly close a parallel you are to that idiot Tonks boy. That being said… I can see why 'Dromeda wants her gone. I think part of her might be genuine, might honestly believe she's taking the moral high ground here, giving Bella a second chance—" A small, bitter sound curled up from somewhere deep in her chest before she added, "—but the rest of her just wants the satisfaction of seeing Bella destroy herself completely."

Hermione was more than startled by this revelation. Not only was Narcissa offering her a second glance into their past which closely mirrored Andromeda's own words, but she was also offering an—admittedly drunken—insight into Andromeda's role in all of this. Despite the dark finale to her words, Hermione found the most prominent thoughts in her mind were… sympathetic ones. The more time she spent with these three women, the more she realized how glad she was to have been spared this sort of upbringing. The hints of the atrocities the Black sisters had lived seemed to far outweigh the cruelties of her particular experience with poverty. Recalling the small moment of violence Hermione had seen their father inflict on Bellatrix in her memory, imagining that multiplied and spread across at least seventeen years of her life… it was Hermione's turn for her glass to tremble. For the first time, Hermione felt tempted to consider Andromeda's plan, but it was a fleeting thought, the sort of temptation one might give into when offered a chance to nurse an injured baby bird back to health, not the sort one gave into when confronted by a full-grown dragon with a broken wing. If there was anything left in Bellatrix Black worth saving, it would take more than anything Hermione was willing to offer. She liked her limbs intact, thank you very much.

Narcissa had continued to drink through Hermione's silence. "I can practically see the wheels turning in your head, girl," she murmured.

Hermione blinked at how slow and dark Narcissa's voice had become. It took a moment to realize that the other witch was… well… drunk.

"I'm just… piecing things together, ma'am," she offered, finding herself more nervous now that alcohol had been added to the unpredictable nature of this particular witch.

Narcissa's eyes narrowed. "If you're still calling me that, you haven't had enough to drink." She topped off Hermione's glass with astonishing grace considering her level of intoxication.

Hermione didn't resist. Aside from Narcissa being quite right about needing it for the conversation, this particular drink was… indescribable. She had experienced her fair share of wizarding and Muggle brews alike in her days at the Leaky Cauldron, but this was something else entirely. It tasted impossibly sweet, impossibly light, yet she could already feel it going to her head after only half a glass. She could scarcely imagine how one could ever make any significant quantity of this… It so closely mirrored the remarkable taste of the dew drops she and the other children had often painstakingly drank one by one from the flowered vines scattered about Diagon, but how one could possibly bottle such a thing… Hermione shook her head and allowed herself to bask in the honeyed heat slipping so easily down her throat without imagining the labor or cost.
As she drank, she felt the day finally settling in her mind. It wasn't nearly as pleasant as the drink. "I... You were right to make me talk to her," Hermione started, cautiously allowing some of what she was feeling to be spoken aloud. "And... and thank you for... what you've just told me. But this? This sort of thing is exactly why I left! I... I'm nothing in these games the two of them play. I've been manipulated, betrayed, used—" Hermione's words were gathering power, gathering anger to cover her brittle fear. "—why did I come back?" Her voice cracked at the end of the question.

Narcissa quickly reached over and took Hermione's glass from her dangerously clenched fist, setting both of their drinks on the bookshelf behind her chair.

"Because I asked you to," she answered simply.

Hermione blinked. "Oh. Right." She'd almost forgotten that day in Flourish and Blotts. Her escape home felt incredibly distant after everything that had transpired in the past forty-eight hours. "You did. Why?" She tried to return to a semblance of civility, but she had a feeling her gradually increasing level of intoxication left her sounding frightened and needy at best.

Narcissa smiled, and while there was a startling pain lingering behind her usually icy stare, the smile felt real. "I have... a proposition for you," she said, her tone something Hermione couldn't begin to identify. "You need a distraction... and I need a scandal."
Chapter 16

It took quite some time for Hermione to convince her heavy eyelids to lift and she regretted it instantly once they did. The light lanced directly into her skull and set it pounding, sparking to life the memory of just how much "liquid sunlight" she had swallowed down last night. Was that a second bottle she recalled being summoned from the kitchen?

Hermione groaned and gave up on keeping her eyes open. Her thoughts didn't help with the headache. How far gone must she have been to have agreed to this?

Clawing her way into full wakefulness as she kicked away the sheets, Hermione dragged herself upright and tried to convince herself that the floor was still just as flat as it had been when she went to sleep. It seemed awfully far away.

She finally managed to put on robes and persuade herself that making breakfast was something she could handle… right up until she stubbed her toe on something, tripped, and went sprawling across the floorboards. Groaning again, she scooped up the book which had ended her brief moment of competence when her foot had decided to make friends with the only object on her floor. *Handfast: The Complete Guide to Pure-blood Marriage Ceremonies.*

Hermione shivered as she remembered Narcissa's voice last night. Even when Hermione expected anger, there had been nothing but an empty, emotionless winter behind her words. Her shiver turned into a flinch when she remembered her own earnest reaction to the elder witch as she agreed to do whatever it took to help her. The memories were surreal. The whole evening felt like drowning, drowning in Narcissa's miserable past and her beautiful, delicate, seductive wine and her cold, brilliant, beautiful voice and now that she was sober again, Hermione wished she could rewind those hours and never take the first sip, because there was no way any of those thoughts would even exist in her mind if she hadn't been thoroughly under the influence.

"I'm sure you've managed to figure out some of the … situation between Lucius and myself."

"I've actually been trying not to, ma'am."


Too bad, indeed. Any illusions Hermione had of maintaining her plausible deniability when it came to the inner workings of the Malfoy marriage had been thoroughly shattered by Narcissa's lengthy explanation. Staring down at the book in her hands, Hermione remembered Narcissa's lack of patience with her somewhat drunken inquiries.

"How much do you know about pure-blood wizarding marriage traditions?"

"I didn't realize there were different traditions at all, if that's any sign. What sort of traditions?"

"I haven't the time to teach you hundreds of years of binding and ownership history, but sufficed to say, pure-blood marriages of my generation tend to be a bit more complicated than whatever modern nonsense you're imagining. There are a number of side effects to a handfasting bond, but the one which affects us now is the simplest; it is essentially permanent. Moreover, I can't end it alone. It requires both parties involved as well as the head of each bloodline. Lucius does not wish our marriage to end. He finds it convenient. I do not."

When Narcissa's words had triggered Hermione's curiosity as well as her sympathy, the witch had tossed her two books, both of which Hermione vaguely recognized from various encounters she'd
had with Narcissa and literature. Hermione had devoured the smaller in its entirety the evening before in a semi-drunk haze, flipping pages in horror as she learned some of the other things which came with the type of marriage Narcissa had described. These ceremonies were brutally outdated, deeply rooted in a not-so-distant past of blatant misogyny and magical male supremacy. Most likely, the two were betrothed before they had even met, promised to each other by their families well before they were of age. The ceremony probably took place on the new moon closest to the wife's eighteenth birthday; though there were a few other acceptable dates, Hermione couldn't imagine the Blacks would allow any but the most traditional.

The particulars of the ceremony… the ritual bloodletting, the dark magic, the Dementor witness… all these momentary atrocities paled in comparison to the aftereffects of such a bond. It forged a link between husband and wife, but it was a distinctly less than equal one. While designed to ensure longevity, fidelity, honesty, and increased access to magical potential, the bond allowed the husband all sorts of liberties. These spells dated back to a very particular era, an era where "female passions" were seen as the root of all evil in failed marriage. Courtesy of the bond, the wife would be unable to experience strong feelings towards anyone but her husband and her blood kin. Through the emotional bond the handfasting so forcibly crafted, secondary violations could occur. The wife's magic could be drawn upon at will, her physical location detected, and, perhaps most dangerously, her emotions could be subtly influenced.

Narcissa was as thoroughly caged as Bellatrix.

It had been dreadful to read, especially written in a text so clearly supportive of such traditions.

It was interesting, now Hermione thought about it, that none of these limitations had come up last evening. Her discussion of the issue had been… removed. Practical. Impersonal.

"I attained a Muggle annulment of my marriage quite easily, as well as a legal separation of our non-wizarding property and the wealth that was mine by birthright, but as for undoing the initial handfast, I must get Lucius's consent. He has no interest in losing face through public divorce. He is already under house arrest. As of this moment, I don't think he can imagine anything worse than the humiliation of the world knowing I left him. I can prove otherwise."

Now that Hermione thought about it, the emotional component of the bond designed to keep the wife complacent was entirely absent from their words the night before. Though she hadn't even noticed in her distinctly less than able-minded state, something clicked now that morning and sobriety had arrived. Hermione had certainly seen no sign of emotional manipulation on Lucius's part… could this be a deliberate act of sabotage? Could Narcissa have worked out a way to circumvent the bond? She was a powerful Occlumens after all. Could her own emotional distance be part of something bigger? Could her brutal grip on every aspect of her life have allowed her some agency within the darker aspects of their marriage?

There were still so many unanswered questions, and though Hermione stared down at the second book in her hands for a long moment, she knew breakfast would have to come before any further investigation. It wouldn't do to forget the job she was being paid for in favor of the strange, voluntary one she'd taken on last night.

Of course, the moment her hands were occupied with the familiar tasks of chopping vegetables and scrambling eggs, her mind was free to wander back to the remainder of the evening, the last dregs of the second bottle of wine, and just how Narcissa intended to prove Lucius wrong.

"I think my solution could be … mutually beneficial. You need something to keep your mind off of Andromeda: something more than cooking and cleaning and hiding away in your chambers. I need him gone. You and I… we're going to start a… a relationship of sorts. If we throw ourselves into the
public eye, into the press, well… I highly doubt Lucius will still consider divorce the greatest of evils if he instead has to contend with the public believing I'm sleeping around behind his back. With you."

Hermione had sat in stunned, drunken silence throughout Narcissa's words, nodding blindly over her rapidly re-emptying glass despite her complete and utter confusion. Eventually, the word relationship had slipped through the fog and she had indignantly asked, "Excuse me?"

Narcissa's words, however, were shockingly persuasive. In the moment, Hermione had thought them entirely impossible to find fault with. Now, she really wished she had thought to at least ask for a bit of time to think the idea through, especially considering the remainder of Narcissa's explanation.

"Now, please don't be insulted, but you're absolutely perfect for this. Not only are you a woman, Hermione, but you're a Mudblood. You're young, you're lower-class, you're everything my vein of society looks down upon. If anything will make my husband reevaluate his life decisions… There's nothing that could more thoroughly crush his fragile image than if the entire wizarding world believes he's been cuckolded by someone like you. I couldn't care less about my reputation; I want my freedom. The moment I'm free of this farce of a marriage, I'll be able to get away from this place, petition the Ministry to let me out of the country, go fix everything with Draco in France."

She hadn't even thought to ask what all this little arrangement would entail. She had been far more concerned with the quiet, subtle agony in Narcissa's voice, the pain which she couldn't hide quite so well once she was a bottle in. Now, in the kitchen, Hermione's stirring grew more aggressive through the slowly boiling water as she remembered the string of insults that marked her qualifications for this job as Narcissa Malfoy's fake lover. In the end, though, she had asked exactly one question, and it had changed everything.

"Of course! Of course I'll help! Only, why me? Why not… someone else, someone before?"

"Because I've come to trust you, Hermione Granger, and trust is something that does not come easily to me."

Those few precious words—faint slurring and all—were the only bit of the evening that still tempted her. The rest was a blur of wine, confession, and confusion, but hearing Narcissa declare her trust, knowing she'd just been given more honesty in those strange, drunken words than in all the time she'd spent with Andromeda… that meant something to her. Well, that and one other thing. Having a chance to make Lucius's life a bit more miserable after what he'd done to her, to both of them… that was revenge that would taste sweet indeed.

Narcissa found her in the Library shortly after lunch had been delivered. Hermione heard her enter, now easily able to pick out the near silent footfalls of the youngest Black. She felt eyes on her as she continued to clean at the foot of the nearest ladder, but she did not turn, wanting to give the other witch time to decide how this interaction would progress.

To her surprise, her silence was met with tentative speech.

"Do you think me weak, then, Hermione? To have stayed with him all this time, to have let the bond between us trap me all these years?"

Of all the things Hermione might have imagined pressing on Narcissa's mind after the prior evening, that was hardly the top of the list.

"I'm sure you're asking yourself all sorts of questions. Did I do nothing but read and research all this
time? Why didn't I run? Why not give up everything and put enough distance between us that… Well… I've hardly confronted my own life to this very day. Was I a coward?"

Narcissa's voice trembled on the last words and Hermione quickly dropped her stack of books, crossing to the other woman. "No," she whispered. "Not at all. In fact I—I think you must be the strongest person I've ever met."

Narcissa gave a bitter laugh. "I've no idea what that means anymore. All I want—" She pressed two fingers to each temple, as if to try and squeeze out the pain of the past decades. "—is to be done with this. I'm not even searching for something anymore. At one time, it was safety; another, freedom. Now, I have no idea what I'll want when I break through to the other side but… I want what I'm living now to end, and I need you to do that."

"My answer hasn't changed since last night," Hermione answered, wrapping her arms around her own stomach to suppress the urge she had to offer some sort of physical comfort to the ever stoic woman before her. "I'll do whatever you need. I'm still not sure I understand, but I'll do it."

Narcissa nodded, lifting her gaze to finally meet Hermione's. "Good."

"But," Hermione whispered, digging her nails into her upper arms out of sheer nerves, "I do have questions."

"Ask."

In silent accord, the two witches assumed their usual seats, not quite facing each other, but angled enough to pass words with ease. "I… I started reading the books you gave me."

A quick smile flitted across Narcissa's lips. "Of course you did."

Hermione looked away, unable to meet the eerie intimacy of her gaze. After last night, something had shifted, and Hermione wasn't sure whether or not it was for the better. "I- I'm still… I'm curious about the emotional bond."

Narcissa nodded slowly. "I thought as much."

Though Hermione hoped that would be all the prompting needed, Narcissa seemed disinclined to answer yet. "You don't seem… influenced," Hermione added. "I've seen you attack him with magic, which, according to everything I've read—"

Narcissa held up a hand, cutting her short. "If you are even asking, you've more than likely figured most of it out. I was trained in Occlumency and Legilimancy from a very young age, and living with Bellatrix offered me numerous opportunities to perfect my craft. Not only is the handfasting bond outdated, but it severely underestimates the education of a modern witch."

Narcissa was playing with her wand as she spoke, and it was the first time Hermione could recall seeing her fidget. The motion sparked an odd sensation of déjà vu. Bellatrix, Hermione suddenly realized. Bellatrix twirled her wand in almost the exact same way.

"My sister helped me prepare. Bellatrix always believed that having unfettered access to our own magic was key to our survival and success in the first war."

"Bellatrix was bound as well?" Hermione interjected. The idea hadn't even occurred to her until now.

"Was she bound?" Narcissa echoed with a weak, despairing laugh. "The eldest? The one most
responsible for creating an heir? Of course she was bound, and it certainly didn't help the matter of her sanity. My sister resisted the bond by… embracing her madness. I resisted it by rejecting everything I've ever felt."

Hermione couldn't turn away, could scarcely even stand to blink. Narcissa seemed almost to glow in this moment, lit from within by a cold fire of pure, empty, silent rage, an anger that never slipped into her words or her actions, but which must have been denied and crushed and missing from inside of her for decades.

"Bellatrix overwhelmed her husband's pitiful capacity for human emotion. She took everything around her and pulled it into herself, filling to the brim with more love and anger and pain than any one human could hold until Rodolphus could scarcely stand to brush the surface. She is most herself again after moments of pure, furious release, especially torture or murder, when everything comes exploding out of her in a burst of unadulterated rage…" Narcissa paused as a shudder wracked her shoulders. "…but enough of her. I've done quite the opposite. I let everything go. I've put a great distance between myself and my emotion. All emotion. It has been… surprisingly successful."

"That's awful," Hermione whispered. "I'm so… I'm so sorry."

Narcissa shivered, closing her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, it was as though Hermione's apology had been shaken off of her as easily as droplets of water. "Yes, well, it was better than the alternative. Believe me, I know. Once Draco arrived I… I couldn't not love him. The first seventeen years of his life I… let down my guard. I've regretted it every moment since. I never would have allowed his father to… Well, it's in the past. I allowed my son to put my plans on hold for long enough. It ends here."

Hermione was silent for a long time, piecing together Narcissa's words to paint a picture of her life. She tried to imagine what the other witch had gone through. The years leading up to Draco's birth, entirely isolated from any emotional connection, any passion, and caring, any love… Then a son… She could only imagine how impossible it would be to remain emotionally distant from your own child. To go from emotional solitude to emotional manipulation over the course of only a few months… how had she ever come back again?

"So… if there's so much as a crack, if you feel anything, anything at all, he—your husband—he can…?"

"Well, no, not exactly. Back then, it was… different. Lucius has long since given up searching for a way into my mind and my magic on any sort of regular basis. He would have to be actively attempting to draw on my power or locate me when I let down my guard, and I have been particularly unforgiving towards his attempts ever since the Dark Lord fell, but I do not take chances. Without my magic, Lucius never could have survived the Dark Lord's disfavor. I brought us through the war. I will have my due."

Narcissa's voice was filled with haughty ice in that moment, her eyes flashing with pride. Hermione couldn't help but stare. She was far more put-together than Hermione would have expected after the night they'd both had, her figure boasting the sort of finery Hermione had grown accustomed to, but would never be able to fully comprehend. Draped in robes of a pale sage, cinched tight about the waist but only just clinging to her shoulders, Narcissa was the image a fey queen, ruler of some dying forest, disgraced but unbroken, determined to reclaim her failing realm. Hermione was drawn to her power and pride even as she was frightened of the deadly winter chill that accompanied her everywhere she went.

"You certainly will," Hermione murmured under her breath, unable to imagine a future where the woman who—according to Andromeda—had defied He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named not once, but
twice, wouldn't utterly destroy any later obstacle that dared stand in her way. "When do we start?"

Narcissa's gaze focused once again. "Immediately. Or, as close to it as we can manage. As much as I would prefer diving out into the eye of the press this very moment and ending it once and for all, you aren't ready."

"I'm not ready?" Hermione echoed, genuinely confused.

"No. You aren't comfortable with me. You still bow your head when I walk into a room. You visibly defer to me when we speak. I'm still not convinced you won't call me 'ma'am' at an inopportune moment, and that is not the sort of publicity I need. This must seem authentic, Ms. Granger."

Hermione straightened in her chair, hearing the wisdom in Narcissa's words even as she cringed to realize this might be more difficult than she thought. "You'd better stop calling me Ms. Granger, then," she finally said, trying not to shrink away from the Lady Malfoy's arched eyebrow at being corrected.

When Hermione didn't back down, a slow smile of pleasant surprise graced Narcissa's lips. "I suppose I'd better not, darling."

Hermione swallowed thickly. Oh. So that was how this was going to be. Only now, hearing that word drip off of Narcissa's lips in a thick, honeyed tone she'd never before been privy to, did the ramifications of playing at courtship with Narcissa Malfoy truly begin to sink in. She was too good at this. The youngest Black had been seducing the world since before Hermione had even come into it. She needed to remember she was the bait, not the prey. This could be hazardous to her health.

Needing time to collect herself and her thoughts, Hermione retreated to her chambers for the afternoon, promising to join Narcissa again for dinner. She sat at her desk in silence for nearly a quarter of an hour, not really thinking on their conversation so much as on her complete lack of control over this situation. She had just agreed to take part in a plan entirely not of her making, and with no guarantee the outcome would be in any way to her benefit. It was not a place she enjoyed being, but at least she was aware of the game this time.

To distract herself, she decided it was time to write her mum a letter.

She lingered over the greeting for many minutes, pen poised over the parchment until a little ink blot had formed from her indecision. In the end, she finally skipped niceties and dove in.

I thought you would be glad to know I've come back to the estate. I've resumed my position with the Black family, though in a slightly altered context. If I were you, I wouldn't concern myself with the papers for the next while. Things here have changed a bit.

I presume you are in the process of buying your new house; please return my Gringotts key at the earliest convenience. Money should continue to arrive.

I hope you are well.

Hermione

It was the closest tone Hermione could summon to civil. She was still not feeling particularly charitable about her mum's insistence that she take up this job again, but in the end, here she was, and it was still her mum. Maybe she really would be happier living somewhere else. Only time would tell.
Hermione got a bit lost as she hunted for the small owlery she knew to be somewhere on this floor, but she eventually found the secluded, glass-walled room and the birds who dwelled within it.

"Hello again, little nightmare bird," Hermione murmured softly as she approached the feathered monstrosity from Bellatrix. "Do you remember me?"

An answering yawn was her only greeting, and those gaping jaws did not appear particularly friendly.

"I picked out a name for you when I was gone," she continued to talk quietly as she drew closer, keeping a nervous eye on that deadly beak. "Venze. It has to do with glory. Or venom. Both. Do you like it?" As she carefully secured the letter to Venze's leg, a warning trill echoed through the air, but she was able to pull back without injury. "I'm going to take that as a 'yes.'"

She opened the window, and both bird and letter were gone.

Crookshanks had snuck in while she wasn't paying attention, and his attempt at looking innocent while side-eying the smallest owl in the room wasn't working. Hermione scooped him up despite his half-hearted whine of protest. Snagging the other book Narcissa had loaned her the night before from her room, she plopped both herself and her monster cat down on the windowsill of the second floor landing. She hadn't felt any particular desire to lurk here since she first met Bellatrix, but it had been a comfortable little nook all the same.

This second text, *Wizarding Marriage through the Ages*, was less painful to read than the first. It was longer, spanning a great deal of history and including the traditions of a wide range of wizarding cultures, but the content addressed in the handfasting chapters was narrow and factual. Thankfully, it was also the opposite of encouraging. Where the other text had clearly been designed to promote such a bond, this text was dismissive at best, insisting that none of the things such rituals were designed to encourage could ever actually grow from a nonconsensual union.

It also further explored the emotional component of the magic, explaining the various pathways through which one witch or wizard could access the power of another. Using emotions—a volatile source of magic at best—to create such a connection was generally frowned upon, due to the undesirable effects on both parties involved. Though some wizards and witches throughout the ages had chosen to willingly bind together their abilities, attempting an equal partnership nearly always resulted in madness, volatility, and death. The only reason the pure-blood tradition had remained successful was due to the enforced subordination of one partner.

Hermione shivered. No wonder Bellatrix had lost some degree of sanity. Hermione could picture that witch subordinate to no one.

In the end, the most curious information she discovered was something Narcissa had mentioned, but only in passing. *To void a traditional pure-blood marriage contract, the head of each family line must be present.* This clause was historically invoked to promote unity between the most high-ranking families, as political marriage was often the result of prior conflict.

Hermione wondered what this meant for Narcissa. For the plan. For her.

Narcissa did not allow her to serve dinner. Prepare it, of course; she was still being paid to work here after all, but Narcissa was treating this meal as a rehearsal dinner of sorts, and rehearsing for a fake date might yet be the most peculiar situation Hermione had ever found herself in.

Rommie shooed her from the kitchen the moment she had finished cooking, insisting Narcissa would
meet her in the dining room. The grand space was dimly lit when she entered through the kitchen, the only light spilling from the smaller chandelier over the less massive table off to the side. Narcissa sat alone, her back to the kitchen doors, but she rose when she heard Hermione's entrance, turning and piercing the younger witch with a stare she could not read. Hermione fidgeted across the room, unsure how to proceed.

She had felt unsure all day; unsure of her place in the household, unsure of her ability to play this role convincingly, unsure even what she should wear tonight. Her nerves had landed her in the same dress she had worn on her first date with Andromeda, which somehow felt both strange and fitting. Next to Narcissa's ever regal attire—a fitted, wrap-around silver garment which seemed designed to leave the observer in a perpetual state of curiosity as to whether it was designed to be a coat or a dress, and whether the thick linen concealed anything beneath it at all—still left Hermione feeling distinctly underdressed regardless.

Narcissa's arched eyebrow wasn't helping. Hermione looked down, half wondering if she had spilled something, only to realize she was still wearing the apron she had been cooking in. Flushing crimson, she reached up to untie the neck and tug it away, balling it up and gesturing nervously towards the kitchen before scurrying away to hang it back where it belonged. As the door swung shut behind her, Hermione could have sworn she heard a faint chuckle, and when she reentered, there was a small smile playing on Narcissa's lips. "Much better," she said. "Though we will have to... update your wardrobe before any of this goes too far. Nothing personal."

Hermione approached the table. "I thought... isn't my, well, status part of the image?"

Narcissa nodded as Hermione sat across from her, nervously eying the pristine, embroidered tablecloth that had emerged for this odd occasion. "It is, but I trust the tabloids to do their homework in that respect. They can discover your upbringing through research rather than attire."

"Research?" Hermione echoed, suddenly more nervous than before. "They won't... What about my family? My mother... she doesn't deserve to be harassed by the press. If she—"

"I will protect your mother to my fullest capability."

"How?" Hermione insisted, realizing there was more at stake in this than her mere peace of mind and reputation.

"If anything gets out of hand, I can toss a libel suit their way... or buy the newspaper, if I really must, though I would rather avoid that particular responsibility. Anyone involved in direct action against you or your family can be guaranteed a lifetime bussing tables in a Muggle diner."

Hermione bit her lip to contain a startled laugh. She was inclined to believe the cold determination that glinted in Narcissa's eyes. "I—well then. Hopefully none of that will be necessary but... thank you all the same."

"I have power. I use it when I must." Narcissa dismissed her thanks with a wave of her hand. As she did, the house-elves arrived with food. It was a bit surreal for Hermione, being presented the coconut rice and stuffed peppers she had thrown together as though it deserved these fancy platters and showy arrangement. Still, she had always enjoyed her own cooking, and the light of the chandelier and the ethereal splendor of the woman across from her somehow leant the meal a fragile ambiance of something far more extravagant than it was.

"Tell me about yourself," Narcissa prompted as she cut into one of the peppers. After taking a small bite, she added, "Aside from the fact that you are an excellent cook, of course."
Hermione felt herself blush at the unexpected compliment. The change in Narcissa's tone and manner was unnerving, though Hermione could still sense an underlying distance in her words. There was a prompting, curious smile on her lips, but Hermione could sense the strain behind it. It slowly occurred to her that she was now interacting with a character of sorts, the role Narcissa had perfected to engage with the rest of society while keeping her true emotions carefully under wraps. At this point, Hermione realized she had two choices: constantly analyze how genuine any of Narcissa's words or actions could be, or choose to take each illusion of emotion at face value.

"Thank you," she finally replied, allowing herself a bite as well. If Narcissa could falsify emotional engagement she did not feel, then the least Hermione could do was to attempt the same. "I—there isn't all that much to tell. You know my history, you've seen my recent past, and you, well… you are my present."

Narcissa looked startled for a moment, her fork paused partway to her mouth. "That is one way to put it, I suppose," she mused. "Though not strictly true. I know very little of your history, other than the bare details Andromeda shared of your background in magic." She paused, then leaned forward. "And what sort of literature you've seemed to enjoy. You grew up in Diagon, correct?"

Hermione blinked, caught off guard by the reference to their time in the library together, but she recovered quickly. "Yes. Just on the edge, actually. My adoptive family ran an inn there."

"Anywhere I might have stayed?"

Hermione shook her head. "It was a clean place, not the dregs of the down, but hardly high-society."

"I'm sure you have quite a few stories, then. Any particularly interesting guests?" That intense, unwavering curiosity remained fixed on Narcissa's face, and part of Hermione was tempted to believe it was all real, that the older witch was genuinely interested in her childhood, but another part of her insisted this was the first time Narcissa had paid her past more than a moment's notice, and it was all simply part of establishing a relationship they otherwise would never have.

Still, Hermione allowed herself to get lost in the telling, recounting one man's insistence that their "Complimentary Owl Housing!" advertisement meant they had to house his flying alligator as well. The faint light of surprised amusement in Narcissa's eyes was astonishingly… satisfying.

By the time the house-elves returned to take away their plates and bring out Narcissa's requested fruit for desert, Hermione was pleasantly surprised to find herself far more comfortable across this particular table than she had been when she first entered. At a lull in her own distinct babbling, she realized Narcissa had been doing this on purpose, drawing out her words until she felt safe speaking freely with her employer. "I'm sorry. I've been going on and on…" she murmured as Narcissa picked up a knife and began intricately slicing the large, green fruit that had been placed at the center of the table. "What is that?"

Narcissa glanced up at her, pausing the motions of the knife. "You've never had mango?"

"That's a mango? I've only had it dried, before."

Narcissa spared her an indulgent smile as she resumed her motions. "It is much better fresh. You're in for a treat."

After another few cuts, Narcissa carefully handed half of the fruit over to Hermione, leaving the other half and the bit around the massive seed behind on the plate. The younger witch blinked down at the gridlines cut into the fruit in confusion. Picking up her spoon, she stabbed it into one of the slice lines ineffectively. "How do I…?" she gestured to the oddly cut fruit.
Narcissa chuckled, reaching across and gently stealing back the mango half. "Sorry. I should have done this first." In a deft motion, she pressed the green skin on the outside upwards, turning the little dome inside-out and leaving perfect cubes of glistening orange flesh sticking up on the outside, ideally exposed to the edge of a spoon. "Just like this," she added, taking her own silverware and scooping off one of the bites.

When Narcissa rested her elbow on the tabletop and extended her arm towards Hermione, the younger woman could only blink for a moment in surprise. Then, the spoon was just there, waiting in front of her mouth, and she reflexively accepted the proffered cube, wrapping her lips around metal and mango alike. The fruit was wonderful, bursting across her taste buds in a tangy dance of sweet and rich and teasingly bitter that in no way compared to the dried version she had tried before. Narcissa offered her one more bite off the end of her spoon before passing back the inverted delight and leaving a mildly stunned Hermione to her own devices. Once they had each finished their halves, Narcissa offered her the seed.

"It can really be the best part," she insisted, sliding the plate closer. "There's plenty of fruit there; it just isn't possible to cut closely around the seed."

"How can I even eat it, then?" Hermione asked, eyeing the juice already staining the plate. "Without making a mess, that is."

"Oh, you don't," Narcissa replied, and when Hermione looked up, there was a devious glint in her eye. "Let us just say if there is one moment in which it is not possible to be a lady, it is when eating around a mango seed. Go ahead. Enjoy."

With those pale, calculating eyes peering at her so intensely over such casual, light words, Hermione could do nothing but obey. Daring to pick up the dripping flesh between her thumbs and forefingers, she nearly dropped the slippery seed. After an almost disastrous first bite, she got the hang of it, and Narcissa was quite right. Despite the juice running down her chin and staking its sticky claim on her fingers, this little bit of culinary heaven was quite worth the mess, as well as the faint embarrassment of having the Lady Malfoy's eyes on her as she ate.

When she finished, carefully bringing the napkin in her lap up to her face instead, Narcissa offered her a knowing look. "Tell me I was right."

Hermione nodded. "Absolutely."

They adjoined to the library again after the meal, Hermione following a pace behind Narcissa's determined, practiced stride like a nervous puppy. That entire meal had been nothing she imagined it would be, and she didn't know if she was doing well in the eyes of the youngest Black or making a total fool of herself. When Narcissa proceeded to turn her seat to face Hermione's head-on, a rush of icy anxiety raced through her veins.

"I think that went well."

Hermione let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. "It did? I mean, I thought it did, but… I'm still a little confused. What was that? I… what are we practicing, exactly?"

Narcissa arched one fine eyebrow. "I wouldn't call this practice, Hermione. This is… acclimation. Changing roles. I need you to see me as… as a peer, at the very least, and if you feel odd about being paid for it, you could consider yourself a personal assistant, with the emphasis on the personal. Someone you would choose to spend time with. Someone who you wouldn't be frightened of pursuing, of being pursued by. To an outsider, this needs to look authentic, so between us, I need
you comfortable around me, if not a little… tempted."

Hermione felt her cheeks flushing again. This particular tone continued to be incredibly surreal to the younger witch. She had grown used to Andromeda's gentle, insistent flirtation, but this chillingly matter-of-fact explanation interspersed with pseudo-pursuit was something else entirely. "I'm not frightened of you," she insisted.

Narcissa's icy stare pierced right through her. "Of course not," she drawled.

Hermione shivered, and she knew the older woman saw it. "Should I be?" she whispered, lacing her fingers together tightly in her hap.

Her tentative question seemed to startle Narcissa, and a frown slipped into place for a moment. As quickly as it had come, it was gone, replaced by the same mild disinterest that had characterized most of Hermione's interactions with her up to this point. "Hardly," she replied. In the next breath, she changed the subject. "Have you been working on your Patronus?"

Caught off guard, Hermione stammered out her reply. "I—No. I haven't thought about it since… the day you explained it to me." Hermione had almost forgotten about that day, her loaded inquiry into the nature of the Patronus and her own incorporeal first success. She was surprised Narcissa remembered.

"Would you care to try again?"

Hermione blinked. "I—Yes! I mean, of course, but I don't even have my wand on me. I left it in my chambers. Nowhere to carry it in this dress."

Narcissa's eyes widened. "You don't have your wand?"

"N-no?" Hermione answered, unsure why Narcissa sounded so shocked.

Slowly, a strangled laugh overtook the startled look on her face. "You have led a different life. Go ahead; bring it here. I know I am not the teacher my sister is, but this at least is one skill I can offer."

Hermione obeyed the command, hustling upstairs. As she went, she considered Narcissa's words. You have led a different life. Hermione knew that much was true, but it took her half of flight of stairs to understand the context. When she did, she nearly tripped, realizing that in Narcissa's life, her wand must always be her first line of defense, her protection, her safety. Hermione had never considered it as such. She was never taught enough combative spells to make a difference. Now, even after Andromeda had broadened her knowledge of magic to include them, she didn't think her wand… necessary. Not every moment, and certainly not for dinner with Narcissa. Then again, in this household… it would probably be a good habit to get into.

On her way back down, Hermione froze on the stairs, catching sight of dark hair hurrying around the corner towards her in a flurry of heavy cloak and a clatter of heels. For a moment, the shadowy corridor played tricks, painting the figure in the darker shades of the eldest sister, but when she passed by without seeing Hermione above her, the younger witch realized it was actually Andromeda, and she was on her way to the door. A cold draft drifted in as she went out, leaving Hermione's heart racing and her skin prickling with goose bumps. She slid into a crouch on the stair, placing her head between her knees. This was not okay. She could not feel like she averted a crisis every time had a near encounter with Bellatrix or Andromeda.

She forced herself to rise and continue back to the library, but when she entered, she paused just inside the door.
"Does… Have you told Andromeda what we're doing?" she asked softly.

Narcissa turned in her chair to face her. "Not yet, but I will speak with her soon, before it progresses too far. Why do you ask?"

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. It was one thing to establish the full extent of the end of her relationship with the middle Black, but it would have been entirely another to try and explain this new, strange relationship with her sister. "You will? I saw her leaving just now and… I panicked a bit."

As Hermione returned to her seat, Narcissa nodded. "She has a part to play as well, unfortunately. While Lucius is the head of the Malfoy line which negates the necessity of any further involvement from his family, the head of mine is technically Bellatrix. However, Andromeda has legal rights over our eldest sister. I'm not sure whether that sets her as the true head of the Black line in relation to this spell or whether she will just need to tell Bella to cooperate, but I do not believe she will grudge me this. She knows my situation and she has always been… supportive, if distant."

At least one of Hermione's lingering questions had been answered. "She'll know it isn't… real, right?" she stammered, unsure how else to phrase that particular inquiry.

"Yes. I planned to give everything between you two a few days to settle, but I will speak to her when there is an opportune moment."

Hermione supposed that was the best she could ask for.

As their attentions turned towards casting a Patronus instead, all thoughts of Andromeda fled her mind, replaced a few moments later by dejected annoyance. "Why won't it work?" she muttered, dropping her wand in exasperation after her fifth attempt. No matter how many times she brought to mind the memory from her last session, not so much as a glimmer of silver appeared at the tip of her wand. "I did it last time!"

Narcissa's gaze was measuring. "The same memory?"

"Yes," Hermione answered curtly.

"You don't sound particularly happy about that."

Hermione blinked. "I—well it didn't work. Of course I'm not particularly happy."

"Has the memory… changed?"

Hermione shook her head, but even as she denied it, she realized Narcissa could be right. The last time she had used this memory, her mum's pride and happiness over the idea of her fake promotion at the Ministry, it had been a recollection of… family, of love. Now, the memory was tainted with the knowledge that her mother had never really believed her capable of anything more than a basic desk job or housekeeping, and the knowledge that her money was less disposable than her happiness. Slowly, the motion of her head turned into a nod instead. "A bit."

"Is it no longer a pleasant one?"

Hermione turned aside, startled to find herself on the brink of tears. "No," she whispered, swallowing thickly. "Not really."

Narcissa reached over and placed a hand on Hermione's knee, squeezing gently. "I'm not going to ask, but if you would like to—"
"—I feel like I don't have a family anymore!" Hermione blurted out, then shook her head, biting her tongue.

"I know your father recently passed away," Narcissa offered into the weighty silence. "I don't think I ever offered my condolences."

"My father? N-no, my parents died when I was a child. That isn't what I meant, I—"

Narcissa's eyes slowly closed as Hermione's voice faded. "Oh. I thought—I thought you knew."

Hermione's eyes widened and her heart began to race. "My father? Are you—What are you saying?"

Narcissa couldn't meet her eyes. "I received the last of his medical bills the day after you returned. I thought that was part of why you… came when you did. I thought he might have been in your Patronus memory."

"My dad's dead?" Hermione's voice was strangled, disbelieving. "N-no, my mum would have… she wouldn't just…" Hermione kept shaking her head, her mouth opening and closing even with no sound passing her lips. Even knowing this was coming, knowing he had only days to live, she never thought, she never imagined she wouldn't know. "How could she—she didn't even write!" Even if her mum hadn't known where she was going, a post owl could have found her without trouble.

It wasn't until Narcissa's hand took hold of hers with a gentle squeeze that she realized she was crying. Once she did, she couldn't stop. She pulled away from Narcissa's touch to wipe furiously at her eyes, then gave up, leaning forward and covering her mouth in her hands, staring at the ground through blurred, stinging eyes. "I don't even know when the funeral is," she whispered into her palms.

As the tears came faster, she felt gentle fingers run through her hair, a silent touch of comfort that only made her cry harder. She sensed more than heard Narcissa rise, coming to kneel beside her chair and rub soothing circles between her shoulder blades. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm sure he was a good man. He raised a wonderful, brilliant daughter."

Hermione felt a brittle laugh fighting its way through her tears, a wild sound, half-mad. "You don't have to say that. I know I'm convenient, but I'm not naïve. I know what you think of me." Her words were punctuated by shuddering breaths, her sadness and confusion feeding an anger she would never have otherwise put into words.

Narcissa's hand stilled for a moment, then lifted to run through her curls once again, tangling slightly and coming to rest at her neck. "I'm sorry you found out like this."

Hermione drew in a final shuddering breath, trying to pull together shattered pieces inside of her even as she flushed with embarrassment to have broken down in front of Narcissa like this. "No, I—thank you. I'm sorry I—I'm glad you told me. I knew it was soon but I didn't... know."
As Hermione gathered up her emotions and her wand, Narcissa pulled back and stood. "I don't believe this is the night for a Patronus anymore."

Hermione smiled weakly and shook her head. "Would you mind too much if I turn in early? I think I'd like to... be alone."

Narcissa nodded, waving her wand to return her chair to its original position and picking up a book from the table beside her. "Of course. If you would care to be alone with company, however, I will probably be up a few hours yet."

Hermione accepted her words with a small smile, but withdrew all the same. She paused in the doorway and turned back, watching Narcissa in silence for a lingering moment. She was an image of pristine composure as she read, turning each page with delicate, silent precision as the eternal tension in her bearing slowly faded into the comfortable embrace of the armchair. She seemed a different women in these moments, lost in her own mind, and it was the only time she appeared... small. Hermione was almost tempted to rejoin her, to accept the tacit comfort of her presence, but she had already accepted too much from Narcissa today.

Lying awake in bed, emotionally drained but not physically tired enough for sleep, Hermione considered her day. Aside from the crushing realization that her father had finally passed away, spending this time with Narcissa so far had been... surprisingly pleasant. She had accepted the role out of horror at Narcissa's circumstances and out of her own desire for a distraction—any distraction—from the lingering tension with Andromeda. She had never expected it to be... enjoyable. It was anything but a smart reaction. Hermione was Narcissa's fake... girlfriend didn't quite feel the right word. Her fake affair? It wouldn't do to get caught up in the whirl of it, in the decadence of Narcissa's lifestyle and the stunning array of affected emotions she could put on in their act. Being distracted was fine. Anything more was... dangerous.
"detached" courtesy of marrymehesterharper.tumblr.com
Chapter 17

Andromeda burst into the kitchen two mornings later as Hermione was just finishing up breakfast. Snow slid off her boots and cloak and melted in puddles on the floor as she crossed to the fire. "Burr," she said, offering Hermione a cheerful smile as she held out her hands to the flames. "It's a nightmare out there. How soon is spring, again?"

Hermione stared at her, waiting for an explanation for the conversational tone. When none was forthcoming, she found her voice. "What are you doing here?"

"Warming up," Andromeda replied, her cheery mood unaffected by Hermione's defensive posture and words.

"I mean… what do you want?"

"To warm—"

"—with me," Hermione amended. "What do you want with me? Or shall I leave you to the fire?"

Andromeda's smile slipped for a moment. "Please stay." She shrugged out of her cloak, draping it over the back of one too-short chair, leaving the hem to settle in the puddle of water it was still creating on the floor. "I'd just like to talk."

Hermione resisted the urge to snort. "To talk," she echoed dryly.

Andromeda nodded, sending bits of snow scuttling from the ends of her hair. "I promise, I think I have news you'll like.

"Do you really?" Hermione muttered, but there was less bite. Intrigued despite herself, she resumed putting together plates of breakfast, allowing Andromeda's words.

"I know you want space, and I think I've found a way to give it to you. I've been offered a position at Hogwarts."

"Hmm?"

"A teaching position. I'm going to be a professor!"

Andromeda's excitement was palpable and unavoidably contagious. "What, now? Halfway through the year?" Hermione asked.

"Well, no. I would start in the fall, and it isn't exactly a full professorship, but it's an incredible opportunity all the same. Poppy—or, Madam Pomfrey, that is, the school nurse—has been offered a highly esteemed position at St. Mungo's, and with my healing experience, I'm more than qualified to take over."

"That's wonderful," Hermione offered tentatively, casting a genuine smile over her shoulder. "I'm happy for you."

"That's not all," Andromeda continued, pacing in front of the fire. She talked with her hands, casting dramatic shadows across the walls. "Many students over the years have complained that there isn't a class offered in wizarding medicine. Minerva asked if I would be interested in designing a curriculum with her in the coming months, something for students who take both Advanced Herbology and
Advanced Potions: a healing elective. After a year or so, I could even train students one year and have them assist more fully in the hospital wing the next, so we wouldn't be so short-staffed. It would put Hogwarts well ahead of the other wizarding schools in Europe in terms of training healers for graduate study."

Excitement and elation seemed to trail behind Andromeda's restless feet with every step, and Hermione realized she had stopped preparing food some moments ago. It was hard to keep herself angry and distant from this infectious joy. "Is there really only one trained healer for an entire school of teenage wizards?" she asked. Out of everything the other witch had said, that was the most surprising.

Andromeda chuckled. "When you put it that way… Not even that much, really. Poppy was wonderful, but she was far more a mediwitch than a healer. Spells and potions only… nothing like what I've been trained in. She's going to freshen up my education on more traditional methods while I'm working out the curriculum, so this should be a wonderful opportunity for everyone involved."

Hermione set the last of the plates in line for the house-elves, then turned to face Andromeda again. She looked at her for a long moment, searching her face for any lingering hint of an ulterior motive, for a trace of the mad drive she had seen at their last encounter, but all she saw was the brightest smile she had seen in months lighting up the circles beneath her eyes, and Hermione offered a wistful smile in return. "It sounds amazing. Those students will be lucky to have you. You're an incredible teacher."

It was the truth. Of all she felt towards Andromeda, the respect she had for her teaching would never fade. She shook her head and turned away again, reaching out to reshel a salt. Mid-turn, Hermione felt a pair of arms encircle her waist and pull her backwards, tugging her into an embrace. On instinct alone, she relaxed against the familiar shape and warmth, breathing in a scent of intimate safety, but the moment she felt fingers rise to stroke through her hair, she stiffened, shaking her head.

"I'm sorry," Andromeda murmured, still holding her close. "I've messed things up terribly, haven't I?"

Hermione began pulling away, attempting to extricate herself from those insistent arms, but when Andromeda's head fell forward, coming to rest against her shoulder, she froze. The shuddering wash of breath against her neck felt… vulnerable. For the first time since she had called everything off, Hermione did not feel threatened by Andromeda's proximity. "Yeah," she answered. "You did."

They stood in the firelight for a long time, the crackling coals and creaking cauldron the only sounds in the kitchen besides their breath.

"I'm finally doing the right thing, I think," Andromeda eventually said, "I'll give you space. I know why… I know what I did wrong. I came into your life and took over. I didn't treat you like a relationship; you were a possession. I wanted to have as much power over someone's life as my sister had over mine. I wanted your world to revolve around me and I—I wanted you to love it. I thought… I thought if you loved me it was fine. I acted like using you was alright as long as your life was better for it. I can't undo that, but I'm sorry."

Hermione's hands were trembling against Andromeda's forearms, caught stiffly between holding herself together and pushing the other witch away. Finally, she felt her fingers lock against Andromeda's skin and pull her closer, feeling the full-body embrace and acknowledging it as the start of some kind of closure. She couldn't bring herself to answer Andromeda's words, couldn't say, "I forgive you." That wouldn't be true. Everything was far too raw. This, though… this was the first time Hermione knew that someday, she wanted to do just that. Andromeda leaving, giving her space, would be the first step.
A raucous, chilling laugh echoed from the doorway and the two witches jumped apart. "Isn't this just touching," Bellatrix cackled, leaning against the doorway far too casually to have only just walked in.

Before Hermione could summon words, another figure entered the other end of the kitchen from the dining room, striding in with a flurry of coattails and the start of words. "Hermione, I—" Narcissa's voice stuttered to a halt as she took in the scene before her, one sister leaning in the opposite doorway as a frazzled Hermione stood only a few feet from the third sister, wide-eyed in the middle of an impromptu reunion. "What in Merlin's name is going on?"

"You'd have to ask Andy," Bellatrix answered with a teeth-baring grin. "I just came down for a cup of tea."

With no further ado, the eldest sister strode more fully into the room. The space seemed to shrink in on itself as she crossed to the teapots, pulling one down from its hook beneath the nearest cabinet and filling it in the sink.

"Dromeda?" Narcissa prompted, voice steady but hardly warm.

"What?" Andromeda snapped. "Am I not allowed in my own kitchen now?"

Hermione bit her lip. If things hadn't been tense enough already, Andromeda's unnecessarily defensive words hadn't helped.

Narcissa arched an eyebrow. "Hardly."

"Maybe I just want a cup of tea as well," Andromeda huffed. Her wand slid from her sleeve and into her grip. A brisk wave summoned a second kettle from the far wall and another harsh motion set it boiling in a flash of magic. Bellatrix's kettle, on the other hand, was slowly beginning to steam over the fire, and she cast a surly glance over her shoulder when Andromeda's began whistling immediately.

Hermione backed away from the three women, bracing one hand against the counter, closing her eyes, and taking a deep breath. Having them all in the same room was... frightening, and not a little overwhelming.

"What about you, Cissy?" Bellatrix prompted, gathering a cup from the cabinet by hand as another whipped by her head, summoned by Andromeda's aggressive wandwork. Bellatrix glowered at the flying china.

"I'm here to talk to our employee," Narcissa said, face impassive. "I don't need an excuse to—"

Bellatrix chortled, cutting her short. "No, I don't care why you're here, I just meant what about you? Want a cup of tea? I've made plenty of water."

A look passed between Bellatrix and Narcissa that Hermione couldn't begin to read, but a small smile flitted over Narcissa's lips. "Very well. I could do with a cup of earl grey."

Before long, Hermione found herself seated at the small central table with more Black sisters than she could recall seeing together in one place since the fire. She studied them in the near silence as each put the finishing touches on their tea. Andromeda added a splash of honey while Narcissa took cream. Bellatrix, by contrast, added nothing but the tip of her wand, sticking it in unceremoniously to stir and retrieve the teabag. When the little sachet of leaves had plunked onto the saucer, she reached behind her head and gathered up her hair, twirling it upwards and sticking in her damp, freshly herb-dipped wand to secure the heavy curls atop her head.
Narcissa paid her eldest sister no mind, but Andromeda had watched the entire display through narrowed eyes. "Bella," she said slowly. "While you're here, I have news."

"Oh, brilliant," Bellatrix deadpanned, taking a sip of her tea.

"I've been offered a job."

"Really?" Narcissa interjected.

Bellatrix didn't even react.

"Yes. At Hogwarts. I was just telling Hermione. I start in the fall, but I have preparations to make between now and then, so I'll be away more often. Bella, are you even listening?"

"Oh. Brilliant," she repeated in the exact same tone of abject indifference.

Andromeda's expression darkened. "You do realize this is going to affect you."

"Is it?" Bellatrix's eyes widened in mock surprise. "Your life affecting mine? How novel."

"Well seeing as you have no interest whatsoever in freedom anyway, I suppose spending more time locked upstairs doesn't actually affect you in the slightest," Andromeda snapped, Bellatrix's continued disinterest finally denting her mild mood.

"Not really, no."

"In that case—" Andromeda snarled, her composure slipping more visibly with every passing moment. "—the least you could do is congratulate me."

"Congratulations!" Bellatrix offered with painfully fake cheer. "Replacing one hobby with another, trading play for work… good for you! How delightfully mature. You always were a better teacher than a lover, hmmm?"

Hermione choked on her tea, instantly wanting to be anywhere but here.

Across the table, Narcissa's eyes had widened. "I think that's quite enough, you two. I'm happy for you, 'Dromeda. I think some time away will be good for you. Bella, perhaps we can see about getting some of those restrictions transferred to me for a while."

While only seconds before Hermione had been ready to bolt from the room, Narcissa's words had been stunningly effective at cutting through the tension. Though there was still fire racing between the other sisters' narrowed eyes, Andromeda had taken to biting her lip rather than biting off her sister's head.

"Thank you," she finally offered, jaw tight. "While I don't think I'm ready to hand you the reins anytime soon, perhaps we should work out something more flexible with the Ministry."

Bellatrix bared her teeth and began drumming her fingers against the tabletop in a passable imitation of horse's hooves. "I don't wear a bridle," she cut in with a menacing giggle. "Though I'm sure I could find a rubber bit in my old… collection." Bellatrix had been out for blood since the moment she walked in, and it didn't seem Narcissa's placating words had any effect on her intentions.

"Why you—" Andromeda started.

"Maybe I should—" Hermione made it halfway through a stammered, blushing exit attempt before Narcissa cut them both off.
"Wait. As enthralling as this conversation is, I have news as well."

"Well aren't we the regular *Daily Prophet*," Bellatrix grumbled, seemingly disappointed that Andromeda didn't have a chance to respond to her last taunt.

"I've started the proceedings for a wizarding divorce. Quietly, of course, but things are going to be changing."

Andromeda's jaw clenched visibly.

Bellatrix rolled her eyes, but when she replied, her tone was surprisingly gentle. "Not as though we've been down this road before, Cissy."

"Things are going to be different this time," Narcissa insisted.

Andromeda's cup clanked jarringly against its saucer and all eyes turned her way. "Different," she huffed, the knuckles on one hand straining and white where they gripped her teacup.

Narcissa reached out to rest her fingertips on the back of Andromeda's trembling hand, but the elder sister hastily dropped her cup and jerked back, pulling out of reach.

Hermione stared, silent and confused, until Narcissa spoke again. "We talked about this last night, 'Dromeda."

Hermione's shoulders twitched. She couldn't mean—

"Yes, we did." Andromeda's mood, so cheerful only half an hour ago, seemed to darken even further. "And as I promised, I'll go along with it, but you know perfectly well I don't approve."

"You told her about—" Hermione stammered, one hand gesturing vaguely in the air between Narcissa and herself.

"I did." Turning back to Andromeda, she asked, "Did you find out about her legal status?"

"Yes," Andromeda snapped. "I spoke with Minerva, and she verified with the Ministry. You'll need Bellatrix. She has to be physically present, but she can't consent to any legal action without my say-so."

"I'll bite," Bellatrix interrupted them, eyes narrowed. "You're trying to break the handfast, aren't you?"

"I am."

"I offered to kill him years ago, Cissy," Bellatrix said with a glint in her eyes. "You really should have taken me up on that. Too late now."

Hermione sat uncomfortably on the edge of her seat, but Narcissa ignored her sister's violent offer. Instead, she offered an explanation, recounting the bones of her plan, insisting that Hermione's involvement would be the tipping point, the difference between this time and the last she had confronted her husband with the idea of a divorce. As the rather clinical explanation of her strange circumstances spilled from Narcissa's lips, Hermione worried the edge of her empty teacup with her teeth, sipping air to avoid making eye contact with any of the sisters.

Bellatrix offered wild, unrestrained laughter in response to her list of Hermione's qualifications. It set Hermione's teeth on edge, but she supposed it was a better sign than immediate rejection or rage.
"You dating the Mudblood, too, hmm? Twisted. I'll play along. I never did think Malfoy was good enough for you. If you have to use the help to get rid of him, so be it."

"I still don't like this," Andromeda snapped.

"You made that perfectly clear last night," Narcissa interjected.

Andromeda wasn't finished. Though she had been silent throughout Narcissa's words, her anger had not abated. "You're putting Hermione in the public eye! We have enemies. It's an unnecessary risk. You can't just use her to—"

Narcissa chuckled, her once calm, cordial tone dropping ten degrees with instant chill. "As though you wanted any better for her. At least I asked first."

"Like she has another option! Don't pretend she has any power here."

"I—" Hermione started, but her voice was too soft to push through Narcissa's next words.

"I didn't see you having any reservations about 'power' when you took her to bed!"

Hermione drew in a sharp breath through her nose, stunned by Narcissa's sudden intensity. "That… that isn't…" she stammered.

Once again, another voice overpowered her protests. "Isn't this just like old times?" Bellatrix offered with an unrestrained grin, kicking her heels up on the table and tilting her chair back on two legs. "The three of us squabbling and ripping into each other over the latest plaything."

Each of the bitten-off sentences from the past twenty minutes finally burst from Hermione's mouth in a moment of indignant fury. "I am not a toy!" she hissed, bracing herself against the table as she rose, the stool behind her rocking dramatically but regaining its footing. The table shook with the trembling in her palms and tea splashed over the rim of two cups, only Narcissa avoiding a spill mid-sip. As Bellatrix and Andromeda stared down at the puddles on the table in silence, Hermione pulled back her hands as her shoulders continued to shake. "My life is not a game."

She bit back the rest of the words in her mind as she made eye contact with Bellatrix. The eldest sister seemed to be weighing her with her with interested surprise. She tugged her wand out from its place in her hair, curls falling from the haphazard updo and bouncing about her shoulders as she tapped the tip against the corner of her mouth. "Aren't you, though?" Bellatrix breathed, leaning in close, whispering just beside her ear. "I thought you liked our little games, pet."

Even as Hermione shook her head and narrowed her eyes, she stood her ground, refusing to flinch away.

An indignant Andromeda rose halfway from her seat, but Hermione saw Narcissa rest a restraining hand on her arm.

"I didn't come back for Andromeda," Hermione insisted. "Or for your games."

The young witch stiffened as she felt a touch at the base of her spine, two fingers creeping up the curve of her back where neither of the other two women could see. "Didn't you, though?" Bellatrix breathed, leaning in close, whispering just beside her ear. "I thought you liked our little games, pet."

Even as Hermione shook her head and narrowed her eyes, she stood her ground, refusing to flinch away.
"Hmmm," Bellatrix hummed, her fingers sliding back down the way they had come. The spider-like touch made Hermione's skin crawl. "Too bad," she added, breaking contact. From the corner of her eye, Hermione could see her wiping her fingers off against her robes, as though she had touched something dirty. "You're almost fun now and then." As a lock of Bellatrix's hair slid over her collarbone, Hermione was surprised to notice the other witch's scent—like juniper and ash, something sharp, fiery, and feral.

"Leave her alone, Bella," Narcissa muttered. Her voice was distant, disinterested, but two fingers of the hand not holding Andromeda's arm now rested against her wand on the table.

Bellatrix shrugged, prancing back around the table and scooping up her tea, downing the last dregs like a shot of liquor before tossing it aside to shatter in the sink. "I was headed out anyway."

"Out?" Hermione stammered, stepping towards the sink, but Bellatrix was already gone. In the distance, she heard the main door creak open and slam shut.

"I forgot she could even use the grounds," Narcissa drawled, looking suddenly exhausted.

"As did I," Andromeda sighed, her gaze narrowing. "There's half a blizzard out there. I suppose I ought to keep an eye on her."

"Yes," Narcissa agreed. "Something seems off with her today."

Hermione listened to their quiet exchange from her spot by the sink as she pieced back together Bellatrix's broken cup. How quickly their tensions rose and fell. As an only child, Hermione couldn't be sure if their fierce word games, biting anger, and swift forgiveness were simply a mark of sisterhood or something more unique to this particular broken family, but she would be perfectly content to never be caught in the crossfire again.

One fragment of the broken cup had slipped down the drain, and her summoning couldn't seem to get it at quite the right angle to steer it free again. She didn't even hear Andromeda come up behind her until she felt a familiar hand grasp hold of hers, wrapping around both it and Hermione's wand to steady her motion. One quick adjustment and the last piece sailed free to rejoin the others. The cup was whole.

"We should talk again soon, Hermione," Andromeda said, giving the younger woman's hand a quick squeeze as she set her own cup in the sink.

She followed the shadow of Bellatrix's footsteps from the room, leaving Narcissa and Hermione alone.

"What did my sister want?" Narcissa asked as she brought her own cup over to Hermione.

She grumbled her reply. "Which one? When?"

Narcissa gently took Bellatrix's cup from Hermione's fingers, setting all three to washing themselves with a wave of her wand. "Andromeda. Before I came in."

"Oh. She—" The past moments flashed through her mind, from Andromeda's joy about her new job, to her too-familiar embrace, to her apology. "—wanted to talk. About the new job, and—Just… talk."

"Really."

"No. Not really, but—that's all we did. Talk. It was… okay."

"Yes," Narcissa agreed. "Something seems off with her today."

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"Really."

"No. Not really, but—that's all we did. Talk. It was… okay."
To Hermione's surprise, Narcissa seemed satisfied with her hedged reply. "Very well. If you're all finished in here…?"

She nodded, turning quickly to scoop up the plate with Narcissa's breakfast and hold it out to the other witch. She had eaten her own food as she cooked to save time.

Narcissa pushed it aside with two fingers. "I'll eat later. We have plans."

"We do?"

"We do." Narcissa turned towards the door into the dining room, the door deeper into the house, the opposite direction from where Bellatrix and Andromeda had gone. "I really only meant to fetch you from the kitchens, and now half an hour has gone by. Come along."

"Where are we going?" Hermione asked, trailing behind Narcissa.

"The library. I have to go out tonight, but I thought you might like to finally see some of the Elvin Scrolls with me this morning. After all the work you've done freshening the place up, I think it's about time I showed you some of the true wonders in our collection."

Hermione nearly tripped in her excitement to catch up, the dark shadow of the kitchen falling away behind them. "Wait, really? You'll let me see them?"

Hermione could hear the smile in Narcissa's answering words. "Of course. If you thought I'd forgotten our first day in the library, you're mistaken."

Hermione couldn't keep a grin off her face. "Hardly. I—I was half terrified of you, but when we started talking about languages, about history…"

Looking up at Narcissa, Hermione could see that ghostly smile curling up one corner of her lips. "You were so in awe of the library; I didn't think you were paying me any attention at all."

"As if that's possible," Hermione murmured under her breath.

"Hmm?"

Hermione shook her head. "Nothing, just… you aren't exactly possible to ignore."

A hint of teeth flashed in Narcissa's smile before her face closed once again. "Good."

The library doors were before them, the gateway to a world of towering shelves and endless wonder, and when Narcissa held one door wide, beckoning Hermione in ahead of her, the younger witch felt she had finally been given that last of the keys to the kingdom.

Their afternoon in the ancient archives started a week of something new and wonderful. Unlike their first, hesitant dinner, their moments among the shelves were unstrained and informal, the pages talking between them far easier than their own words. With Andromeda away for at least half of each day and Bellatrix retreating to a near-silent presence somewhere over their heads, the plan was given Hermione's full attention.

No, that wasn't strictly true. In fact, the plan was given nearly none of Hermione's attention. Their time in the library, their increasingly casual and intimate dinners, their lingering words by the fire… Narcissa was given Hermione's full attention. The plan… that was an afterthought.

Bellatrix was often an afterthought as well, but one which worried at the edge of her mind most
nights. It didn't feel right, Andromeda's newfound freedom leaving the eldest sister trapped even more fully in the invisible realm above them. Hermione hadn't caught so much as a glimpse of her since the morning in the kitchen, other than in her dreams. Sometimes, at night, she would drift upstairs, bodiless and untethered, slipping through the ceiling and into those brutalized corridors and ragged hallways, drifting around corner after corner of an impossible maze until she came across a cloaked figure curled up against a wall, wrapped in shadows, ink-stained forearms shackled above her head, the tallies dripping liquid midnight onto the floor below. Sometimes, there would be a second figure standing over her, fairer brunette curls silhouetted against a sourceless light.

In her sleep, Hermione pitied the eldest. In waking, she hardly spared her a thought. There were too many other things to fill her time.

Narcissa speaking high Elvish, for example.

As many treasures as the Black library held, the Elvin Scrolls were by far the most fascinating to Hermione. The Elves were the first of the great races to die out, and very little was known about their culture and history. Narcissa was more than willing to entertain her boundless curiosity.

"How did you even learn to read it, let alone speak?" she asked the first time she heard the artisan syllables roll off Narcissa's tongue.

Carefully refreshing the preservation wards on the scroll she held, Narcissa's answer was absentminded. "There were wizards around in those days, even if well predating the English language. There are fragmented Latin translations, even primitive phonetics, and I was lucky that my interest and my parent's wealth saw my hobby supported at Hogwarts. There's no way to know how close an approximation of their tongue we've pieced together, but certain poetics have given us the basic structure at the very least."

"Poetics?"

Narcissa smiled. "Elvin poetry is some of the earliest written art that exists. The modern Cinquain and Tanka both originated from the O'r ic Sonnet. Five structured lines of something beautiful and profound."

Hermione knew little of poetry, but Narcissa's soft words and distant expression fascinated her nearly as much as the Elvin tongue itself.

"Could I—would you read one for me?" Hermione asked, and Narcissa easily agreed.

Over the course of the week, she read for Hermione many times. After a few days, the younger witch began recognizing words and phrases in everything from the historical texts to the personal letters, but she was far too fascinated by the lyrical, evocative syllables spilling from Narcissa's lips to voice her stumbling comprehension.

The poetry often echoed in her memory long after leaving Narcissa's side.

*E in dell*

*Vor'ecian*

*Vief Teras e in mor*

*Kaiy var e in delscaa loren*

*Vor mir*
The lilting refrain was a surprising comfort in the back of her mind as she spent time alone with her thoughts and her worries. Hermione wrote her mother every day, but had still received no word of the plans for her father's death. Finally, when she almost beginning to wonder if something terrible had happened, she received an envelope. There was nothing inside but her Gringotts key and an obituary clipping from the *Daily Prophet*. Her father waved up at her from over the brief words, young again, arm-in-arm with her mother. Her eyes were too blurred with tears to read the words beneath, but as she watched his hand raise and lower over and over and over again, her breathing grew harsh. Scooping up the vault key, she threw it across the room, watching impassively as it clanked against the window. She left it where it fell, dimly relieved that nothing had broken.

"Sa vor, miel rieska'ra. Loro e in kaiy va. Deas'kya bor eínrensír aaf, a'vor."

Even without the lines in front of her, Hermione could hear the breaks, the arcing build of the syllables in their two-four-six-eight-two progression, always ringing in Narcissa's cold, jewel-toned voice, even in her thoughts. She had never felt the draw of poetry before, and had limited access to such things, but the contained, ordered lyricism of the Elvin art soothed her. She allowed the words to loop in her mind as she tucked the picture of her father into the corner of her mirror frame, then followed her thoughts back to the library once again.

The translations of the poems were often less satisfying than the Elvin words. There were windless nights and moon-cast shadows and metaphors for an incomprehensible afterlife, but it didn't really matter. It was stunning just to listen to and learn from, and Hermione never hesitated to say as much, even after a full week of sociable study.

"It's so beautiful," Hermione breathed for the umpteenth time. "The whole language, and your recitation, I just—beautiful."

"You know that word."

She did. "Yir. Beautiful."

"Dor'ecian santiern, mindre," Narcissa returned with a smile.

Hermione cocked her head to the side. "I—I recognize the 'thank you' bit, but not the last word."

Hermione was startled to see a faint wash of color steal across Narcissa's cheeks as she turned away, carefully binding the last of the scrolls and returning it to its place in the warded cabinet. "Just a... a term of endearment, if you will."

"Oh," Hermione stammered, unable to keep a small, unwarranted smile from twitching up the corner of her lips as she filed away the word with the rest of her growing lexicon of the dead Elvin tongue. *Mindre.*

"Hermione, I've been thinking," Narcissa said when she was facing the younger witch again. "I think it's time."

"Time?" Hermione murmured, peering up over their heads towards the giant, dusty clock mounted on the far wall. It certainly wasn't dinner time, and Hermione had no idea what else she could mean.

"Yes. You've finally stopped looking frightened when... when I turn flirtatious. When I say something unexpected, you don't look so lost. I won't be able to keep the legal side of this from Lucius for more than another week, so it's time for us to go out. Together. In public."
Chapter 18

Narcissa was true to her word. The next morning, Hermione was pried from the kitchen before the kettle had cooled and hustled around Diagon all day, pulled from one clothing store to another in a flurry of color and tape measures and footstools and lights. There was a sort of wonder in it, in the array of textures and styles hanging in her once near-empty closet at the end of the day, but Hermione was relieved when the bustle and headache of it all was behind her. She understood the necessity of improving her wardrobe, but she wasn't exactly comfortable with it. The reminder of Narcissa's seemingly limitless wealth and its place in their strange arrangement pricked at Hermione's sensibilities, but Narcissa kept careful control of their entire outing, leaving Hermione little time to do anything more than walk along beside her and obey her quiet, gentle commands.

Narcissa was casual with her in public, guiding her with a hand on her arm or a quick touch between her shoulder blades, but none of the contact was more than innocuous. She kept their interactions subtle that first afternoon, and though many reacted to Narcissa's presence with a range of surprising emotions—from obvious deference at her standing and reputation to restrained anger at her recent history—none seemed to spare Hermione more than a passing glance.

Their time in the open was largely dependent on Andromeda's schedule, since Narcissa could only take time away from the house when her sister remained to enforce the conditions of Lucius's sentence. Hermione had nearly forgotten the odd initial verdict that had locked this family together under the same roof. If not for having to juggle the task of babysitting Lucius, it would have been surprisingly easy to forget she was working for Death Eaters altogether in the hubbub of pretending to date one of them. Luckily, Andromeda was compliant if distant, and she always made sure to keep Narcissa updated on her whereabouts.

The next outing saw Hermione trussed up in a new set of robes and ushered into an infamously high-society restaurant with a well-known reputation for discretion. Narcissa wanted to let the attention come to them naturally, so starting somewhere that knew and respected the Malfoy name was perfect. As discreet as they swore to be, the news of the Narcissa Malfoy dining by candlelight with a young, unknown witch in a high class establishment wouldn't be kept under wraps for long, but it would offer the appearance of attempted subtlety.

The evening went off without a hitch. Narcissa kept Hermione's mind engaged with her conversation, not allowing her time to be nervous or unsure. By the time food arrived, Hermione's smile and laughter were unhindered and genuine, and her enthusiastic reaction to the delicious meal had Narcissa's own smile looking warmer as well. When they finished, the younger witch was truly reluctant to leave, so they lingered well beyond the disappearance of the plates.

Though there was no sign of attention beyond a few side-eyed stares from the restaurant's other patrons that first night, Hermione was almost certain she caught a camera flash from the corner of her eye as they walked out into the street to Apparate home, and sure enough, Narcissa greeted her in the kitchen for lunch the next day with a blurry tabloid photo of her profile and the caption "Malfoy Mistery?"

"Has Lucius seen?" Hermione asked, trying to wipe away a drop of olive oil she had spilled on the paper, but she only succeeded in smudging it further, blurring the line of her jaw in the image.

"Not yet," Narcissa replied. "Though it can't be long. Tomorrow we should be a bit more noticeable. If nothing tips him off about this in the next few days, he'll be getting served before he's heard a word of it, and that isn't my intention."
As promised, Narcissa took her for a long walk after their next dinner, holding her pressed against her side, an arm around the younger witch’s waist. Hermione had grown comfortable with Narcissa’s physical proximity over the past days, but this was a bit more than she was used to. Narcissa seemed to feel her reservations in her posture. “Not still frightened of me, are you?” she murmured, and the gentle teasing had the desired effect. Hermione relaxed, drawing back into the headspace where this was a real date, an evening out with someone she liked and desired and who wanted her in return. She was always very careful to keep her imagined partner nameless and faceless, because a part of her was frightened of just who might appear in her mind’s eye, but imagining this intimate stroll as genuine let her relax into the touch at her waist, return the quiet, amiable conversation with literally practiced ease, and ignore the glare as a wizarding camera flashed beside them in the sunset.

Andromeda was gone from dawn to dusk the next day, so Hermione and Narcissa were trapped indoors, isolated with their thoughts and the latest image from the press, a picture from their walk. Hermione was a bit more identifiable and their pose was a bit more notably intimate than the past images, so the words beneath, while careful to articulate that nothing was really known at this point, speculated of infidelity, a crumbling marriage, and an illicit affair. Narcissa was pleased. Hermione was concerned. She’d never really thought beyond this part, never really pictured just how much attention their little plot might garner. As much as she knew this family had played a significant part in the war, she hadn't realized the level of celebrity their dark, high-class allure had produced. Of all the Death Eaters, the Malfoys and Blacks had the most complicated relationship with the law, still wielding considerable social and political power despite their fall from grace. The Black family was infamous, and Hermione's presence at Narcissa's side had finally begun to make a stir. Now that the papers had latched onto the potential of a new scandal, the last question remaining was when Lucius would notice.

Hermione lost track of Narcissa shortly after lunch and busied herself hunting down Crookshanks. She hadn't seen her cat in days. She wasn't worried, not really; if there was ever a creature who could take care of itself, the Kneazle was it. Still, there wasn't much point in having a cat if she could never find it and trick it into cuddling with her, never whisper her worries into its matted fur on a tired night…

Rommie eventually found her wandering the corridors and explained that Crookshanks had taken to lurking about the third floor. It took the assistance of both house-elves to lure him down to the kitchen with the most loudly opened can of cat food Hermione had ever heard. Still, the venture was exactly the distraction she needed, and she even got to hold the cursed creature for a few moments after he finished eating. He would never be a lap animal, but he was lazy when he was satisfied. Hermione even coaxed out a reluctant purr with just the right scratch behind his ears. The words about her in the paper still lingered in her mind, but now they felt like no more than she should have expected. She was ready for this. She was ready to move forward.

That night, Hermione dined alone. She hadn't seen Narcissa since lunch and was a bit concerned, but she knew she had no right to expect the busy witch to continue spending every moment with her when it wasn't for the plan. She couldn't resist checking the library before turning in for the night, but it was dark, silent… empty. It had been so long since she visited those shelves without Narcissa's quiet stride beside her. She had nearly forgotten how eerie it was when night had fallen and the candles had yet to be lit. She didn't linger.

Her footfalls dragged on their way back upstairs, hesitating before the turn that would take her to her chambers. Something pricked at her awareness and she paused long enough to place it. There was a sound, just teasing at the edges of her hearing. A voice. A raised voice.
Something shattered, twice as loud as the incomprehensible words, and Hermione turned away from her room, backing down the adjacent corridor which housed Narcissa's "other" bedroom, following the sounds.

A few steps closer confirmed her suspicions: the voice belonged to Lucius.

"...my wife! You will call this off!"

Hermione bit her lip. Clearly, he had found out.

"I've been fair. Hell! I've been reasonable! And this is how you repay me? Flaunting yourself on the arm of that filthy little child? I am your husband!"

Hermione hesitated beside the door, trying to keep her breathing steady. Adrenaline and worry battled for control of her common sense.

"I've let you have this freedom. You think I couldn't break you if I tried?"

Something shattered audibly from within and Hermione jumped. Sliding another inch closer, she saw that the door was slightly ajar. With her eye pressed to the crack, she could just make out the side of Narcissa's body, standing, wand raised, against the far wall.

"I know what it takes to get back in. I know how to push your buttons. I know all I need is one spark of anger and I'll be right back inside that pretty—" A vase flew across the room and shattered against the wall by Narcissa's head. She didn't even flinch. "—empty head of yours."

Five or six small trinkets flew directly at Narcissa in a whistling blur, but a flick of her wand shattered them all in mid-air. They clinked against the floorboards impotently as they fell. "Get angry, dammit!" Lucius roared, summoning another batch of the room's possessions to whirl about in the air around him, gathering speed with his fury.

Narcissa did not even bat an eye, apparently unconcerned with her husband's rage. Hermione couldn't resist leaning closer. She worried her lip between her teeth as she wondered just how the ever-unflappable witch was going to respond.

Something crashed against the door. Hermione squeaked, jumping back as more glass clattered to the floor in pieces. An instant after her sound, the door was flung wide. Lucius glared directly at her through the door-frame, wand raised. "Why, if it isn't the bloody harlot herself," he drawled.

Before Hermione could find her balance or her tongue, Lucius's wand ripped a bookshelf away from the wall and flung it directly towards her. She had no time to grab her wand, no time to do anything more than regain her footing and brace herself for impact.

"No!"

Hermione's eyes were tightly shut, hands raised over her head, but she heard Narcissa's yell slice through the room accompanied by a rush of air. When nothing slammed into her, she peered cautiously between her arms. The bookcase had been ripped in two and flung to either side of her, Narcissa's wand pointed her way. The rush of relief nearly brought Hermione to her knees.

Before she could even take a full breath, Lucius's chilling laugh pierced the air.

"Now I've got you," he rasped.

In that moment, Hermione finally saw that the tip of Narcissa's wand was trembling in the air, still
aimed directly at her. Narcissa wasn't moving an inch, her jaw tightly clenched, tendons straining in her neck, the knuckles of her right hand white against the black wood of her wand handle, and there was something flickering in her eyes. If Hermione didn't know better she would have almost thought that was… fear.

Even as she watched, the emotion seemed to drain from her, leaving behind something distinctly different from her usual detached cold. Her eyes looked flat. Empty.

Lucius was moving, stepping closer, though he seemed to be fighting against some invisible force as he did so. His eyes bored directly into Narcissa's, a dark power glowing in their depths. Hermione scrambled for her wand, but her motion drew Lucius's attention. Her hand was halfway out of her pocket when he turned both his gaze and his wand on the younger witch, but the moment his attention was diverted, Narcissa seemed to break free of her strange stasis. Before either of them could react, Narcissa moved again, whipping around and casting something with an incomprehensible cry that burst from her lips and exploded from her wand towards her husband in a pulse of amber light.

It never reached him. Barking out another of those horrible laughs, he seemed to catch the spell midair with the tip of his wand, sending it back out into the room in all directions as his eyes locked into his wife's again, freezing her in place. "You can't hurt me," he spat as the curse flew wide, arcing back towards both women.

Hermione threw up a frantic shielding charm. The light broke around it, but through the rippling air, Hermione watched in terror as the spell ricocheted back towards Narcissa's frozen form. Without a single coherent spell in her mind, Hermione pushed at her shield charm, yanking a wash of colors from the depths of her awareness more quickly than she could even fully imagine them. In the same breath, she flung the colors away, shoving the mess of energy towards Narcissa with everything she had, the sole thought of protection driving the rush of power.

A shuddering wash of magic blasted away from her and lit the room. She could see it, then, for a frozen moment; amid the rioting glare of color and smoke and light that filled the small space, a single dark thread of something black and sickly stretched, untouched, between Lucius and Narcissa. As her wide-flung mishmash of spells crashed into the wall where Narcissa stood, Hermione turned her wand, grabbed the brightest shade of offensive yellow she could picture in her mind, and flung it directly at Lucius's chest, right where the dark thread began.

He crumpled to the floor, and all the magic in the room faded away.

Narcissa fell with him, a tiny "oh!" as though of surprise slipping from her lips as she collapsed to her hands and knees.

Hermione's momentary pride that she hadn't frozen in the face of Lucius's anger this time was crushed by that small, helpless sound. She rushed over to the fallen witch, dropping her wand in the wreckage of the bookcase and scrambling through the shattered glass to reach her. "Ma'am, are you okay?" she asked, slipping into old habits. "Narcissa!"

"Fine," Narcissa gasped, but her arms were shaking as they supported the weight of her upper body and her head hung limp between them.

Hermione carefully slid an arm around her and helped her to sit upright, but instead of leaning against the wall, Narcissa leant into Hermione, resting her forehead in the crook of her neck. When she made no move to pull back, Hermione gave in to an urge she'd had since the first piece of glass had been flung Narcissa's way. She pulled the older witch closer, wrapping both of her arms around her and breathing a sigh of relief into her hair. Narcissa's nose was buried in the side of her neck, and
it was the first time Hermione could recall seeing true vulnerability from this formidable witch. "You're fine?" she echoed, voice shaking. "You're fine. I thought I— For a second there I didn't— You're alright. We're alright. He's not… he didn't get in your head again, did he?"

Hermione could feel Narcissa's lips form a trembling smile against her neck. As she finally seemed to regain her strength, one of her arms rose and wrapped around the younger woman, returning the weary embrace. "No. I pushed him out. He's not near as strong as he thinks he is."

Hermione let out another rasping breath of relief. When she breathed in again, she could smell the charred odor of air burned by magic, but she could also smell the woman in her arms, something clean and light, but with a lingering scent of parchment dust and preservation spells—the library had left its mark, and it was a comforting one.

Neither moved until a sound from across the room drew their attention. Lucius was stirring.

Narcissa sighed against Hermione's shoulder. "Help me up?"

Hermione hastily obeyed, supporting Narcissa's slender frame as she rose. They staggered together across the room, Narcissa's knees unwilling to fully obey her commands. After guiding her to safety against the wall in the corridor, Hermione returned and snatched up both her own wand and Lucius's from their place amid the rubble. When she returned, Narcissa stood in the door-frame, staring in contemplation at her husband's crumpled silhouette on the floor.

"Lock him in for the night," she ordered.

"What?"

"You heard me." Narcissa's voice was cold and steady. "I'm not sure I have the strength after whatever you just did to us to cast something effective by myself, but I can help you through the wards. Lock him in."

Hermione conceded to the steel in Narcissa's voice. She obeyed each of Narcissa's instructions from that moment on without question, echoing back spells and adding in her own flare of color where she could.

Eventually, her wandwork was cut off by a brisk, "Enough!" Narcissa looked exhausted, braced against the wall with an arm wrapped across her body, wrist over her heart, hand clutching tightly to her shoulder. "I need rest. Thank you for taking care of that—" she murmured with a vague gesture at the faintly-glowing door. "—but in the future, it would serve you better not to listen at doorways in the first place." It seemed Narcissa's vulnerability had fled, leaving behind something cold and standoffish, but not unkind. "Goodnight, Hermione. I will see you tomorrow."

Hermione's odd spell must have drained her far more than she originally thought, for she passed out the moment her head hit the pillow and slept straight through to sunrise. She spent half the morning worrying that her intervention had nearly cost Narcissa's her freedom, but the youngest sister seemed in particularly good spirits when they finally crossed paths. She instructed Hermione to "dress casually" as she passed her in the hallway, smiling as though nothing had happened. "I thought we'd have lunch at a little café I know." The change in tone from their weary intimacy the night before was startling, but Hermione obeyed the command.

The café was a lovely little space, nestled in a shaft of sunlight between taller rows of Diagon buildings on all sides, and Narcissa's step was lighter than Hermione could ever remember seeing it. She held out Hermione's chair as she sat before seating herself. Hermione blinked at the gallant
gesture. A waiter came by for drinks and Narcissa procured two glasses of water and a pot of tea for them, steering the date with an airy ease Hermione had never before been privy to.

Then, she caught Hermione's stare. "What? Did I do something wrong?"

"Oh, no!" Hermione said, biting back a startled laugh. "It's just… you seem happier today."

She smiled broadly. "I have a short reprieve, a few more hours at the least, before the link between myself and Lucius has time to heal. I was nervous, at first, about what could have happened when I let down my guard, but whatever you hit him with was far more than simple stunning. I can feel him in pain. It's as though you charred some sort of hole in his magic itself, which should be impossible, but... I'm letting myself… enjoy the day a bit more than I usually would. Everything is dampened, still, but I feel—" She drew a rush of air into her lungs. "—lighter."

"Oh. That's… good, I suppose. You look lovely," Hermione said, and though it was a phrase she had offered more than once in over the course of their odd little dates, she meant something entirely different now, and thought Narcissa could tell. She was certainly stunning as always, her winter cloak draped over the back of her chair to reveal a delicate green dress—what passed as 'casual' for Narcissa Malfoy—beneath, but it was as though a hint of warmth was glowing from the surface of her skin, softening the deadly chill that always seemed to accompany her, and that hint of heat was what kept Hermione's eyes locked on the other witch. The younger woman rarely took the initiative in pacing their dates, preferring to let Narcissa decide which moments were appropriate for physical contact, but when Narcissa rested her arm on the table after pouring her tea, Hermione raised her hand from her lap and gently brushed the skin at Narcissa's wrist.

Still smiling at Hermione's compliment, Narcissa flipped her arm and captured Hermione's hand with her own. "Thank you. So do you."

Hermione knew how to act the part of an appropriate reaction to a returned compliment, but a smile and a faint blush had never come so easily as it did in that moment. Narcissa's words often sounded genuine, but they rarely felt that way. Today, with a glimmer of appreciation practically shining behind her eyes as she took in Hermione's more casual dress, Narcissa's complimentary words tugged at something in her chest, and it felt wonderful. When a thumb traced over the pulse at her wrist, her blush deepened, and she found it momentarily hard to breathe.

"Thank you," she echoed, biting her lip in an attempt to clear her head. Narcissa's fingers stroked over the back of her hand.

The soft, absentminded touch continued through their light lunch. Narcissa didn't allow Hermione to reclaim her arm at all. The ease with which they could eat their finger sandwiches with one hand made the prolonged contact possible, but Hermione was hardly touching her meal. Narcissa's wandering hand was... distracting. For the most part, her fingers were still, resting against Hermione's forearm, just barely touching the skin, but every now and again, the tip of a finger would move, tracing aimlessly up along her arm, wandering with the pace of the conversation. It was very pleasant, surprisingly so, and Hermione often found her own words stuttering and losing their direction from the gentle caresses.

Narcissa finally seemed to notice her own unconscious motions when Hermione's eyes fluttered closed for a moment, a shiver racing up her spine from the feather-light touch. Narcissa's eyes widened. "Sorry, I—You like this?" Narcissa murmured. She paused, fingers hesitating against the fine bones in Hermione's wrist, but as her question trailed off, they drifted down again, continuing to stoke along her arm.

Hermione wasn't sure quite how this fit into their public image, but she reflexively offered a slight
nod of her head. It felt lovely, and she wasn't going to lie.

Narcissa bit her lip for a moment, then resumed the pace of their quiet conversation about how and when modern books were added to the Black library collection, but the gentle touch continued unabated. There was a purpose to Narcissa's motions now, an awareness of what she was doing. She turned Hermione's hand over and extended the range of her wandering touch down into the palm of her hand, running the ball of two fingers over the tracery of veins at Hermione's wrist and up along the lines of her palm.

Hermione wasn't used to being idly touched, not at all. She wondered if this was how a cat felt being petted, warm and tingly and like a bit of an afterthought. She couldn't much bring herself to care, though. It felt relaxed and simple and wonderful, and she felt... greedy.

It wasn't until she noticed the plates being taken away that she realized how much her mind had drifted. Narcissa was offering her an amused smile, and she allowed Hermione to reclaim her arm with a final squeeze of her fingers. "Shall we head home?" she murmured, letting a Sickle and a few Knuts clatter onto the tabletop as she rose. "I believe our point has been more than made," she added as she offered Hermione her arm.

The younger witch blinked for a moment at the suddenly practical words, and her smile was strained in reply. Still, she took the proffered limb and allowed herself to be escorted between the tables, doing her best to ignore the way her skin continued to tingle where it rested against Narcissa's own. Making their point was what she was here for, after all. She knew what they were doing. Disappointment was not part of this agreement, and Hermione knew she needed to push aside whatever that creeping emotion was before it got to put its roots in any deeper.

They pushed through the door arm-in-arm.

"Lady Malfoy!"

"Madame Malfoy, who is—"

"What is the nature of this relat—"

"Is this an affair?"

"—ionship we're seeing?"

"Is it true there's a Malfoy divorce on the horizon?"

"Lady Malfoy! Over here, I—"

Hermione balked at the herd of squawking reporters waiting to ambush them on the curb, stumbling and losing contact with Narcissa.

"Ms. Granger!"

Hermione could feel all of the blood rush from her face when she heard her own name from the back of the crowd.

"Is it true you're a Muggle-born? Is this a political statement?"

"Has Lucius decided to share his lovers these days?"

"Madame Malfoy!"
Hermione was rooted to the pavement. Even though Narcissa was only a step in front, Hermione swore she could feel her being pulled farther and farther from her, swallowed up by the camera flashes, stolen away by the violent exclamations of her name, and dragged into the crowd. She turned her head frantically from side to side, looking for a way out, for air, but before she could bolt, Narcissa's arm was back, grasping hold of her own and pulling her close.

"Breathe," she whispered, breath ghosting over Hermione's ear.

Shuddering, Hermione obeyed, air rattling back into her lungs. Before she could even finish that first breath, one of Narcissa's hands was grasping hold of her chin, the other holding them pressed together, and her face was so close, too close—

Narcissa kissed her in a furious flash of light and a collective intake of breath from the crowd.

"Does that answer your questions?"

Hermione heard Narcissa's words echo into the sudden silence, but it wasn't until Narcissa had Disapparated them away amid the camera flares that her mind caught up. Her brain had shut off the moment Narcissa's lips touched hers.

"I'm sorry," she gasped when the world stopped spinning and her feet hit the floorboards of the Manor entryway. "I'm so sorry, I froze, I—I won't do it again I swear!"

"Hush," Narcissa insisted, keeping hold of Hermione's arms, sliding her palms up to grasp the younger witch's shoulders. "It's alright; you were fine. It will get easier with time, and with that picture splashed across the papers, everything should go quickly, now."

Hermione shook her head. "It wasn't fine! I nearly ran away, I—"

"—stayed. You stayed. You gave me exactly what I needed."

Narcissa's hand rose again, lifting to brush Hermione's hair away from her face. Her fingertips came to rest against Hermione's temple, a faint, comforting warmth.

"I did?" she queried, feeling her pulse finally begin to slow. "You mean that?"

"You did, and I trust you'll do the same tomorrow, and the next, as long as we need." At Hermione's slow, accepting nod, her words changed direction. "It's only late afternoon, but I know neither of us got a good night's rest. Don't cook tonight. Take some time for yourself. I'm going to let Lucius out again while he's still feeling… under the weather."

Hermione stiffened. "You are? You'll be alright? Should I come, should I—"

Leaning forward, Narcissa pressed her lips to Hermione's forehead, lingering as she drew in a breath of air. Pulling away with a gentle smile, she exhaled her parting words. "I can handle my husband."

In bed, Hermione wondered over the kiss. She wondered that Narcissa had done it, and she wondered that, in the last moment, she had reflexively kissed her back. She tried to think what it meant—not the kiss itself, she knew only too well what that was for, but her own response—tried to remember that the last woman she had kissed before that moment had been Narcissa's sister, of all people, and the one before that was Ronald "Golden Trio" Weasley, for Merlin's sake. Somehow, though, it was far more difficult to bring to mind Andromeda's warm passion than Narcissa's careful, calculated kiss. Narcissa's lips were not nearly so cold as her words would suggest, and Hermione couldn't seem to push them from her mind.
She sat awake for an hour, bundled up in the blankets and staring at her own shadowy features in the mirror, dim light from the moon reflecting off the snow out the window, highlighting her own confusion and the faint motion of her father's obituary's waving hand. Was there any chance Narcissa had some of these same stray thoughts? Could there be any part of her that considered Hermione as more than a means to an end? Of course not, she mused, and yet... That moment, the moment when Lucius had flung the bookcase at her… that had been the moment when Narcissa slipped, when she lost some control of her emotions, when Lucius was able to break through. Narcissa had felt something when Hermione was in danger that was more than any fear for her own safety, and as much as Hermione wanted to push that thought aside, she couldn't, not with the ghost of Narcissa's kiss haunting her tired mind and the shadow of her fingertips still raising goose bumps along the curve of her wrist.

There were thoughts she didn't dare to look at, thoughts that hid behind row after row of carefully compartmentalized planning. If she dared to look, there was more. They were good in public. There was no need for this level of continued interaction, for the too-frequent contact, the extra time, the sought-out hours in the library. Why keep taking the time for Hermione when Narcissa could be finalizing everything for her freedom, for her suit against the Ministry and her trip to reunite more permanently with her son? Why, then, had Hermione been offered scarcely a moment alone since their charade began?

Logically, her mind scolded, because Narcissa doesn't want to leave anything to chance. I could so easily ruin all of this, and she has to be sure I'll keep playing my part. Practice makes perfect, after all. Even so, Hermione was having a hard time holding on to mere logic. There was no room for logic in this home, in this family, with these people. There was only room for a quiet sort of war: strategy and survival. As she finally leant back against the pillows and gave in to the draw of sleep, she tried to silence her rioting mind. There aren't any conclusions worth coming to. Don't think about more, don't waste time on logic, or I'm already five steps behind, and I lose.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Narcissa sat at the kitchen table when Hermione came down the next morning. Lucius was leaning against the counter.

As soon as Hermione saw him, she stiffened and tugged out her wand, but Narcissa saw the motion and shook her head. At a closer glance, the scene was anything but threatening. Lucius’s shoulders were slumped, his hair—usually groomed to the point of ridiculous impeccability—was flat and lackluster, and his frown was resigned rather than angry. He didn't even turn to look when Hermione entered.

"What do I get if I agree?" he asked, shoulders limp, voice tired.

Narcissa's reply was curt. "My cooperation." When her brisk answer received a glare from her husband's otherwise despondent eyes, she elaborated. "I'll go along with whatever story you spin. I'll agree that it was your idea all along, that we've merely been working through the red tape. You can say this was nothing but formality; you left me long before the affair bega—"

"Say there was no affair!" he bellowed, finally raising his chin in a burst of anger and dragging his glare up from the floor. At the steel in Narcissa's gaze, however, he visibly flinched.

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"Have you not seen the papers, Lucius?" Narcissa asked, voice soft but deadly. "It's far too late for that."

Lucius crossed to the table and slid the latest *Prophet* out from under Narcissa's cup of tea. "What have you done this time?"

Hermione had already seen the incriminating image of their kiss. The moments before their embrace had been given a teasing place in the front page listings with the taunting tagline *“Latest developments in Malfoy affair!”* leading readers to a full three-quarters spread on page six which displayed the entire scene, looping again and again from the moment Narcissa pulled her close to the silent movement of her lips mouthing, "Does that answer your questions?"

Just thinking about the spectacle had Hermione blushing, and the angry flush rising on Lucius's forehead wasn't helping her embarrassment. He spluttered out nonsense syllables for a moment as the paper crumpled in his fists, then crossed to the fire and flung the incriminating wad in to burn. "You — You and— You actually—aargh!"

Before Lucius could find words, a tap at the window behind him interrupted his incoherent outrage. All eyes turned to the glass and the mail bird peering through it. It tapped again. Lucius took one look at his name on the front of the envelope in the owl's beak and turned away with a scowl.

"That's a Ministry owl, Lucius," Narcissa said.

"I know that!" he snapped.

"Then you know perfectly well what happens if you opt to ignore it."

With a growl, he shoved open the window, missing the bird by only a few well-trained centimeters. Ministry birds were used to a chilly welcome.
Lucius ripped open the envelope with shaking hands, muttering under his breath as he read the summons. "You must appear before the marriage council to renounce your vows in one month's time."—a month! You intend to drag out this farce for an entire month?"

Hermione, too, turned questioning eyes to Narcissa. What had happened to it all going quickly, now?

"I don't have any choice in the matter," Narcissa answered, biting her lip and shooting an apologetic glance towards Hermione. "The Ministry has to schedule things carefully. They've decided two Dementors will be needed to escort Bellatrix to the council. and borrowing them from Azkaban takes time. I'm sorry."

Lucius had been staring at the summons for most of Narcissa's reply, but he looked up for the last words. "You apologize to her?" he spat. He turned to the fire and threw in the letter, but his attempt to send the summons the way of the newspaper from moments before was futile. The fire spat back the official Ministry documents unsinged and they drifted to settle by Lucius's feet. With the tip of his walking stick, he tried to shove the offending papers into the heart of the flames, but the fire parted around them and the coals turned cold and black in an instant. His cane was not so lucky, the ornamental black lacquer beginning to smoke and spark after only moments in the fire. Giving up, Lucius smothered the smolder at the tip of his cane in the hem of his cloak and turned to storm from the room, only to nearly crash head-on into Hermione. His startled eyes showed just how quickly he had forgotten her presence in the room.

His pause gave Narcissa time for a parting question. "You never answered me. Do we have a deal, Lucius?"

"What's the alternative?" he drawled. He didn't turn, his glare piercing Hermione instead. "What more could you possibly—"

Narcissa silenced him in an instant. "You know perfectly well how capable I am when it comes to destroying reputations. I've been quite reasonable, so far. All things considered, I've even been kind. Should you attempt to make this any more difficult than it has to be, the entire wizarding world will hear everything you've tried so hard to keep hidden. I won't hesitate to tell the press just how weak you are, how useless you were during the war, completely incapable of protecting your family, your livelihood. I'll not stop. There won't be a soul who hasn't heard how little I ever felt for you, how in love I am now. With her. How incredibly subservient you must be, to allow the affair to go on so long unpunished."

Hermione had witnessed Narcissa's biting scorn before, but never like this, never filled with such cold, deadly intent.

Lucius stood only inches from her, eyes bloodshot, shoulders heaving with anger, and for a moment, Hermione feared he would lash out, strike her, but his malice emerged only in angry, bitter words. "Fine. Fine! You have your deal. I'll take it. I'll find my own affair! I'm starting this divorce. I'm the one leaving you."

"Agreed," Narcissa said.

Narcissa waved Hermione aside, and he was gone.

Hermione stayed in the doorway and watched a fleck of blackened newspaper drift from the fire towards the open window. Narcissa seemed to be tracing the same path with her eyes, but as she reached for her cup of tea, Hermione caught sight of her subtly shaking hands. "Are you alright?" she asked softly, stepping into the room and waving the window shut with her wand.
Narcissa stared into her tea. "Yes and no."

The candid answer startled her. "Are you worried about—" She sat across from Narcissa and cast her eyes towards the door. "—him?"

Narcissa shook her head. "No. I wouldn't put it past my husband to try another time or two to change my mind, but it isn't that. This is… just an unpleasant touch of déjà vu. Nothing to concern yourself with."

As Narcissa took a sip of her tea and lowered the cup once again, Hermione could see tremors racing across the surface of the water. A month ago, Hermione would have left well enough alone, but she had other instincts now, and they pushed her to offer what comfort she could. She wouldn't reach out and take the other witch's hand, not while they were alone, far from the public eye, but if not physical comfort, she could offer her words. "I won't pry," Hermione said softly. She stood and began gathering the ingredients she needed to make homemade granola for breakfast, giving Narcissa a semblance of privacy as she added, "If you'd like to talk, though…"

There was a lingering silence as she poured the oats into a skillet, but eventually, Narcissa spoke. "There was a Dementor at the original handfast. Now I'm to welcome two more into my home to end it and, well... I've never cared for Dementors. I don't supposed anyone does but I—" Narcissa's eyes followed the tip of Hermione's wand as she stirred and flipped the oats in the magically-heated pan, but her stare was distant, and she hardly seemed to see Hermione at all. "My husband and I fell out of favor during the war, when Draco failed to follow through on… a certain order, so we offered the Dark Lord our home. There were always Dementors coming and going through Malfoy Manor, off to do his bidding somewhere, but while they were here… he seemed to take great pleasure in letting them feed. He'd offer them a snack. Prisoners, usually, since we kept those. But sometimes he—"

Hermione watched over the edge of the hovering pan as Narcissa reached for her tea, but her hand was shaking so badly that she didn't even try to pick it up.

"—sometimes he was disappointed in one of his own. It was often my husband. He received more than one taste of the kiss. Never me, personally. I think Bella must have kept me from that, but I could... I could feel a shadow of it when they fed on Lucius, and… the cold… Anyway, it was just... another part of life, back then, until..." The hand resting on the table clenched into a trembling fist. "Once he caught Draco doing something… something childish, ridiculous, harmless. He was folding up bits of paper and enchanting them, passing notes to two of the other boys in the middle of a full company meeting and he—" Narcissa turned away from Hermione, starring out the window instead. "One moment there was a little paper bird dancing at the tip of his wand, and the next it was set on fire by the Dark Lord's anger, falling to the table in a heap of ash and then... then the Dementor was there, feeding and feeding, and— my son was twitching on the floor, going limp, and it just kept—"

When Narcissa's words ground to a shuddering halt, Hermione let the pan clatter on top of the stove and crossed to the other witch, reaching out and resting a hand between her trembling shoulders, unable to keep from offering whatever tentative comfort she could. To her surprise, Narcissa leaned into the touch. She turned her neck and rested her forehead against Hermione's arm, reaching out and clasping the younger witch's spare hand between her own.

"I thought it was never going to end. I've never had so little control in all my life, I—I wanted to rip the creature off of him with my bare hands, but all I could do was sit there and listen to my husband's pitiful, disgusting mind as he thought, Thank Merlin it isn't me this time around."

Had it been anyone else, Hermione would have expected Narcissa's shaking shoulders to be accompanied by tears, but when the older witch glanced up at her, her eyes were as cold and clear as ever. "I'm so sorry," Hermione said. She hadn't the slightest idea how else to respond to something
so raw. It was the most she had heard of the time during the war, and this dark, sickening, compelling world Narcissa spoke of with so much pain in her voice was nothing Hermione might have imagined the inner circle to have lived.

Narcissa gave her hand a gentle squeeze, acknowledging her words. "I will never live that way again."

Breakfast was a somber affair, and Narcissa made a quick departure to the study afterwards, so Hermione's wanderings led her out into the grounds. She didn't fight the urge to distance herself from the Manor and all it held. After that... enlightening morning, she wasn't in the mood for company.

It was a clear, windless day, but the sun did little to battle the inescapable February chill. The cold had been unrepentant; though quite some time had passed since the last snowfall, a thick layer of dirty white still covered the earth at shin-height all throughout the grounds. Hermione stared out across the lawns. She hadn't explored in winter, not since doing her best to enchant a few pockets of life against the looming snowfall, but there were fresh footprints all over the paths, heading out well beyond a walk from door to gate.

Hermione easily recognized the imprint of one particular heel as Andromeda's. It belonged to a particular pair of dragon-hide winter boots, Andromeda's favorite, and ones which she had a habit of leaving to drip in the entryway. The dragon-hide resisted warming spells, so Hermione had moved them to dry by the fire too many times to count. She would recognize that tread anywhere.

Mixed in all about the path Andromeda had left, however, was a more disturbing set of tracks with ten distinct toes. Bellatrix, Hermione assumed. Who else would be daft enough to wander the grounds with bare feet in the middle of the winter? That aside, Hermione could recall a number of times when some argument or another between the middle and eldest sisters had sent Bellatrix storming out the door, and she was the only one who wouldn't be able to summon shoes to follow her.

Andromeda's footprints didn't go very far, and Bellatrix's resolve wavered not long after, the bare feet turning back the way Hermione had come, but a third set of prints followed along beside her, leading her further into the grounds. She couldn't pinpoint these; they may very well have belonged to anyone. It was doubtful that Andromeda owned only one pair of winter boots, Bellatrix could have eventually remembered a pair of shoes, and while Hermione had never known Narcissa or Lucius to venture outdoors unnecessarily, that didn't mean it had never happened.

She didn't give the footprints another thought until she reached the vegetable garden.

The tomato vines were nothing more than ghostly heaps in the show, buried and forgotten once their fruit had been picked, but her one little bean plant still stood tall in the invisible bubble of warmth she had enchanted for it. Surprisingly tall, in fact. It had grown taller than the borders of her spell, leaving a single leaf exposed to the snow that now delicately dusted its tracery of veins. Hermione moved closer with a frown. That shouldn't have been possible. It was far taller than the slender stake the bean plant had originally been wrapped about, but as she approached, she saw that someone had replaced it with a tall, dead branch, and the bean had taken to its new guide with a delighted growth spurt.

The same unidentified footprints she had followed here were all over this patch of land. They had trampled down the snow and dead tomatoes in equal measure, and a frozen bag of *Ferzano's Fantastic Fertilizer!* was slumped and frosted beside her. She had seen heaps of the old bags in the garden shed, but never left outside.
Hermione gently coaxed her warming spell upwards, giving the bean more room to grow, then knelt down beside it, examining the blue pellets of fertilizer as well as the distinct tread of her mystery gardener. Who in Merlin's name would have taken the time to care for her ridiculous little pity-bean, let alone drag a bag of old fertilizer all the way from the garden shed in the snow? Andromeda had followed her to the garden before, but had never seemed particularly inclined towards touching the dirt herself, and Narcissa would hardly have had the spare time. Bellatrix… well… Hermione was well aware of her past with these cursed acres. Would she really go through all the trouble of keeping a plant alive instead of carving her signature path of destruction on the rare occasion she stormed out here? Beyond that, would she venture into the garden shed to do so? Then again, Hermione mused as she traced the tip of one gloved finger along the outline of a heel, she supposed Bellatrix's flippant attitude towards even the darkest moments in her past would likely make an effective barrier against any lingering fear or remorse that might otherwise keep her away from the site of her past murder. Perhaps something had driven her back to the gardens after all.

Her curiosity got the best of her and she drew her wand from her sleeve, remembering just how long it had been since she tried crafting anything new with magic. The tip of her wand hovered over the nearest clear footprint. She was fairly certain this was something she could do… some sort of charm… She wanted to know who had walked here last, so she needed the right tint of magic to call out whatever shadow remained of the mystery witch… something between the teal used to reveal human presence and the deep navy that could summon the shadow of the most recent spell from a wand. After shuffling through an array of blues in her mind, she settled on something that felt spell-worthy, pressed the tip of her wand into the center of the footprint, and cast.

Hermione felt a spark of pride when it worked. A colorless, cloaked blur of a human form burst upwards from the snow in a swirl of powder, and though the remnant faded quickly out of sight, Hermione could easily identify Bellatrix's wild curls silhouetted against the horizon. She rose and brushed the snow from the knees of her robes, frowning at the path Bellatrix's footprints took beyond the garden. She wasn't surprised, not exactly, but it was a strange image all the same.

She followed the footprints down the lawns, the trodden snow leading her all the way to the base of the far wall. There, Bellatrix's path turned and skirted the edge of her high-stone prison. The footsteps paid no heed to the bushes and hedges they encountered, trampling over grass and shrubbery with equal aplomb until they paused without warning at the side of the snow-buried pond.

Hermione knew Bellatrix had stopped here; there was a human-sized dent in the snow, as though Bellatrix had just decided to quit walking, fall over, and take a nap beside the frozen cattails. It was such a strange thought that Hermione didn't know whether to laugh… or to join her. She studied the outline for a moment, then slumped down in the pristine snowbank beside it with a sigh. She wasn't surprised, not exactly, but it was a strange image all the same.

She followed the footprints down the lawns, the trodden snow leading her all the way to the base of the far wall. There, Bellatrix's path turned and skirted the edge of her high-stone prison. The footsteps paid no heed to the bushes and hedges they encountered, trampling over grass and shrubbery with equal aplomb until they paused without warning at the side of the snow-buried pond.

The hint of pale blue at the far horizon reminded Hermione of Narcissa's eyes.

She groaned, turning and burying her head in the snow. So much for leaving her worries back behind the Manor doors. Everything about Narcissa was just so… so much. She was so intense, so compelling… even in her distance. And so beautiful, Hermione admitted to herself, blinking melted snow out of her eyes. And so… complicated. Lately, she was beginning to realize that what little remained of Narcissa Malfoy was dying with each passing day, each small victory over Lucius, each shared memory, and the Narcissa Black that fought to reclaim her freedom was a force of nature, the
eye of some great storm that grew fierce and inescapable, nourished by each spurned emotion she
didn't dare keep inside herself. Narcissa could so easily overwhelm anyone standing too close,
whether she intended to or not.

Even out here, Hermione was standing far, far too close for safety. She didn't know how she was
going to weather another month of this perilous game.

And yet, a week passed, then most of another, and very little changed. Her dates with Narcissa grew
more and more sporadic without the pressing need of publicity from the weeks before. The less time
they spent away, the more Andromeda was able leave, and she seemed to throw herself into her
future at Hogwarts with scarcely a glance back. Bellatrix kept her own silent council somewhere
above their heads, disappearing the food Hermione made just as she always had, but never venturing
downstairs. Luscius made himself scarce. Hermione's didn't complain.

Narcissa, meanwhile, insisted on taking Hermione out just often enough to keep the media interested
and to keep Lucius on edge, but the press was more respectful, and there were no more kisses.

Hermione did her best to convince herself she wasn't disappointed.

Their time in the library continued as well, but it was quieter than it had been in the past. Hermione
knew she had only herself to blame. She immersed herself in learning as much as she could of the
Elvin tongue, and though Narcissa was always willing to lend a hand with a difficult translation,
Hermione rarely asked. She told herself that it was best to give Narcissa time and space to sort out
the legal mess her life had become, but even when piles of documents followed Narcissa into the
library and corroborated her excuse, part of the younger witch knew it was not so simple. Spending
time with Narcissa had come to mean… too much. Her smiles when Narcissa brushed a hand over
her shoulder in passing had become too real, as had the chill such innocuous gestures sent racing
down her spine. She hated this feeling, the thought that she and Narcissa could stand in the same
place, living the same moment together, but her every action could mean one thing to Hermione and
something else entirely to the other witch. Narcissa had been nothing but honest with her, but
Hermione didn't dare be honest with herself. It began feeling… deceitful, so she did her best to keep
herself distant from the situation—and the other woman—altogether.

Narcissa hardly seemed to notice. The closer the council date drew, the more she disappeared into
the papers and documents she surrounded herself with. When Hermione eventually asked, she
explained what she was doing. "This isn't a one step process. Separating myself from my husband is
only the beginning. This—" She held up a lengthy roll of parchment. "—is the start of proceedings to
have the remainder of his sentence carried out under someone else's guardianship. I'm recommending
an actual prison, this time, but we'll see." Another bit of parchment was a draft of her petition to be
allowed to leave England, while a surprising packet of Muggle paperwork marked her passport
application. "I'm not taking any chances," Narcissa insisted. "I'm going after my son. I haven't been
able to make things right, not while I'm living under this roof. It's always been my word against
Lucius's about too many things. It was always easier for him to just… be somewhere else. I
understand why he left. Now it's my turn."

The smile she offered afterwards was apologetic. "I didn't think it would take quite this much time,
though," she admitted.

Hermione was quick to assure her that she understood, and Narcissa's attention turned back to the
documents.

"Thank you. Now, you wouldn't happen to know how to take a photograph that doesn't move,
would you?" she asked, waving one of the Muggle papers about in clear exasperation.
Between the two of them, they eventually managed it.

Without near-daily updates of their "affair" appearing in the papers, days were beginning to blur together. If not for Rommie, Hermione might have forgotten the significance of passing time altogether.

After one of her afternoon shopping excursions, the elf greeted her in the kitchen with shelves of the usual groceries and arms full of something unexpected. "Missus didn't ask for anything special, but Rommie was just thinking to pick up some nice chocolates for the holiday."

"Holiday?" Hermione asked, staring down in confusion at the frilly, heart-shaped box she had just been handed.

"Yes, missus. It's the fourteenth."

Hermione blinked once, still lost, then gasped and dropped the box of chocolates as though it had bitten her. "Valentine's Day? No. Already?"

Rommie caught the box before it could hit the floor. "Aye, missus. Thought you might be wanting to give these to the mistresses with their lunches."

"Oh, bugger," Hermione muttered. "Thank you, Rommie," she added. "I'd forgotten completely." She reluctantly took the proffered chocolates and added one of the treats to each of the lunch trays she had prepared. It was a very nice thought. Hermione just wished she'd remembered on her own. "Would you like one?" she asked the elf, and to her surprise, Rommie nodded, carefully selecting the smallest one as her ears twitched happily.

Hermione brought Narcissa’s to the study in person.

"Do you know what day it is?" she asked as she entered. She caught Narcissa with her chin resting in one palm, eyes closed. If Hermione wasn't mistaken, that was the same set of robes she'd been wearing the past evening.

Narcissa blinked up at her in obvious confusion. She looked exhausted.

"More importantly," Hermione added, "have you gotten any sleep in the past few days?"

Narcissa's eyebrows knit together and she waved off Hermione's concern. "A bit. Enough. Just needed to get up early today. Had to be sure the closure forms went out by this morning and I—" Narcissa caught sight of the chocolate heart next to the salad on Hermione's tray. "What's—Wait. This morning. Oh. The fourteenth. That's—"

Hermione nodded. "I'd forgotten all about it, but Rommie brought chocolate back from the shops. I was wondering if... well... should we go out today?" She set the tray down on the side of the desk least covered in parchment. "It has been a while."

Narcissa glanced at the food, then up at the clock. "They will expect it, won't they? The press. Lunch in some frilly café or a romantic dinner. It's the sort of thing one does. I suppose we should, but... I'd really rather not." The exhaustion in Narcissa's voice was palpable.

"Me either," Hermione admitted, sitting in the chair across the desk from Narcissa with a sigh. Narcissa offered an understanding smile. "We're of the same mind, then. Let's not. Let's let them speculate, see what sort of sordid rumors our absence might produce."
Hermione chuckled, blushing. Those were some rather predictable rumors. "Are you going to be locked in here all day?" she asked, genuinely concerned for how much time these legal shenanigans were stealing from Narcissa's usual routines.

Still staring at the paper in front of her, Narcissa slowly shook her head. "I was going to, but you're right. I've been at it too long." She signed the page with a quick stroke of the quill before meeting Hermione's eyes. "Let's…" she trailed off. "That is… you've been a bit busy the last few days as well, if I'm not mistaken."

Hermione's stomach lurched and she bit back a reflexive apology, but Narcissa didn't seem to notice the embarrassed flush on her cheeks.

"I didn't want to assume anything, but if you don't have other plans…?"

At Narcissa's arched eyebrow, Hermione shook her head. She never had other plans. Not real ones.

"Spend the day with me, then. I imagine our usual seats in the library have missed us, and we're both overdue for a… less structured afternoon." Without waiting for Hermione's reply, Narcissa stood and rolled her shoulders in a quick stretch. An odd image of the witch shrugging water off of parchment-bound wings danced in Hermione's mind for a moment, and she smiled as Narcissa added, "I haven't touched an actual book in days."

Hermione followed her from the room without protest.

In the library, it was surprisingly easy to fall into old patterns. Their chairs welcomed them back with open arms, and all it took was a gentle prompt from Narcissa to start their quiet conversation. "Have you found anything interesting, lately? I know you've been at the scrolls for days."

Hermione managed to smile through the mild guilt she still felt at having avoided Narcissa for so many days, and she humored the other witch's question even as she shook her head. "Nothing I'm sure you didn't already find fifteen years ago."

Narcissa chuckled. "You're probably right, of course."

Narcissa's wry smile was anything but modest, but Hermione knew she had earned that pride. The more Hermione had explored the archives and accompanying academic texts, the more she realized how impressive Narcissa's "pet project" really was. She had taken fragments of a long-dead language and pieced together a semblance of literary history, a piece of lost culture that still baffled most historians, and she had done it for no reason beyond… wanting to.

"Why Elves?" Hermione abruptly asked. It was a question that had been in the back of her mind for some time. "Of all the things you could have chosen to study…?"

If Hermione had been expecting some astute, academic response, the sort she usually got when questioning Narcissa about anything on these shelves, she might have been disappointed by Narcissa's astonishing burst of rich, full laughter. As it was, she was instantly distracted by the astonishing, rare sound. Only moments ago, Narcissa had seemed on the verge of falling asleep, but something had visibly shifted, and there was a brightness in her eyes that Hermione couldn't begin to make sense of.

"Oh, that's quite a story," she finally replied, hiding her seemingly uncontrollable smile behind her hand. Hermione wondered what on earth had gotten into her. "In fact, it wasn't the Elves at all. It started with poetry."

"Did it really?" asked Hermione. She couldn't decide if Narcissa's inexplicable good mood was a
byproduct of sleep deprivation or something more sinister. When Narcissa started telling her story, however, Hermione gave up on questioning it, and just... let herself enjoy.

"Oh, yes. I discovered poetry quite by accident when I was younger. Bella needed to go school shopping in Diagon and our parents brought me and Andy along. While Bella was getting textbooks, I was left wandering around Flourish and Blotts with... some sort of fizz-pop, I think, and I managed to get that appalling, sticky, sugary goop all over one of the display books. I was so terrified of getting in trouble for ruining a book that I hid it in my robes; set off all sorts of alarms, of course, but no one would dare accuse my family of stealing anything, so no one ever did find out. In fact—" A still-smiling Narcissa rose and whirled out of sight among the shelves, leaving a bemused Hermione to stare after her, still mentally giggling at the image of a younger Narcissa Black wandering about Diagon with a lollipop and a stolen book.

"—here it is!" Narcissa called out. A moment later, she walked back into Hermione's line of sight with a slim paperback in hand. "I thought I remembered keeping it, and I knew exactly what it was, even after all these years."

She handed the book over to Hermione so quickly that it nearly landed on the floor. "A Few Figs from Thistles," Hermione read aloud. "Edna St. Vincent Millay." She flipped past the table of contents and was immediately confronted by a large, brownish stain over the first poem. "I see Flourish and Blotts doesn't have near the level of cleaning charms your personal collection does."

Narcissa chuckled. "Evidently not." As Hermione skimmed the words of poetry, Narcissa recited the first few aloud, "'My candle burns at both ends; It will not last the night.' It's the first poem I ever remember reading. I was far too young for most of Millay, but even as a child, she had this... light lyricism that drew me in to her early works. I found her darker side much later. I hear she was a remarkable witch. Should have loved to have met her, but she died probably four or five years before I was born."

"This is a Muggle publication," Hermione noticed, only half-listening to Narcissa's rapid words. "American, too." She was distracted by the clearly non-wizarding legal information on the page which bore the other half of the lollipop stain.

Narcissa nodded. "There have been so few great witches to come from the Americas."

Hermione blinked at that matter-of-fact dismissal. Narcissa's moments of prejudice had come to surprise Hermione more and more as they spent time together. Her pure-blood upbringing emerged in unexpected ways, often just in time to remind Hermione that this woman had been raised in another era altogether, and not entirely by virtue of her age.

"Millay, though... she was quite the exception. And very non-traditional. She had her first literary successes in Muggle publications and wasn't really accepted in the wizarding canon until close to her death. She attended some Muggle university... What a shock it must have been for the community on Witch Island, and after seven years at the Institute, too! Besides, she—" Narcissa cut herself off with an apologetic smile. "Sorry. I adore Millay. I could go on for hours."

Before Hermione could so much as glance back down at the book she'd been handed, Narcissa's excited history lesson started up again, barreling right through her apology with a sudden deluge of words on Millay's particular talent with sonnets and her undervalued experiments in the theatre.

Hermione was fascinated by this startling passion she'd accidentally uncovered, but she couldn't even begin to make sense of most of it.

"You look as though I'm speaking a foreign language," said Narcissa after one too many blank stares
from the younger witch.

Hermione shook her head and offered a hesitant laugh. "Ah, sorry. It's just… I've never really read much poetry before. I've no idea about… any of this stuff. I've stumbled across it once or twice, of course, but nothing held my interest."

Instead of the disappointment Hermione expected to see, Narcissa's eyes lit up with the force of her sudden smile. "Nothing? Oh, that just won't do." She stood in a whirl of robes and disappeared once more among the shelves, muttering to herself as she collected first one armful of books, then another, then a third, depositing them on the suddenly too-small table between their chairs. Hermione blinked at the heap of paper and bindings in growing astonishment.

When Narcissa breezed away one more time, Hermione called after her, "Is everything alright?"

A ghostly head reappeared around the edge of a nearby shelf at a distinctly inhuman height, then a ladder squeaked around the corner, carrying its occupant to where Hermione could more fully see her. For a moment, the levity of the past minutes faded from Narcissa's face. She seemed to know immediately what Hermione was asking. "It is. I'm just… not tired anymore. Not in the slightest. Lucius has been drinking all day. He's gone and passed out."

Hermione knitted her brows together. "Are you… drunk?"

Narcissa laughed softly. "Oh, not hardly. Our connection doesn't work like that. No, I only meant that I have… a few moments of relative freedom again, and I intend to use them." She punctuated her words by allowing the last armful of books to clatter atop the others. Finally, Narcissa settled gracefully back into her seat and murmured, "Where to even start? Hmm… prophetic poetry… no, that's boring. Cavendish is rather dry, but—or! Levertov… 'a spring night entered my mind through the tight-closed window…'"

As quickly as Narcissa's serious mood had descended, it disappeared again, replaced by the same quiet, joyous energy that had been driving the youngest Black ever since they entered the library. Hermione found herself with book after book pressed into her hands, lines of poetry and technique and history dripping from Narcissa's lips like thick, wild honey, and... Hermione stopped listening, and that was alright. Narcissa—as thoroughly as she seemed to enjoy sharing this age-old passion with a fresh mind—seemed far more interested in rediscovering the forgotten treasures for herself. There were too many jumbled phrases and half-memorized recitations for Hermione to begin keeping track of, but while she couldn't fully appreciate the words, she couldn't begin to stop listening to Narcissa's alluring silver tongue.

Beyond that, Hermione couldn't tear her eyes away. Narcissa was positively vibrant in her distraction, tugging her chair closer and closer to Hermione's with each new rediscovery until their knees brushed together with every page turn. While Narcissa was constantly glancing up and down between the lines of her books and Hermione's eyes, the younger witch couldn't even spare a glance for the text. First, it was that soft hint of a smile turning up the corner of Narcissa's mouth even as she spoke that stole Hermione's attention. Then, it was the fingers flying between pages one moment and pausing, lingering over a well-loved piece with the caress of a single fingertip the next. Soon, it was the pulse beating between breaths beneath the thin, pale skin at her throat, the stray lock of hair that fluttered in front of her lips, the way the tired darkness beneath her eyes matched the shadow between cheekbone and jaw… Oh no, Hermione thought to herself. More than once, in fact.

But she couldn't bring herself to look away.

Thoughts were there, in the back of her mind. Thoughts that triggered curious and dreaded fears of just what sort of thoughts might be too loud for even Narcissa's careful Legilimency to avoid.
Thoughts that had no place in their charade, their ploy, their staged rapport. Hermione clung to the hope that Narcissa was too distracted to notice her own fragmented attention, and decided that, if Narcissa did stumble across anything in her mind that might give the youngest Black pause, it was decidedly and entirely her own fault for being so… so…

Beautiful.

She was so cursedly beautiful like this, half buried in books and that quiet, delightful brilliance and this rare, warmer joy, and—

Hermione needed to distract herself. She picked up the nearest book, nodded along with Narcissa's words, and wished the text on the page in front of her could actually be as exquisite as Narcissa made it sound, because then, there might be a chance in hell it could pull her attention back from the edge of insanity.

Finally, Narcissa seemed to realize how long she had been carrying on, and Hermione found herself with space to actually read a page or two between bursts of the other witch's dangerous, honeyed words. She slowly picked through the pile on her lap, unsure how most of the books had even gotten there. Setting aside an odd collection of poetry made from newspaper clippings whose often-moving words actually made her a bit dizzy, Hermione uncovered the text that had started it all, still opened to the lollipop-stained page and accompanying poem.

"My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light!"

As Narcissa murmured quietly about art and writing and magic, Hermione could almost sense the witch behind these words, the hint of the other in those four simple lines. She let Narcissa's voice wash over her, let herself turn pages with an open mind, and she decided then and there that poetry was an odd creature, but perhaps not as irrelevant as she had once imagined.

"Hermione," Narcissa said, drawing the younger witch's already fractured attention away from the latest book.

"Hmm?" She dragged her eyes up from the page. The intensity of Narcissa's gaze made Hermione wonder when she had completely lost track of the one-sided conversation, and just how long she had been the subject of that surprisingly attentive stare.

"I'm about to ask for something very selfish," she continued, reaching out and taking the book from Hermione's grasp.

When an explanation was not immediately offered, Hermimone prompted, "Oh?"

Narcissa stared down at the cover of the book she had just taken, running the tip of a finger over the swirled engraving of the title. She seemed to be stalling. Finally, she set the book aside and drew in an audible breath. "I want you to stay here after I leave."

"What?" Hermione spluttered. She pulled back in her chair, no longer caught in the heady daze of the past hours. "Why on earth would I do that?"

Narcissa offered a weak smile at her indignation. "I'll admit, I wondered if my insistence was the
only thing that kept you with us this long, and I suppose that's my answer, but not why I asked. No, it's only—" She ran one fine-boned hand through her hair in a gesture Hermione had come to recognize as embarrassment. "—I know what will happen when I leave. Both Andromeda and Bellatrix will be at each other's throats in a heartbeat and I'm going to get fifteen howlers in the first week demanding I come home at once, and I can't do that. I can't make peace between them forever. But I also… I don't want to see them hurt. If anything truly drastic happens while I'm away, I would come back, but I don't trust either of them not to take advantage of that, to manipulate my concern. I need you to be my eyes and ears, mindre."

Hermione had been shaking her head, waiting for a breath to interject and protest, but the quiet murmur of the Elvin word gave her pause. She swallowed thickly.

"Just for a little while," Narcissa added. She reached out and clasped hold of one of Hermione's hands. "Two or three weeks. If anything happens that I do need to know, you'll be able to contact me. I won't have to sort through the petty anger they'll be losing their minds with for the truth."

"You'd trust me not to just let them kill each other?" Though Hermione's tone was light, even joking, she was all too serious in asking.

Narcissa smiled. "I think you have a complicated relationship with all three of us, but I don't think you want any of us dead."

Hermione's shoulders slumped. "You're not wrong," she muttered. "That wasn't supposed to be my argument, though," she added, starting to pull her hand away from Narcissa's grasp. "There are any number of other reasons why my staying here is honestly the worst idea imaginable."

Narcissa recaptured Hermione's hand with ease, brushing her thumb over the pulse at Hermione's wrist in an absently soothing gesture. "I'm sure there are. I'm not asking forever, though, and there won't be anything to stop you from leaving if it ends up being… too uncomfortable. Would you at least promise to try?"

There was no guile in Narcissa's words, her plea gentle and unassuming, and her hand was warm around Hermione's own.

What's one more month in the grand scheme of things, her thoughts taunted. An entire month with Bellatrix and Andromeda. Alone, she argued back. All for a woman I may never even see again. Happy Valentines Day to me. The denial died somewhere in the depths of Narcissa's entreaty stare, though, and Hermione swallowed back her protests with a nod of resignation. "I'll try."

Chapter End Notes

All poetry in this and future chapters falls in the public domain, and, as such, is no longer subjected to copyright. That being said… credit where credit is due, since these are not, in fact, the fictional witches I usually write:

First Fig
by Edna St. Vincent Millay
The Crack
by Denise Levertov
"Kaiy vor'ecian dien… ah… hmm. Vor'ecian dien niil'de? No. That's not it. Forest. What's the damn word for forest? Trees are kest'de so forest is… oh for Merlin's sake! Why can't I—"

"Lorst'de, missus?"

"Lorst'de! That's it! Thank you—" When the word appeared behind her seemingly out of thin air, Hermione was so caught up in her own meager attempt at writing an Elvish sonnet that she hadn't even given the other presence in the room a second though. Once her practical mind caught up with its creative kin, she turned slowly in her chair. "—Rommie?"

The house-elf was silhouetted in the bathroom doorway, halfway through exchanging Hermione's used towels for clean ones, a task the witch had tried to take on for herself but which Rommie and Atcham would have none of.

"Yes, missus?"

Hermione stood, crossed the room, and squatted down in front of the smaller figure. Staring directly into Rommie's huge, nervous eyes, she asked, "How do you know that word?"

Rommie blinked up at her. "Why, from Rommie's mother, missus."

Hermione rocked back on her heels. "Your mother?"

Rommie grew increasingly fidgety. "Yes, missus. Rommie is knowing lots of the old words."

"The old words," Hermione echoed under her breath.

"Yes, missus. Mother sings them when Rommie was small. Lots and lots of old words, Rommie knows."

Hermione scrambled to her feet. She startled the poor elf to nearly drop the towels she was carrying, but Hermione hardly noticed as she gathered up her quill and the scrap of parchment with her failed line of poetry. It had been a stupid idea, anyway, clearly born of her inescapable fascination with Narcissa Malfoy, not from any sudden desire to become a poet. She scratched through the line without a second thought, crossing back to where Rommie stood. Crouching down once again and balancing the parchment on her knee, Hermione asked, "Could you repeat any of it? The song?"

"Rommie doesn't have Mother's voice, missus," the elf muttered, ears twitching, the tips turning down.

"You wouldn't have to sing, I just wondered—"

Rommie shook her head. "The old words always is singing."

"Oh, well then. Could you—"

To Hermione's surprise, Rommie reluctantly nodded before she could even finish her request. "If the missus insists." The elf cleared her throat with a squeak, then began singing in a soft, tinny soprano. "Co'ee d'elle von lorst'de ka'rhyi…"
Hermione did her best to scribble down what she heard as the house-elf sang. It wasn't the most pleasant of sounds, and it went on rather a long time, but Hermione had Rommie repeat it twice before reigning herself in and letting the confused creature get back to her work. With a phonetic semblance of the strange lullaby inked onto the page, Hermione hurried downstairs in search of Narcissa.

The library was empty, but Hermione found her behind the desk in the main study. "Narcissa! I—" She noticed the mountain of paperwork and the ink stains on Narcissa's fingertips and took a step back. "—can come back later, if you're busy?"

Narcissa had glanced up when Hermione barged in. She glanced back down at the mess of papers around her and shook her head. "No, please, stay. This is the perfect time for a break. Was there something you needed?"

"Well, not needed, no, but I was hoping you could help me translate something?" She stepped forward and set the scrap of parchment in front of the other witch. "It's a mess, I'm sure, but you know so much more of it than I do and—"

Narcissa's eyes widened as she picked up the page. "What is this?" she murmured, but waved away Hermione's words when she started to reply. "One second."

Reaching into the largest drawer, Narcissa drew out a pair of gold-rimmed reading glasses Hermione had never seen before. She perched them distractedly on her nose and ran the tip of her finger down the smudged scrawl of Hermione's transcript. "I recognize some of this. It's… this part here is one of the elves' most famous origin myths, but… much more complete! Terribly misspelled, though. I… and this is… this bit at the end, it looks like the Chronicle of the Last Days but… this is different, it's —" Narcissa glanced up and cut herself off. "—Why are you looking at me like that?"

Hermione swallowed thickly and shook herself. Narcissa looked so different with glasses on that it had actually distracted Hermione to the point of missing most of the other witch's words. The little metal frames had the uncanny effect of making her look both older and… softer than she usually appeared. They were a startling mark of vulnerability, but the pale eyes peering up over the rims were as clear and piercing as ever. "Sorry, I just… I've never seen you in those."

Narcissa blinked, reaching up absentmindedly and pressing the frames farther up the bridge of her nose before lowering her gaze back to the parchment. "Oh. Yes, well… The library has charms for ease-of-reading. Your atrocious scribble comes with no such luxury. Speaking of which—" Narcissa set down the parchment and tugged off the glasses in one fluid motion, tapping the end of one side against her bottom lip. "—how in Merlin's name did you get this?"

"From Rommie," Hermione said, crossing behind the desk to look over Narcissa's shoulder at the page again. "You recognize it, then?"

"Rommie?" Narcissa echoed. "Our house-elf?"

"Yes. Exactly."

"She can't even read!"

"Whose fault is that? Hermione thought, but bit back the words before they could escape. "No, but she didn't need to read to remember this. It was a song her mother used to sing to her."

Narcissa's fingers crinkled the edge of the paper as her grip tightened. "You can't possibly mean—"

Hermione leaned closer, doing her best to pick out the occasional word or phrase she recognized.
"You said that first part is an origin myth, right? I see a line about the heart of the forest... a great darkness... is that a cave? The light of that next part would suggest—"

"—leaving a cave. You're right! Painful light. Light that breaks, or erases—"

"—House-elves. You can't deny that it makes sense! If this is the history, the language of house-elves, with their huge eyes... They must have been cave-dwelling for centuries before we discovered them!"

"This can't be about house-elves!" Narcissa snapped, no longer caught in the moment of discovery. "This is High Elvish!"

Hermione shook her head. She had had more time with the words, more repetitions in Rommie's reedy, well-intentioned crooning to make connections even without a translation, and she thought she just may have stumbled across something huge. "Could you flip it over again?" she asked, ignoring Narcissa's exclamation. "You said this second part is about the last days. You showed me that scroll, right? The burnt one. There are only a few phrases on it about the end of an age, but look at what we've been missing! This—" Hermione reached out and tapped one smudged word that appeared over and over again on the page. "—is the word for us. For humans. Or, for wizards, rather. We were the end of their age. High elves didn't go extinct, did they? Or, at least, not on their own."

Narcissa was shaking her head, but she couldn't seem to find words to reject Hermione's tentative conclusion.

"The high elves weren't some mythical, pre-human race that died out after all! We—" Hermione's tone sobered. "—found the elves. We... let's see—" Hermione pulled together a few of the other words she knew. "—burned. Borecian. Fire. Borsiege. Shar'hotan. Killed. We must have gone to war with them, and when we won... we enslaved them."

Narcissa grew still during Hermione's words. "What of all their culture, then? The high elves were a civilization far more advanced than we were at the time! They couldn't have been... house-elves. They were creatures of... of luxury, of beauty and such self-sufficiency they had all the time in the world for poetry and art and—"

"—and they were largely better than us! At so many things! We do have records of that much, of defeats in battles fought against them... It must have taken more than a century to overcome them. No wonder we rewrote history with High Elves as tall, beautiful, godlike beings... Made it all the easier for us to lose. A species with magic near as strong as ours and a civilization far more advanced...? That would be a worthy enemy. It couldn't be little creatures living in the ground that may well have wiped wizardkind off the earth in a heartbeat, had they been so inclined. It had to be someone we could... lose to graciously. If I know anything about the wizarding world, it's this never-ending fear of those different from us. No wonder we destroyed any evidence that the race we took on as servants once thrived beyond our wildest imaginings! No wonder we don't let them to use wands or to read and write, and yet—"

"—this survived," Narcissa cut in, voice soft. She picked up the parchment again and turned it over and over in her hands. "Passed on from one generation to the next. The entire story of their people..."

"A lullaby," Hermione finished.

"A lullaby," Narcissa echoed.

Silence fell in the room as Narcissa studied the back of the parchment, reading through Hermione's
scrawl again and again.

"I'm right, aren't I?" Hermione asked. It was an astonishing discovery, to learn that house-elves were not the lesser subspecies of elf they had long believed them to be, and Hermione intended to see this through to the end. "We've had it all wrong for centuries."

"You very well may be," Narcissa murmured, finally looking up from the words. "Not that it does much good for anyone, now. I'm just about the only elfish scholar left alive."

"You have to do something, then!" Hermione insisted, surprised at Narcissa's dismissive words. "You're probably the only one who can."

"Well, I can't imagine what. Andromeda has asked our elves if they want their freedom plenty of times before. They've no interest in it. They're content."

"They're not content! They—they're exploited! They haven't had any choice in this in centuries, not really. Where else could they go! Of course they don't want their freedom."

One of Narcissa's eyebrows had been creeping higher and higher as Hermione's insistence built. "And what would you have me do? Give it to them anyway? Pay them with gold they already have almost complete access too? Force them to make their own way in the world?"

Hermione scowled. "You could at least stop treating them as... as animals!" She grabbed up the now much-creased scrap of parchment and brandished it only a few inches from Narcissa's face. "Rommie knows more of this tongue than a lifetime of scholars but she wouldn't know she was looking at it if you dumped the entire library's worth of scrolls in her lap! You've kept them like this! You've made it impossible for them to ever have a hope of being part of the wizarding world. I mean, for Merlin's sake, you could have at least let them read! You could at least let them know about their history, their art, their own culture. You—"

"You're right, Hermione."

"—could at least try to... Wait. Excuse me?"

Narcissa gently extracted the parchment from between Hermione's trembling fingers. "You're absolutely right. There are a few things I could do, and if it means this much to you, I will."

Hermione opened her mouth, but no sound emerged, so she closed it again.

"I will see if Bellatrix knows what sort of wards keep Rommie and Atcham out of the library. If she doesn't know, I'll go digging in my parents' records, though heaven knows what a nightmare that will be."

Hermione's brows knitted together. "I don't want you to do it just because I asked you to. I want you to do it because, well, because it's the right thing to do. Because you care. Because you actually think that house-elves deserve a better life than this."

Narcissa's answering sigh was less than patient. "Hermione. Really. This life is far better than anything else they might have made for themselves. We've given the two of them far more freedom than most, a reasonably safe life with no fear of going cold or hungry or falling ill. I realize now I've also clearly misjudged them, and I'll admit that much, but whatever history led them here, they are what they are."

Narcissa's last words grated at something in Hermione, drawing the corners of her lips down into a scowl. "Is that what you think of me, then?" she muttered.
"What?"

"Is that what you think of me, then?" repeated Hermione, voice louder.

"What in Merlin's name—"

"Oh, don't start. You may as well have been talking about me, just then. And you wouldn't be wrong. This is a better life than I might have made for myself, with some taste of freedom and all my most basic needs cared for, but you can't erase the past! If misfortunes of birth and a lack of education mean you don't think their life is worth anything more than an eternity washing towels and running errands, I don't see why you'd waste a moment of your time with me."

Hermione turned away, blinking furiously against the hint of hot tears threatening in her eyes, because she wasn't upset, not really. She was just… angry! She had almost thought the Narcissa she'd come to know these past weeks was an entirely different Narcissa than the one who had addressed her as a Mudblood and met her with nothing but derision and disdain, but clearly, she had let herself be far, far too distracted by a pretty voice and it's dangerously placating words.

"Hermione, I— I don't even know where to begin. You know that isn't how I think of you. Is that how you see yourself, as nothing more than another house-elf to us?"

"No!" Hermione snapped, turning back to face the other witch. "No, I don't see myself like that, and I'm tired of… of everyone expecting me to! I know that my life is worth something. I'm not just some beaten-down child waiting to be pulled off the streets by a pretty savior with a heart and pockets of gold. I take pride in what I've been able to do here, and I'm not just going to— to fall for everyone who shows me more kindness than they think I've earned." Hermione no longer cared about the tears. "But you know what? I don't think I'm anything more than another house-elf, because those two elves have done so much for your family for so long, and they take pride in what they do, too, and their lives are worth just as much as mine, and yours, and if I had the power you do, I'd be thrilled to have a chance to help them reclaim their past! I would take this bloody translation to someone who could use it to rewrite history, to give the elves back their voice, and I wouldn't have to be asked. Because I care."

Hermione's voice cracked at the end, and she had to fight to get her tears under control, but she was glad she'd said it, even if Narcissa's stunned silence did have her biting her lip against the hint of fear rising behind her anger. Arguing with a pure-blood head of house about the rights of non-human magical creatures probably wasn't the brightest idea she'd ever had, but prudence be damned, Hermione had said exactly what she wanted to for once in her life, and she wasn't about to back down now.

Narcissa couldn't seem to meet Hermione's eyes. "You're right again, aren't you?" she asked softly. "That... How incredibly condescending of me." The set of Narcissa's mouth seemed to display how bitter the words tasted in her mouth, but she continued speaking nonetheless. "You... You've changed so much from the first time I saw you, and I—that isn't what I meant at all. I suppose I just... I don't like to think of myself that way, either. As... prejudiced." She muttered it like some dirty word. "It took me a long time to look past the Death Eater rhetoric, and so much of me wants to believe I left it all behind when I broke from Lucius, but you're right. The wizarding world owes our elves an apology. I don't have the faintest idea how to go about that, but I—I'll talk to McGonagall. She always supported my study, and her work with nonhuman magical beings before her deputyship was groundbreaking. If there's anyone who might know where to go with this, it would be her."

Hermione's hackles were still up, but the reluctant sincerity in Narcissa's voice was slowly chipping away at her anger.
"And you're right about more than the elves, of course, and I know that, really, I do. You've become far more self-assured than, well, than even I was at your age. I wouldn't be sitting here with you like this, taking on what we've been going about all month, if that weren't true. My apologies for ever insinuating otherwise."

Hermione was quiet as she mused over Narcissa's words. It wasn't exactly a blazing declaration of support for elfish welfare, nor was it exactly an understanding of Hermione's angry words, but it was far more than she expected. Slowly, she offered a smile and a few placating words. "Well, alright, so maybe I'm not quite that self-assured. A… gentle reminder now and again doesn't hurt. And thank you. For listening to me. And for… trying."

Another week passed. Narcissa took two precious afternoons off to accompany Andromeda to Hogwarts, and she returned after the first visit with assurances that the headmistress would be stopping by within the month to speak to Rommie. Hermione immediately protested the ambiguous promise and the arbitrary timeline, having come to the conclusion that elfish welfare might be the only cause in which she ever made a difference over the course of her entire life, but reluctantly conceded the point. The Headmistress of Hogwarts wasn't exactly a woman with a large amount of free time to spare for historic cultural discoveries, but Narcissa promised Hermione could say her piece whenever that time did eventually come.

Part of Hermione wondered if it all wasn't part of some conspiracy to keep her here another full month, but she didn't want to think Narcissa capable of that much deception. She had never been particularly kind or caring or selfless, but she had been straightforward, and she had been honest. Hermione accepted the offering for what it was, and thanked her.

The second afternoon at Hogwarts was a "social call," or so Narcissa described it, and Andromeda returned without her for dinner. Hermione waited an hour later than she usually would spend in the library, but when she started nodding off over Lessing, she gave up. From what Narcissa had told her, she had not returned to the school of her childhood since before Draco's departure from the very same halls. There must be… many things to discuss, even if she hadn't remained a part of the world at Hogwarts the way Andromeda had.

By the time she returned to her chambers for the night, it was very late, and the elves had already put out most of the torches in the halls. She entered a bedroom as black as pitch, and had to set her armful of books down on the floor before she could light the tip of her wand.

A whispered "Lumos!" illuminated a face only inches from her own.

"Expelliarmus!" Lucius snarled as Hermione drew in a gasp of air so quickly she choked on it. Her wand flew from between her fingers and skidded under the bed, and before she could even regain her breath, a wooden point was pressed into the side of her neck. "Silencio."

Lucius stared down at her for nearly a minute, eyes wild, as though waiting for her to pull some sort of escape out of thin air, but Hermione was backed against the wall, her wand lost in the darkness, and she was very short on ideas. Slowly, his nervous glare began to relax, and he dug the wand in deeper. "This can go one of two ways," he drawled with sudden, sickly confidence. "I can kill you here and now. No more Mudblood, no more affair, no more divorce. If there are rumors, all the better. Dispel this nasty business about letting my wife's indiscretions go unpunished, but believe me when I say you will die, and I shall never see the inside of a prison cell for it."

Hermione's hand had been inching up beside her as she spoke, but when she made a frantic grab for the wand, he jerked backwards, giving himself enough space to cast a quick body-bind curse.
"Ah ah. That first option's starting to look distinctly more appealing, and we don't want that, now do we?"

Hermione glared. It was the best she could manage, and if the alternative was displaying any hint of the fear she felt, anger was the more appealing emotion.

"Option number two is far more attractive, after all." The tip of the wand rose and brushed a lock of curly hair out of Hermione's eyes, tucking it ineffectively behind her ear. It sprung free even as Lucius continued his chilling, delighted words. "I propose a… a trade. Of, well… of your loyalties, I suppose, or at the very least, of this disturbing performance you've been giving. Tell my wife you can't go through with it; you've gone and fallen for me instead."

If Hermione could have, she would have laughed. As it was, her glare only intensified, and the sick feeling churning in her gut roiled with her helpless anger.

"Forgive me if I've been less than impressed with this little act you've pulled off to half of the wizarding world, but seeing as you've done it once already, surely it can't be that much trouble getting my wife to believe that your allegiance has… shifted. Even if not, it's bound to get her to drop her guard. I already know what a liability you are to her. I can't imagine any of it means a thing to you, though. What is it she bought you with, hmm? It can only have been money, and I doubt a few more galleons is worth your life, or her so-called freedom. Take my offer. Assist me in reclaiming what's been mine all along. Crush her hope, change the tune in the papers, and I'll let you get on with your pitiful existence elsewhere after this entire mess has blown over."

He leaned in closer, his wand dragging along her jawline. "I won't even make you fuck me," he whispered. "Though I really should, with all the trouble you've caused."

A whispered spell undid the binding and silencing charms so she could reply, but the wand was pressed too tightly against her throat for comfort. "Well? What'll it be?"

Hermione's mind was racing at a mile a minute, wondering what would happen if she pretended to agree, wondering how he might enforce her desperate promise, wondering if she might call his bluff asking for death instead. She opened her mouth, not yet sure what answer might emerge, but before she could speak, Lucius's forehead was suddenly yanked viciously backwards and the tip of his wand was drawing a thick white scratch down the length of Hermione's throat.

"Cissy will have her alive," a voice hissed, and Hermione stared in shock as Lucius was dragged bodily away from her, a wild-eyed Bellatrix towing him backwards with a fist knotted in his hair, the other hand clawing at his fingers where they wrapped about his wand. "After your wife is done—"

Bellatrix continued as Lucius's bloody fingers cast bolts of ineffective red light at the ceiling. "—you can do what you want with the Mudblood. Until then, she lives."

Hermione ignored the ominous words, diving towards the bed for her fallen wand. Lucius managed to pull free of Bellatrix's grasp, aiming his wand at his wife's sister and flinging her magicless form against the far wall in a burst of crimson light, but Hermione didn't look back. She scrabbled on her hands and knees in the dark until her fingertips brushed the edge of a familiar, ridged handle. The moment the wand was in her grasp, she flung a silent curse at Lucius's feet and scrambled back out from beneath the bed.

He had dodged her spell. His wand was pointed directly at her. Bellatrix was slumped against the far wall, a trickle of blood dripping from the corner of her mouth even as her eyes were open and focused on the scene. Hermione's wand was still pressed to the floor.

"Looks like option one," Lucius spat. "Pity, that.″ A bolt of yellow light exploded from the tip of his
wand.

Hermione scrambled backwards, the curse missing her by centimeters.

"We're not playing hide-and-seek, girl," said Lucius's soft, cold voice, but Hermione wasn't listening. She rolled out from under the far side of the bed and pulled herself up to her knees. She ignored the spell forming on Lucius's lips, reaching into her mind for as violent an array of colors as she could imagine and flinging them down through her shoulder and out along the length of her wand with the full force of all the anger and desperation she felt. Her magic collided with Lucius's unheard spell and shredded it like tissue paper. Hermione's wand was shaking, vibrating as though an electric charge was running from the spell back up into her wrist, and she couldn't have stopped the flood of angry light if she'd wanted to. She watched through the glare as her spell shattered Lucius's wand and lanced up his arm, crackling and sparking as it arced up his shoulder and spread across his chest like a net of spectral lightning that hurled him backwards with enough force to leave cracks in the woodwork. As quickly as the spell had come, it was gone, and Lucius was left in a shaking, cowering heap against the far wall, a single fragment of his shattered wand clutched between his still outstretched fingers.

Hermione finally rose to her feet, casting a nervous glance towards Bellatrix just in time to see her lick her lips. It was a nervous gesture, and it removed the drops of blood that had been darkening one corner of her mouth, but Bellatrix's eyes were locked on Hermione's wand, and if it were anyone else, Hermione would have thought that the look of someone… impressed. Impressed despite herself.

When she glanced up into Hermione's eyes, however, it was with an astonishing degree of disinterest. "Well. That takes care of that, doesn't it?" Bellatrix rose and ran a hand through her hair, wincing when it came away with a smear of blood. "Looks like you've finally learned a fair bit about taking care of yourself, pet. Now, if you wouldn't mind—" She crossed the floor on slightly unstable legs, bracing herself against the wall over Lucius's clearly terrified form. "—Luci and I have a thing or two to chat about. Upstairs." In an astonishing display of physical strength, she hoisted him up by the collar of his robes, ignoring the shrill, incomprehensible sounds fighting their way between his lips.

"Hold on." Hermione kept her wand cautiously raised towards the pair across the room. "You don't honestly expect me to—"

"—help me get him upstairs? Of course I do," Bellatrix interrupted. "Unless you'd care to bother Cissy with this."

Hermione stared at Bellatrix in disbelief, but her thoughts were racing. The still-frightened part of her wanted to go to Narcissa, tell her what Lucius had just tried to do, claim her protection, but… they were so close to the end. Narcissa had so much on her plate, so many things to worry about even without knowing her husband had just attempted murder. What could Narcissa even do that she hadn't already tried? No, telling Narcissa would do nothing but add another bit of helpless stress to her already overburdened days. Then again, she couldn't imagine what Bellatrix might offer as an alternative. If Lucius said anything… tried anything else…

"What are you asking me to do? I'm not going to help you with anything… drastic," Hermione insisted.

"Drastic? Me? Never." Bellatrix let out a biting laugh, then visibly winced. "It's all quite simple, really. You help me get him upstairs, I get him off your hands, and I borrow enough energy from him that he passes out and doesn't wake up till the morning of the council. Narcissa never even needs to know. Everybody wins."
"Borrow… energy?"

Bellatrix turned away from Hermione's confused stare. "I've got to heal this somehow, haven't I?"

The sight of the blood matted in Bellatrix's curls was a painfully clear reminder of what had just happened to the other witch. "Oh. Sorry, I… you're hurt, and I… You… you probably saved my life. Thank you, I think."

Bellatrix didn't react to her words, still glowering at Lucius's limp head where it hung above the clenched, shaking fist she had knotted in his robes.

"You can… heal yourself?" Hermione murmured, finally connecting the blood to the witch's earlier words. "Using him?"

Bellatrix spun back towards her, but the quick motion sent all the blood rushing from her face. Lucius slumped back to the floor, unmoving. "Didn't Andromeda teach you anything?" Bellatrix snapped, but her ghostly pale complexion took the sting out of her anger.

"About healing… very little," Hermione answered, letting a bit of bitterness creep into her voice. "It won't kill him?"

Bellatrix snorted. "Hardly. He'll just wake up too exhausted to…" Bellatrix suddenly swayed on her feet, reaching out towards the wall again but misjudging the distance and slamming her fist against the cracked woodwork instead, releasing a shower of splinters. "Make up your mind, girl," Bellatrix finally snarled as she regained her balance. "I won't be fit for healing myself much longer. It's him, upstairs, now, or you'd best fetch Cissy."

Reluctantly, Hermione nodded. She pulled to mind the right shade of periwinkle for a feather-light charm and levitated Lucius's body out of the room, ignoring his garbled groan of protest. Bellatrix followed. She paused every few steps, but she made it up the stairs without falling or blacking out, and the moment she crossed the threshold on the third floor, she took over the task of directing Lucius's body with her own crooked wand.

Hermione fell behind, nervously lingering near the stairs. "Is there… should I… you'll be alright from here? What if Narcissa—"

"My sister hasn't said a word to him in days. She won't even know he's missing. Now get out, before I conveniently forget why I didn't just let him finish you off in the first place."

True to her word, Hermione didn't hear a peep from Bellatrix or Lucius for the next three days. Narcissa, by contrast, suddenly seemed to be everywhere, greeting Hermione at the end of every hallway and on the other side of every door. The more Narcissa seemed quietly glad to see her, the guiltier Hermione felt about keeping Lucius's actions a secret, and the more it set her nerves on edge. During the little crisis, she hadn't even paid a second thought to Narcissa's absence, but once the immediacy of it all had passed, she couldn't help wondering why Narcissa hadn't overheard her fear, hadn't realized she was in danger just from Hermione's thoughts and come running.

By the second day, she was terrified Narcissa might be testing her, waiting for her to confess, so she retreated outside for longer and longer stretches between each meal. The frozen gardens were a poor distraction, but dinner finally offered her a chance to face her fear.

It came up innocently enough, as Narcissa mentioned overhearing Minerva's thoughts about her schedule. "I want you to know she's quite serious about stopping by to chat with the elves. I didn't mean to listen in, but for some reason, schedules and lesson plans always seem to slip past her rather
formidable shields. I've often wondered if it's some sort of... distraction technique, but I've never asked."

When Narcissa first brought up her Legilimency, Hermione had choked on a sip of water, but once her throat was clear, she bit her lip. "You... you must've heard all sorts of ridiculous things from me, these past weeks. I haven't a clue about... Occlumency. Mental defenses and all that."

"Hardly," Narcissa replied, her words as cool and detached as ever. "I've made a point of closing myself off from you. I wanted to respect your privacy, and I often shield myself from those I'm together with as closely as we've been."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief.

At the sound, Narcissa's brow furrowed. She reached across the table and took Hermione's hand. "I should have mentioned it sooner. I hope it doesn't bother you, my... talent. Many witches and wizards keep it a secret. I know how difficult it can be, living with someone who could very well be listening in on your every thought, but I've never... I would never use it against someone who... I would never use it as a weapon. I—I wouldn't want you to... I hope you weren't afraid of... that."

The genuine worry was clear in Narcissa's fragmented reassurances, and Hermione immediately nodded in reply, unable to hold back a smile of her own sharp relief. "No, no, never. I... I've only ever been grateful for it. Well, a bit nervous, I suppose, in the beginning, but... not now. You've never given me cause not to trust you."

It wasn't until the words had been said that Hermione realized how true they really were. It only made the guilt twist more sharply in her gut, but she could still see the dark shadows of exhaustion beneath Narcissa's eyes, and she could only imagine how much worse it would be if she had to keep Lucius under lock and key until the trial. She couldn't bring herself to regret the small deception. Bellatrix's parasitic solution seemed to have gone entirely according to plan, and there were only two more days until the council.

Only two more days until Narcissa had no further ties to this place.

The worry creasing Narcissa's brow suddenly deepened. "You just... Sorry, I... you were very loud, just then. Not a thought, but... is everything alright? I shouldn't have even noticed anything at all, but... that felt like... grief."

Hermione flushed furiously, lowering her gaze to the table and hiding her crimson face behind her hands.

"Hermione," Narcissa prompted. "That wasn't a passing thought. That was aimed right at me."

"Oh no," Hermione groaned. "How can you even tell?"

"Don't deflect. What's wrong?"

Hermione finally looked up through her fingers. To her surprise, Narcissa looked... almost frightened. But what could she say? How could she tell her? How could she tell Narcissa that she had forgotten what it was like to live in this house without her? How could she reveal how many times now she'd held back from grasping hold of Narcissa's fingers in every single silence? How could she honestly answer for an unwanted emotion when it would so thoroughly fracture the fragile trust they had been building these past weeks?

"I'm sorry," she murmured, that same grief pulling her eyes about the room before returning to the other witch. "I just... I was just realizing how close we are to the council, and I... I'm thrilled for
you, really, I am, but... I'm going to miss you, is all."

Narcissa blinked, and Hermione's embarrassment built in the silence.

"I didn't mean for you to... it's just that... well, you know. Oh, I'm so... You've... I—"

"Hush." Narcissa silenced her stammering with a single word. She reached up and pulled one of Hermione's hands away from where it attempted to hide her face, cradling it between both of her own. "You look as though you'd rather be buried alive right now." She leaned closer and brushed her knuckles over one of Hermione's flushed cheeks. "You're allowed to miss me, mindre. I'm going to miss you, too."

They went out one final time the next morning, and somehow, despite the tensions and stresses of the past days, Narcissa managed to make it all feel remarkably... normal. There were quiet words shared over tea and biscuits, words Hermione said but couldn't really be bothered to remember, not when she was sitting like this with Narcissa for the last time.

There was something more, though. Narcissa's fingertips seemed to cling to her, clutching her own, brushing through her hair, tracing across her shoulders, dancing down the curve of her cheek. The words spilling from her lips were a lively, sarcastic rant about the everyday horrors of married life, and between the mundane banter and the too-frequent touches, it set a scene not unlike that of a harried wife clinging to the physical comfort of her affair. It was exactly the picture Hermione knew they had set out to paint, but for her, the easy familiarity of their ruse was nowhere to be found. There was no faking the look Hermione knew was painted across her own face, no faking the irresistible way her body leant into Narcissa's touch, no faking the bittersweet pain twisting and turning and biting behind her ribcage.

When Narcissa leant closer, a bright, fake laugh echoing from her lips as she murmured, "But enough about him, darling," Hermione felt the term of endearment like a punch in the gut. "This is about us," Narcissa continued. "We're so close to being done with him," she murmured, voice dropping to a whisper. "So close."

Then Narcissa leant closer still, the sliver of circular table between them an entirely ineffective barrier in the face of Narcissa's unrelenting motion. She leant closer than Hermione had expected, closer than her words, leaning until her lips were closer than her breath, and Hermione let herself melt into an unexpected kiss, relinquishing to the feeling of Narcissa's lips against her own, the feeling of Narcissa's fingers dragging through the curls at the base of her neck, the insistent heat of being pulled closer still, close enough she could lose her thoughts, because if she let herself find them again, Hermione had a feeling she might cry.

When Narcissa pulled away, there was a pain in her eyes Hermione didn't understand.

"I just wish I could feel again," Narcissa whispered, touching her own lips with two trembling fingers.

Hermione remembered. She had never been able to forget those clinical words in the handfasting text, the cruel barriers that kept the wife from feeling strong emotions towards any but her husband and blood kin.

Hermione remembered, but she didn't understand.

They spent the final evening in the library. Narcissa was in the mood for poetry again, and who was
Hermione to deny her? This was the eve of her day, after all. This was her final night as a married woman, her final night as a prisoner in her own body, and if the quiet refrains of Alger and Ridler were needed to make the hours pass faster, so be it.

Hermione found herself surprisingly ensnared by a collection of Millay's sonnets. She wasn't reading them, not really, since she couldn't keep her eyes off the other witch for longer than the space of a few lines, but what little she did read seemed determined to taunt her.

*Beauty beyond all feathers that have flown*

*Is free; you shall not hood her to your wrist,*

*Nor sting her eyes, nor have her for your own*

*In any fashion; beauty billed and kissed*

*Is not your turtle; tread her like a dove—*

*She loves you not; she never heard of love.*

Hermione realized she was reading with a distinct scowl on her face.

As the night wore on, she began to wonder at the time. It was one thing to fill the evening with the distraction of the library, but it was well past the hour they would usually turn in, and Narcissa hadn't looked up from her book in some time.

"Narcissa?"

The other witch twitched in her chair, glancing up with wide, startled eyes.

"It's getting late," Hermione added softly.

Slowly, Narcissa nodded. "I'm well aware. I don't believe I will be getting any sleep tonight. I… my suspicions are restless. Lucius may still try to pull something daft tonight. I… I don't trust myself to be that vulnerable, or that alone."

The mix of hope and fear glinting in Narcissa's eyes along with the flickering candlelight broke Hermione's heart a little bit. "I'll stay up with you, then," she answered, and Narcissa's shaky smile only served to shatter her further.

She couldn't watch the other witch, then, so she glanced back down at the open page in her lap.

*Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink*

*Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain;*

*Nor yet a floating spar to men that sink*

*And rise and sink and rise and sink again;*

*Love can not fill the thickened lung with breath,*

*Nor clean the blood, nor set the fractured bone;*

*Yet many a man is making friends with death*
Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.

It well may be that in a difficult hour,

Pinned down by pain and moaning for release,

Or nagged by want past resolution's power,

I might be driven to sell your love for peace,

Or trade the memory of this night for food.

It well may be. I do not think I would.

Hermione flung aside the sonnets with a grunt of disgust. What endless, angst-ridden nonsense. She rubbed viciously at the corner of one eye, refusing to acknowledge the faint dampness there. Millay. What a … what a tosser. What a ridiculous, lovelorn fool.

Refusing to continue allowing herself to be emotionally compromised by insipid poetry, Hermione pulled out a half-read text on nonvocal communication between wild phoenixes, something she considered much more worthy reading material. At first, she was mostly flipping pages with distracted disinterest, but eventually, the familiar language of linguistic scholars drew her in, and she lost herself for a few hours.

When she finally reached the end, she looked up to share her newfound fascination for magical bird communication with Narcissa, only to realize that the other witch was fast asleep. She was curled up in her chair, legs tucked beneath her, head resting precariously against a shoulder and the back cushion. A still-open book balanced in her lap, the text staring up at its sleeping mistress in silent judgement.

Hermione watched the slow, even rise and fall of Narcissa's chest for a few moments, feeling the peace of the scene settle somewhere deep inside of her. It was a wonder, really, that even in the midst of her fear, Narcissa had felt safe enough to fall asleep after all. Hermione picked up her wand from the table and quietly summoned a blanket, standing to drape it over the pale, sleeping figure as gently as she could. A soft murmur escaped between Narcissa's lips and her forehead creased for a moment, but she did not wake, and Hermione retreated to her chair, picking up another book of poetry from the pile at her side and settling in for what she imagined would be a very long night.

Part of her knew Narcissa was safe, knew Lucius and Bellatrix were well away upstairs and Andromeda was unlikely to stir for many more hours, but another part of her had taken Narcissa's worry to heart, and she wasn't about to leave the other witch vulnerable, or alone.

Chapter End Notes

Poetry credits:

Love is not all
and

Think not, nor for a moment let your mind
by Edna St. Vincent Millay.
The group that gathered in the main entry was anything but celebratory. The two Dementors sent to escort Bellatrix to and from the ceremony were hardly helping matters, lurking on the other side of the chamber with an impatient Andromeda. Narcissa stood beside Hermione, her breath frosting in the air between them and the nearest cloaked figure. The youngest Black was shivering, and somehow Hermione didn't think it was purely from the physical cold. "Are you alright?" she asked, resting her hand on Narcissa's arm.

Narcissa visibly flinched. Hermione started to pull back, but Narcissa seemed to gather herself, stepping closer instead. "I will be."

"What a magnificent day for an outing!"

Bellatrix's affected voice sliced through the scattered, quiet conversations happening in the corners of the room as she veritably paraded down the stairs. Hermione's eyes were drawn towards the scene she had obviously intended to make, and the younger witch couldn't help but notice how striking the eldest Black was looking for this less-than-joyous occasion. Instead of her usual layers of corseted robes, Bellatrix had chosen a stunning, daring gown—all black, of course—but her hair was tamed and vibrant, and the wicked smile on those thin, dark lips had never looked so dangerous. Hermione had tiredly donned one of her best sets of robes this morning while Narcissa was as poised and polished as ever in a long, relatively simple navy gown, but Bellatrix's monochrome finery put them all to shame. Lucius followed behind her, pale and shaky, and it took Hermione half his descent to even notice him in Bellatrix's shadow. She waltzed over to her silent sister and kissed Narcissa on each cheek. "My most sincere congratulations, Cissy," she said, making no attempt to keep her exaggeratedly cheerful words private. "You've finally ousted the bastard."

Narcissa's answer was cold and reserved. "A bit premature, Bella. We've another few hours yet. Why all this… fuss?"

Bellatrix's grin didn't falter at Narcissa's chilly reception. She ran her hands down along her waist and over her hips, following the contours of the dress and the hint of dark-on-dark lace hiding in the shadows. "It isn't every day the little Prophet hounds have a chance to snap my picture. Couldn't resist the chance to look my best!" As she casually moved away from Narcissa and a silent, wide-eyed Hermione, Bellatrix called over her shoulder, "Rub it in, you know. Look how punished I've been. Look how incredibly far I've fallen since my days in Azkaban." She laughed wildly at her own power play and didn't hesitate to approach Andromeda and the Dementors in their silent wait across the room.

Hermione darted a glance at Narcissa, and to her surprise, there was a faint smile tugging at the corner of her lips. Hermione rubbed her eyes against the exhaustion of having been up all night, and by the time she looked again, Narcissa's expression was as cool and collected as ever. Perhaps she'd imagined it.

She fell asleep at the Ministry. Narcissa wanted her with them for appearances sake, and the press didn't disappoint, turning up in full force to photograph the lot of them as they made their way into the Ministry. Bellatrix skewered each lens with her haughtiest glare, yet she practically pranced before them, and they drank in her preening display for all they were worth. Once they reached the desired Ministry level, however, Hermione wasn't allowed into the chamber where the actual council was to take place, so she found herself abandoned in a small waiting room, and proceeded to pass out on the red velvet cushion of the first chair she found.
When she woke, Narcissa was sitting beside her, a hand brushing through Hermione's curls, staring down at her with a look Hermione couldn't begin to decipher. As she blinked in utter disorientation Narcissa smiled. "You've been asleep for six hours." Her hand gently cupped Hermione's cheek, then returned to her hair. "The others left twenty minutes ago, but I didn't want to wake you."

Hermione hastened to rub the sleep out of her eyes. "I'm sorry. Wait. Is it… Did you…?"

"I did."

As a wide smile began to stretch across Narcissa's face, Hermione sat up with a squeak of happiness, reaching out and throwing her arms around the other woman before she could think twice. When Narcissa chucked in her ear, she pulled back, blushing, but she couldn't help returning that infectious smile. "Oh, congratulations! I can't believe… after all of this, it's finally over."

"Neither can I," Narcissa admitted. "But it's done. It's finished… and I'd forgotten what it is to feel this… alive." A stray hand wandered through Hermione's curls once again and lingered when it reached the side of her neck. "There were so many times, before, when I… I thought I might live out this nightmare, that I'd win, but I'd never feel anything again. The way the magic of a marriage like this drains you… pulls away everything you might feel before you can so much as imagine it… I… There were times I couldn't even remember what it was to feel human. But there was that day—"

"—when I couldn't stop touching you, over lunch. My emotions were as distant and unreachable as ever but you… you were so responsive, so blushingly happy, and I could feel your joy, even when I couldn't feel my own."

Narcissa's voice trailed off, and she slowly let Hermione's fingers fall, but she looked almost pained as she did so. "That was the first real hint of hope I had that I'd come out of this whole. I can still hardly believe it." She quickly shook her head, dispelling the strange stillness of the past moment. "But here we are," she finished, standing and gathering her cloak over one arm and extending the other to Hermione.

With no idea what to say, Hermione swallowed thickly and accepted the hand up. "Here you are," she echoed. "You're free of him."

Narcissa's breath hitched at the word, and she seemed to weigh it in her mind before nodding. A small smile flitted about her lips as she said, "Yes. Free."

As Hermione mirrored Narcissa's step down the hall and followed her into a Ministry lift, she found herself unable to stop staring at the other witch. There was a lightness to her step, a glow to her skin, and a fire behind her eyes that Hermione had only ever seen a dull imitation of in all their prior days together. It was a startling transformation, lighting up Narcissa's ever-present cold, aristocratic confidence with the wild glow of a star-lit summer night.

Narcissa was staring right back, though, and the fierce weight of that gaze had Hermione's palms sweating, her cheeks growing warm, and her weight shifting nervously from foot to foot as the lift creaked upwards. It was uncanny, the power this woman's eyes held over her. She didn't know where to look, where to turn, what to say.

As the soft elevator voice announced the approach of their surface destination, Narcissa stepped closer, quite thoroughly invading Hermione's personal space.

"One last time," Narcissa said. "Just… one last time, yes? For the papers. For… our victory."

Before Hermione could make sense of the words, the lift doors slid open, Narcissa kissed her, and her world turned upside-down, because this… this was a different sort of kiss altogether. Her lips—
as perfectly, stunningly soft as always—brushed across Hermione's. And they were warm, but not with the passive warmth of their first kisses, but with a heated intent that simply melted her, sapped the strength from every bone in her body until she leaned into the kiss, grasping at Narcissa's shoulders to keep herself from crumpling to her knees as Narcissa kissed her not just the once, but again and again, one kiss pulling into the next as the lift announced their arrival over and over like a broken record, camera's flashed across the Ministry atrium, and voices called out questions and accusations that landed on deaf ears. Because Narcissa was kissing her, claiming her lips, running her fingers to stroke down the column of Hermione's neck before slipping them about her waist, and there was nothing else in the world.

When Narcissa finally pulled back, a small noise escaped Hermione's throat, halfway between a whimper and a moan. She would have been embarrassed, but Narcissa's wide-eyed stare and trembling embrace distracted her. "Oh," Narcissa whispered. "I—Oh. Oh. I'd forgotten."

Still ignoring the crowd of cameras on the other side of the press line, Narcissa kissed her again, hard and fast and desperate, nearly bruising, and Hermione's head was spinning.

Narcissa grabbed her hand with sudden intent, pulling her close and leading them silently through the crowd of rabid reporters with a grin of pure triumph dancing on her lips, and it was all Hermione could do to keep pace and try not to look as though she'd just been kissed within an inch of her life and had absolutely no idea what to do about it.

When they reached the street, the reporters yelled all the more frantically from within the Ministry, but they didn't follow through the doors. No wizarding cameras were allowed in the Muggle side of London.

The part of her mind not still preoccupied with Narcissa's lips expected them to Disapparate immediately once out of the Ministry, but instead, Narcissa pressed close again, pulling Hermione so tightly against her that the younger witch thought she might drown in the faint scent of Narcissa's perfume and the press of her silken robes. There was a hand on her hip, then, sliding upwards, tracing over her ribs and wavering just beneath her breast, and there was another at the back of her neck, pulling her into one more kiss. This one was anything but gentle. There were teeth clasping her bottom lip, more than a hint of that demanding tongue, and the dull, lingering ache of the kisses before. It was a kiss that reached inside her and cracked open her heart with a surge of something... not quite joy, more like fiendfyre, and it was oh, so much wicked, glorious heat, spiraling directly from her lips to her brain and igniting every inch of skin it could find along the way.

She hardly noticed she was being steered backwards, pressed out of the afternoon sun and down a darker alley, but Hermione squeaked when her back impacted a hard stone wall, and Narcissa pulled away just enough that Hermione could feel her smile against her lips. "Delicious," Narcissa hissed, her fingers absolutely knotted in Hermione's hair. She pressed forward again, and before Hermione could make sense of a thing, she had melted once more against the other witch, abandoning herself to the kiss. By the time she pulled back, Narcissa's breathing was rapid, voice low and rasping as she murmured, "It's been so long since I touched anyone like this—oh, Merlin, since I touched anyone at all."

Narcissa's fingers were cool and firm as the stroked down the back of Hermione's neck, and her grip was strong as she pulled her close again. There was a moment of disorientation, of a terrifying inability to make sense of what was happening, but then Hermione couldn't be bothered with sense. She couldn't think of anything but her lips, her mouth, and the way Narcissa's own mouth fit against it. Narcissa grasped her chin in one sure hand, turning Hermione's head to exactly where she wanted it to be, and Hermione forgot how to think about anything at all.
It was a testament to the dizzying powers of Apparition that Hermione even noticed the change in scenery, but one moment, they were kissing in a dark, secluded alley, and the next, they were up against a stone wall far more familiar, just inside the manor doors. Narcissa's kiss burned even through the whirl of magic, and one tiny fragment of Hermione's brain managed to marvel at what an impressive feat that had been, to silently bring them here. But Narcissa's hands were clawing at the ties in the back of Hermione's robes, rapidly finding bits of skin to trail her fingertips over, and they were pressed together so tightly, as though she was a heartbeat away from devouring Hermione whole, and…

It couldn't possibly be a good idea.

"Narcissa. Wait. Please."

With the last word, Narcissa froze.

"Can you… can we talk?"

Narcissa's nose ghosted up the side of Hermione's neck and she couldn't help but shiver.

"I'm not sure," Narcissa whispered, her breath hot below Hermione's ear. "I'm not sure if I… What I'll do… If I can't touch you right now. If I can't feel this."

She hadn't moved back an inch, still clinging to the younger witch, a breath away from sharing a single skin, but her hands had stopped battling with Hermione's robes and had turned instead to clutching her shoulders, trembling.

"Could you just… hold me for now, then?" Hermione asked nervously. "Without seducing me, I mean?"

The dark chuckle that rattled from somewhere deep inside the other witch was hardly an improvement. It sent the same shiver racing down Hermione's spine that her hands had caused only moments before. "I could attempt that, I suppose."

It took a long time for Hermione's heart to stop feeling as though it would come racing straight out of her chest. "What is this?" she asked, her voice drifting past the side of Narcissa's head and echoing—too loud for the silence—off the far wall.

Narcissa's eyes fluttered closed, eyelashes brushing against Hermione's cheek. "This… this is the first thing I've felt in an eternity," she said, as though that explained everything.

"What does that mean, though?" Hermione pressed.

Narcissa breathed in deeply. Hermione could feel the pull of air in every place their bodies touched. "It means… I can feel them now, the thoughts I've had. You with your wild magic and your desperate desire for even the simplest bits of knowledge and your foolish pride in defending my house-elves and I—I've never known anyone quite like you. Not with the way I've lived. I'm not sure I even have the words for it, after all this time, but even if I can't say it… I feel it. Do you understand that, Hermione? I can feel again. All I know is I have to have you. Merlin help me, but I do."
Hermione was reeling, still trapped somewhere between the mindnumbing quality of those utterly desperate kisses and the no-nonsense fire of Narcissa's quiet words and the distinctly disturbing idea that she was half a step away from falling into bed with the sister of the woman she'd already made a ridiculous number of mistakes in being with. Even as her body had reacted in all the expected ways, craving this human warmth and an intimacy she'd been dreaming of for weeks, her mind was insisting this was wrong… that Narcissa's touch felt so much like Andromeda's had when her fingers tugged at her robes and glided along her skin and paused at her request and…

Still the protests wouldn't come. They whirled about in her mind but died on her lips and when Narcissa took her silence as permission to kiss her again, Hermione realized just how much she craved this. It was too much, too soon, but it could never be enough, and it was already too close to too late, and it was all she could do to let Narcissa steal her darker thoughts with her lips and replace them with something else, something beautiful. All too quickly, she felt her breath shuddering out of her in matching gasps, drawing those desperate kisses into her with a frantic desire half longing and half anger and oh, Narcissa was right. *Merlin help her* if it didn't feel so achingly good.

It was laughable, really, to think she had the willpower to turn Narcissa away. How was she possibly
supposed to say no to something like this?

When Hermione finally managed to steal a breath between kisses so greedy she wasn't sure there'd be any air left for her at all, she gulped. In the face of everything else that was so incredibly wrong, somehow, this was right. Marvelously right. It had to be. Looking up, she met Narcissa's eyes with a shaky nod of inevitable consent. "I... Alright."

Narcissa laughed.

Hermione felt her heart lurch in her chest. It was a real laugh, something entirely unlike every other sound she'd ever heard this particular woman make. There were times Hermione had thought she'd caught a glimpse of real emotion behind Narcissa's expertly crafted chill, but now, seeing her like this, Hermione realized it had never been real at all. This, though— this wild joy and unbridled desire, this was real, and even if it was only happening because Narcissa had been starved for human touch for the entirety of Hermione's lifetime, the younger witch couldn't bring herself to care.

The laughter faded into something darker, heated, and knowing. "Somehow, I had a feeling you'd see things my way." Narcissa's voice was warmer, then, filled with the effervescent joy of her bright laughter, but the steel running beneath the surface of Narcissa's every action was still present in those words. Once, that cold, almost threatening aura of control would have set the hairs on the back of Hermione's neck standing on edge, but now, as she began tugging Hermione up the nearest staircase, the shivers it sent racing down her spine were of a far more welcome variety.

She quickly found herself in a bedroom she'd only had glimpses of before, but the two uncovered windows and the bed between them were all she managed to take in before Narcissa was in front of her again.

"Turn around," Narcissa said, voice startlingly steady and sure.

Hermione hesitated. "Narcissa—"

Something flashed in Narcissa's eyes, and Hermione cut herself off. She turned around.

Wordlessly, Narcissa reached for the laces at the back of Hermione's robes and began to slowly undo them. Hermione shivered as the bits of string dragged over her skin, but Narcissa was careful not to touch her directly. She pushed the fabric over Hermione's shoulders, letting it pool about her elbows and waist.

"Take off your shoes," she whispered, stepping back to give Hermione the space to bend over.

Again, Hermione had a moment of hesitation, a moment of confusion at the sharp contrast these brisk commands made to the wild, uncontrolled kisses of mere minutes before, but then she obeyed, reaching down to undo the little silver buckles before kicking off her shoes. As one of the sleeves of her robes slid the rest of the way free of her body, Hermione shivered, wrapping her arms around her bare stomach beneath her bra.

Narcissa reached out a slender hand and traced the curve of Hermione's shoulder with one finger, her breath stirring the hairs at the base of Hermione's neck. She slid her hand lower, tugging the other sleeve away, the last of the fabric falling to settle about Hermione's feet as she lowered her arms out of the way. Narcissa's hand drew inward, the other joining it at the base of Hermione's ribs, just below her breasts, her fingers splayed out against Hermione's sides.

It was a slow, wordless survey of Hermione's body, and it pulled heat to the surface of her skin, a flush and a shiver and a taste of fire settling low and heavy in her stomach. Her mouth was too dry for speech.
"None of this," Narcissa rasped, a hint of her quiet control slipping from her voice. "Half my life, gone by without this."

The deeply vulnerable desire in those words stole what remained of Hermione's breath, and she began to turn in Narcissa's arms, but her grip tightened, and Hermione froze. The heat of Narcissa's palms slid slowly along down the curve of Hermione's waist until they paused, resting possessively against her hips.

"Lie down on the bed," Narcissa instructed, voice once more perfectly measured, smooth, but not cold.

Something sparked in the back of Hermione's mind as she complied, a memory of Andromeda's words spoken one too many times to be casual or coincidence. Control freak .... Narcissa… She has such a thing for control… Controlling, my younger sister is… Narcissa can't stand being out of control. The words had always had a context—from her impatience with the construction wizards fixing her home, to her complete her lack of autonomy with Lucius—but they had also always had… an edge. Narcissa had been paired with that word since the first time Hermione had met her, and she had never much dwelled on the reason for it. Now, as Narcissa stared down at her with that dark, mischievous gleam in her pale blue eyes, waiting for Hermione to obey her… request… Hermione couldn't get that word out of her head. Control.

She was anything but graceful as she pulled herself onto the bed, but when she turned to face Narcissa, the other witch hardly seemed to have noticed. Her gaze was surprisingly distant. She was holding her wand in one hand, fingers clenched tightly against the studded handle. "I want so many things," she whispered. "Merlin, I—I haven't been able to—Oh, I just want…"

There was something akin to pain in her eyes, her stare focused somewhere over Hermione's head, as though unwilling to face the younger witch with the full force of whatever it was she desired. Hermione swallowed thickly, finally daring to wonder what it must be like, to be set free from so many years of deadened emotions and have to choose what to feel first. "What do you want?" Hermione whispered, the words scraping along her dry tongue. She licked her lips reflexively. It was only in asking that Hermione realized how much she truly wanted to know. This, just seeing Narcissa's desire, being offered whatever this one encounter might entail, was more than she had dared to dream of. She knew Narcissa was leaving. It might not be first thing in the morning, but she had had another day or two in England at best, and then she would be gone, likely forever. Hermione knew, and part of her ached with that knowing, wanted nothing more than to beg Narcissa to stay, just for another week, month, year, but more than that, she knew Narcissa had to go. Narcissa had been fighting for this day for as long as Hermione had been alive, and just being a part of that victory would have been enough. She wasn't part of Narcissa's future. Narcissa already had that waiting for her, her son and her freedom and the end of this age of winter, but that was the future, and this… this was now, and Hermione was here, and she wanted to make this moment whatever Narcissa needed it to be, even if Narcissa didn't think it was something she could ask of her. "What are you afraid of?"

The goading words won her attention. Narcissa's gaze focused again, searing into Hermione with sudden intensity. "I—" Her voice faltered, the fire in her eyes trailing down along the length of Hermione's body, then slowly back up again. "You don't know what you're asking me."

Hermione shivered. "Probably not," she answered lightly. "But I'd like to, and I have a feeling I'm not going to get another chance."

Narcissa took one small step closer, then another, the tip of her wand tracing circles in the palm of her other hand. "Have you ever even considered… what magic can offer in moments like this?"

Hermione blinked. Of course she had. She supposed everyone must have considered it once or
twice, but it wasn't exactly material for polite conversation, and the potential for things to go wildly wrong were astronomical. She'd certainly never heard of spells specifically designed for sex, and using magic for a purpose other than its original intent was always… risky. "I, well, yes. But I've never actually—"

"Do you trust me?"

Hermione shuddered. What a question. Lately, she'd begun thinking she gave her trust away too easily, too often. She'd trusted Andromeda, unconditionally, and look where that'd gotten her. But with Narcissa… Narcissa had offered her trust already. So many times. This wasn't Andromeda. This was Narcissa. Narcissa Black, with her secret passion for poetry and her embarrassed reaction to her own prejudice and her warm, dangerous lips. And now, she was looking up at her with those pale, icy eyes, darkened and heated with desire, and all Hermione could manage was, "Yes."

Narcissa's answering smile was warm, understanding, as though she knew just how much it had taken Hermione to say that.

"Don't fight me, then," she whispered, stepping closer once more and raising her wand.

"Fight you?" Hermione muttered, swallowing back a sudden flash of nerves. "Why would I—"

"Imperio!"

The word sent the most wonderful feeling stealing through her, cutting off her words. An astonishing, pleasant lightness settled over Hermione's body, wiping away every bit of worry and confusion, leaving behind only a vague, untraceable happiness. The Unforgivable Curse was hardly a spell she had expected to ever hear pass Narcissa's lips, but with the warmth and… joy of it spilling into her mind, she couldn't imagine wishing to fight it.

As the spell seemed to settle into her skin, Hermione quickly grew accustomed to the odd sensation that her body was… not quite her own. It wasn't so much that she had lost control, but that… she didn't want it. Every limb and every thought seemed to float on something lighter than air. Hermione had never been this relaxed in all her life, yet it felt somehow… natural, and she still felt entirely herself.

Look at me, mindre.

The words echoed in some untouched corner of her mind and Hermione's gaze was drawn to Narcissa's face. The look she found there sent heat racing through her veins. Narcissa's eyes were wide and sparkling with unbridled joy and something akin to ecstasy, lips slightly parted, nostrils flared in a shuddering breath.

Then, something changed. As Narcissa's eyes narrowed, it was as though someone had picked up the reins of the spell that had settled in Hermione's body. Narcissa's voice whispered her name, and she felt it, echoing in a distant chamber of her mind. Hermione. Narcissa's gaze pierced her, and there were words in her eyes. Quiet, commanding words that slid into place somewhere inside her, somewhere she couldn't quite hear them, but her body responded nonetheless.

Settle back. Make yourself comfortable. Display yourself for me.

The words were there and gone again before she could make sense of them, but her body obeyed what her mind had only caught a glimpse of. She felt herself lean back, falling into the pillows behind her. Then, her hands were moving, stroking slowly up her waist, crossing to pull down the straps of her bra and undo the clasp.
Narcissa stepped closer, her cheeks flushed, wand trembling at the end of a limp wrist, gaze so intent, it threatened to sear the bits of fabric off of Hermione's body before she had the chance to remove them.

Then, her bra was gone, tossed aside, and Hermione gasped as her own hands slowly cupped her breasts, thumbs stroking gently up and down the sides, as though presenting them to the other witch. It felt like the touch of a stranger, a touch far more intimate and knowing that her own, and when her palms slid higher to drag across her nipples, Hermione could hardly believe these hands belonged to her.

Yes. Let your hands wander. Don't rush. Relax.

Her fingers began to roam her own skin, stroking across her collarbones and up the column of her throat. The tip of one finger brushed along the skin behind her ear while another traced across her lower lip and dragged down her jaw. Her skin was surprisingly sensitive, or was it just this, being splayed open, vulnerable and wanting, before Narcissa that had her reacting like this to her own touch? With each place Hermione's fingers strayed, she could see Narcissa's expression subtly change. Her jaw set with a sharp sort of focus, as though imprinting the physical sense of her and her reactions on her mind, and Hermione realized the other witch was… exploring her.

When the thought flitted through Hermione's scattered concentration, Narcissa smiled. "Yes," she murmured aloud. "I am."

Hermione drew in a sharp breath, but the spell allowed her no further reaction to the realization that Narcissa wasn't just guiding her body… she was inside of her mind in a way even this particular piece of magic could not have allowed on its own.

"Oh yes," Narcissa added, then her words were inside the younger witch again. Your hands are mine. Let them stroke down your body. Return to your breasts.

Hermione tried to hold the words in her mind, but they slipped away, leaving her to gasp as her palms slid across her nipples.

"The power I have now—"

Close your eyes.

Hermione's eyes fell shut. She could no longer see the other witch, and the perception of her own actions was distant, difficult to place, so when the sharp sensation of her thumb and forefinger closing around each nipple pierced her awareness, she gasped at the sudden contact, pressing herself further into her own hands.

"—is intoxicating," Narcissa finished in a whisper.

Hermione's attention was fractured, torn between the faint motion that signaled Narcissa joining her on the bed and the continued pressure of her own fingers around the two points of sexual energy they held. Her touch was unrelenting, kneading and squeezing until a moan was dragged from her parted lips. Only then did Narcissa allow Hermione's hands to move—Enough. Lower.—dragging the backs of her nails down the length of her stomach and the crest of her hipbones. She could feel muscles she'd never truly noticed before tensioning and shuddering at her touch, but then her fingers found the last scrap of fabric on her body, slid it down her legs, and kicked it away, still answering some earlier forgotten command.

Hermione knew, then, how completely exposed she was to the other witch, while she, in turn, could
not so much as open her eyes to look at the still-dressed Narcissa without her permission. She had never felt so vulnerable in her life, confined to her own mind even as she was slowly but surely overwhelmed by the impossible sensations in her body, and even then, there was something else, a flicker of heat and desire skating over the surface of her thoughts that was… not her own.

_Touch your thighs. Gently. Nowhere else. Just the tips of your fingers._

As Hermione's touch traced aimless patterns up and down the insides of her thighs, that odd sensation grew, her awareness of her own physical arousal slowly but surely eclipsed by the measured passion that seemed to be building behind her eyes rather than between her legs.

_Yes. You feel me, don't you? Focus on that. Let me in._

Suddenly, Narcissa sighed aloud, and a pulse of light seemed to burst on the backs of Hermione's eyelids. Her hips jerked and she bit her lip to stifle a startled cry. In an instant, she could no longer tell what desire belonged to her and what was _other_ because it was all hers, now. It sent goosebumps racing across her skin and a heady mist of desire clouding what remained of her thoughts. Her eyes were allowed to open, then, but she couldn't begin to focus, lost in this strange new world of a body that answered to the mind of another and the shadowy awareness that she was no longer alone inside her own being.

When she finally found Narcissa's eyes, they reflected back Hermione's desire perfectly, but where Hermione was half lost in this haze of sensation, Narcissa's stare was clear and strong. She knelt at the end of the bed, still fully clothed in her wide-necked gown, an image of shimmering satin draped over a will of steel. "Beautiful," she whispered. "And all mine." _Now come here._

Her silent command tugged at Hermione, pulling her upright and drawing her to slide closer across the bed. Her skin felt hypersensitive, wired with electricity that crackled in sparks of wild heat as she slid across the silken sheets and into Narcissa's waiting arms. "There have been moments—" Narcissa murmured as she pulled Hermione close, tucking the younger witch's unresisting spine into the contours of her chest and wrapping her up in her arms. "—when I wasn't sure if I'd ever get to touch you, and I wanted… to put you in a golden cage somewhere, keep you safe and keep everyone else in the world away from you, but now…" Hermione's arms hung limp at her sides as Narcissa's hands slid around her waist and up her stomach, following the very path she had driven Hermione to trace on her own body only moments before. "…now I'm inside of you in every possible way…" She pressed a soft kiss beneath the shell of Hermione's ear and turned the motion of her hands downwards again after only one brief caress across her nipples. "…except one."

When Narcissa's fingers entered her without warning, Hermione's mouth parted in a silent gasp. She was impossibly ready, impossibly wet, but it wasn't only that which made her eyes widen in quiet wonder as her hips moved of their own volition. Even in the midst of her building pleasure, Hermione was stunned to find not one trace of awkwardness, none of the hesitation, not a single moment where something didn't quite fall into place between them. Instead, her body reacted without her thought to perfectly accommodate Narcissa's every motion. Narcissa was in control, two fingers buried deeply inside of her even as her mind was sheathed somewhere deeply inside Hermione's own, driving her to the peak of her own pleasure. Narcissa's fingers curled upwards, pressing into Hermione's wetness, and she could hardly recognize the muffled moan that slipped between her lips. Narcissa's other hand wrapped around the front of her shoulders, the spikes of her wand handle digging into her skin as the other witch held her upright in her lap, and Hermione felt her own hands rising again, finding her breasts, thumbs rolling over her nipples even as Narcissa's thumb slid insistently across her clit.

_Just like that. Keep touching yourself. Don't come._
As her body's responses grew less and less controlled, Hermione lost track of which limbs were her own, which skin belonged to her, which thoughts had always been there. Even with only those two slender fingers pressing into her, she had never felt so full in her life, each push and returning pull seeming to stretch some untouched part of her, spreading her thin and raw until there was nothing left but a liquid, desperate heat that wanted nothing more than the weight of Narcissa against her back, the lips pressing hot kisses all along the curve of her throat and shoulder, the third finger slowly making its way inside of her alongside the other two and yes, oh yes, it was there. Narcissa was inside of her, inside her mind, inside her hands, inside her sex, and she could do nothing but whimper, gasp, and feel and oh, oh Merlin, it was wonderful.

Narcissa's thumb began to work in quick circles around her clit and Hermione felt her hips press down, driving herself forward and closer, closer, desperate for that touch and almost afraid of it all at once. There was something close to panic in the back of her mind, the knowledge that she should have come already, shouldn't be able to keep building past the edge this way, shouldn't have any more room in her skin for the heat of Narcissa's electrifying touch, and this ache, this inability to… why she couldn't… just…

Now. Come for me.

A strangled cry tore from her lips and her hips finally jerked free of Narcissa's careful command, her eyes closing, jaw clenched tightly shut, and as Narcissa turned her head to press a fierce, determined kiss to her lips, the heat crested in Hermione's mind and crashed throughout her body, and for one pleasure-drenched moment, she couldn't even remember her own name.

It took a long time for her eyes to open. As her body trembled in Narcissa's embrace with the little shakes and shivers of tired, euphoric muscles, the spell faded away, and Hermione realized the only thing keeping her from controlling her own actions now was sheer contented lethargy.

Breathing. She would focus on breathing. Anything more could wait.

Narcissa carefully lowered them down to the bed, keeping herself wrapped around the younger witch from behind. Hermione's head rested on one arm as the other held them together about her waist, and she felt... protected. Desired. Safe.

"Are you alright?" Narcissa whispered, her thumb tracing idle circles on Hermione's stomach.

"Maybe?" She blushed at the squeak of her voice. "Give me a minute to make sure I'm still all here."

Narcissa chuckled and kissed Hermione's shoulder. "Thank you."

Hermione made a strangled noise of protest. Thank her? She wasn't the one handing out life-shattering orgasms, here!

"No, really. Thank you. For letting me… for being here to…” Narcissa sighed. "I know I… I'm, shall we say, a bit intense. It's been decades since I've taken someone like that. You're so beautiful. Your mind is so beautiful. Sharing your pleasure was just… exquisite. So thank you."

Hermione's breathing had finally slowed and her thoughts had begun to catch up. "You… you were there, weren't you? I could feel your… desire?"

"I was. I could feel everything you felt. There are certain benefits to being a Legilimens, and paired with that spell… It's a heady thing. I should have asked, first, but I… I was a bit caught up in the moment."

Hermione laughed breathlessly. "I can forgive that." She turned slowly in Narcissa's arms. "Oh no!"
Narcissa's eyes widened. "What is it?"

"I'm ruining your dress," Hermione answered quietly. "I'm sorry."

Narcissa's stare widened further and she breathed an incredulous laugh. "Don't startle me like that! 'Oh no,' she says. I thought something terrible had happened!" She leaned forward and pressed a quick kiss to Hermione's forehead. "I want you here, just like this, in my arms. Forget the dress."

Hermione blushed, running her fingers across the delicate fabric along the curve of Narcissa's hip, still half-disbelieving that she had permission to touch this particular woman. "That is highly unlikely," she said softly, remembering the feeling of this fabric against her naked skin only moments before. Forgetting this dress... and the woman who wore it... was going to be perfectly impossible.

As though reading her thoughts—and perhaps she was—Narcissa flushed as well, but a hint of melancholy had already crept into the room.

"Do you leave tomorrow?"

The sudden acknowledgement of the elephant in the room prompted Narcissa to slowly shake her head. "The next afternoon. Tomorrow is when I find out what happens to Lucius while I'm away."

Hermione shivered, and it had little to do with the chilly air on her naked skin. "We have a day, then?" she asked, afraid to ask for anything more than a vague chance at being the way Narcissa spent the last of her time in this corner of the world.

Narcissa smiled. "Yes. And a night. And a morning. If you'd care for them."

Hermione closed her eyes against the sudden stinging there. There were unspoken words in Narcissa's offer. A day and a night and a morning and no more, but Hermione had known that. She bit her lip, and when that wasn't enough, she leaned forward blindly, ignoring the bump of her nose against a cheekbone and finding Narcissa's mouth with her own. She had a day and a night and a morning, and she also had right now, and she wasn't about to waste it.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was some time before either of them slept, and even so, they woke together again well before
dawn, bodies wired and hypersensitive, and Hermione wanted it to be perfect.

"Do it again," she whispered into the darkness. "Take over."

There was a moment of stillness. Hermione silently summoned a gentle glow to fill the room. "Oh,"
she gasped, nearly losing control of even that tiny bit of magic at the sight of the stunningly beautiful,
stunningly naked witch before her. She bit her lip and blushed at the vision of sheets pooled about
Narcissa's waist, hair mussed and shimmering in the dim light.

A hint of a superior smirk flashed across Narcissa's lips at Hermione reaction, but it quickly softened
into something more genuine as the older witch hesitated, fingers poised over the handle of her
wand. After those moments in Narcissa's mind, Hermione could almost feel the readiness, the
wanting, the temptation to pick it up, and the equal, conflicting need for Hermione's assurance that it
would be okay.

"I want it," Hermione whispered. It was true. God was it true. She had given her prior moments with
Narcissa her all, but after what Narcissa had done, it had been a mundane imitation of intimacy at
best. She knew there was a way she could give her something better. "I want it to be as perfect for
you as it was for me," she muttered against Narcissa's neck, letting the faint shaking in her body lend
a tremble to her lips rather than her words. "Fill me with your magic again." Narcissa would leave,
but if Hermione had any say in the matter, she would leave with the best memories the younger
witch could offer. "Help me have you." Use me. "Please."

When Narcissa's head rose sharply, eyes searing into Hermione's own, she knew the thought
between her spoken words had not gone unheard.

Narcissa slowly picked up the wand, and Hermione could feel her heartbeat rise in response.

"Very well."

The quiet words were all the warning Hermione was offered before that weightless, effortless spell
filled her mind once again, spilling into her without pause or incantation. She could feel Narcissa's
silent, contented sigh as though she had breathed it from her own lungs.

Kiss me .

Even with the words forgotten in the same instant they slipped into Hermione's mind, the motion of
rising to meet Narcissa's dark, smiling lips was a simple thing to understand, and a simple thing to
take pleasure in. Sitting face-to-face in the half-light, the dim glow of Hermione's wand may as well
have illuminated the entire world for all she cared to look at any piece of it beyond the witch before
her. There were more words in her mind as the space dwindled between them, unheard words that
sped Hermione's heartbeat just as surely as the kisses.

Feel this. All that I feel is yours. My passion is yours. My pleasure is yours. Know my mind. Know
my joy. Now … touch me.

Hermione's hands sild over the skin before her with a reverence not induced by the spell. There was
something incredibly beautiful being created between Narcissa's skin and the shadows, a magic entirely separate from that filling her mind. A delicious flicker of electricity rippled along Hermione's skin as her hands slid down Narcissa's sides, eliciting a smile and a shiver of anticipation as they reached her hips. When Hermione's fingers brushed the back of her thighs, Narcissa's legs shook, breath hitching.

Closer.

Hermione shifted closer, pressing into the other witch, accepting Narcissa's head against her shoulder. Her hand rose, reverently caressing the long, arched neck and fine, pale hair which had taunted her in so many waking moments and haunted her most recent dreams. The dreamlike nature of her spell-prompted motions weren't helping the continued surreality of the scene. Even now, even having touched her for the first time only hours before, Hermione could so easily have sworn off the entire encounter as a fever-dream on a faded couch in a Ministry lobby.

If not for Narcissa's eerie, irresistible commands.

*I want to feel your lips. I want you to taste my skin. I need you to feel how real I am; know this is not a dream.*

The words felt… closer now. Even after they faded from her mind, their presence lingered. No, Hermione realized, not the presence of the words, but the presence of their silent mistress. She could feel her, feel Narcissa pulling their minds together, intensifying whatever connection was created by the spell.

Hermione's lips closed over the soft skin just beneath Narcissa's jaw bone, teeth just grazing flesh. Her mouth dragged lower, following the faint taste of salt and skin until she could latch on to the thicker muscle between shoulder and throat.

When her teeth sank in just a bit deeper… Hermione could almost feel it. There was a hint of something dull and hot against her neck, not quite pain in her mind, but *presence*, and as Narcissa swayed in her arms, the sensation only grew.

Her lips were moving again, pressing kisses down the length of Narcissa's arm, lingering at the thin skin in the crook of her elbow and dragging her tongue along the pulse at her wrist before pulling back, untangling their bodies, but taking Narcissa's hand with her.

She stared into the older woman's eyes over the palm pressed to her lips, wondering if she had been commanded to do so or if those pale, astonishingly warm eyes were just too magnetic to resist.

She drew two of Narcissa's fingers into her mouth, suckling softly, feeling a strange sense of shared vulnerability at the sensation of Narcissa's nails resting against the flat of her tongue and the feeling of her own teeth resting just behind the second joint of those fingers.

Narcissa's gaze grew dark and hooded.

*Kiss me. Now.*

Hermione allowed the hand to fall, pressing upward again, seeking entrance to her lover's mouth. The kiss was slow and intoxicating with flickers of pleasure that went straight to her head, and the dark chuckle that sounded in Hermione's mind as they fell backwards together against the pillow was pure, unadulterated foreplay.

*Yes. No hands this time. I'm enjoying your mouth far too much.*
Hermione found herself once again kissing a path down Narcissa's throat, but there was no hesitation this time, passing between her collarbones, chin brushing over the swell of a breast.

**In fact... No hands at all. Clasp them behind you.**

Hermione felt her shoulders pulling backwards, the thumb and forefinger of her right hand closing about the wrist of her left. The limp weight of her hands rested in the hollow of her spine, but Hermione felt no confusion at the strange new position, only the same heady joy of Narcissa's presence driving her onward.

Her tongue painted a ragged circle around Narcissa's right breast. She watched the pale areola crease in response, and she felt the ache of it in her mind, feeling her skin tighten in sympathy… or… perhaps a sort of symbiosis. Her lips finally closed over that taunting bit of flesh, humming in surprised delight as she felt the heat of her own mouth permeate her awareness, soothing an ache that did not belong to her.

Narcissa's throat arched backwards, weight shifting, and Hermione compensated without thought, pressing her chest against Narcissa's stomach as the other witch's back arched in offering. Another breast. Another shimmer of shared sensation. Another vulnerable bit of Hermione's mind peeling open to welcome Narcissa inside.

**Finish it.**

It wasn't easy, shuffling down Narcissa's body, back straining to hold her up without the use of her arms or hands, but the feeling of her nipples dragging over Narcissa's skin, rising hot and hard between them, was more electrifying than any discomfort could hinder.

If not for the spell, Hermione might have paused, a bit nervous being confronted with something she had yet to be on either the giving, or receiving end of, but she was firmly in the grip of the other witch's magic and arousal, so there was no hesitation, only… sensation. She slid her cheek up the smooth inside of Narcissa's thighs, feeling goosebumps rising on her own skin to mirror the ones beneath her.

What limited part of Hermione could focus on anything beyond carrying out Narcissa's last command was… intrigued, she realized, by the strange sort of artistry that existed between a woman's legs. It was oddly fascinating, the silvery tint to the hair here, the glint of wetness in the dim light, the smell she'd already come to associate with desire. Somehow, she hadn't expected it to all be so… interesting.

Her head tilted, shoulders distantly making their discomfort known.

At the first lick of her tongue between Narcissa's legs, Hermione froze, eyes flicking up to meet Narcissa's own in question at the spark of sensation she had just felt. It still hadn't been physical, not quite, but it was more, so much more than anything else she had experienced through the connection between them this night.

Narcissa's eyes were closed, chest still moving with her short, shallow breaths, but a smile flickered over her lips. "Yes," she whispered, voice low, hoarse. Narcissa's hand rose from the sheets at her side, one slender finger tracing up her ribs. The nail dragged across her breast and circled her own nipple, and this time, Hermione gasped aloud. "You feel that, don't you?"

Hermione didn't need to form words for Narcissa to feel the answer from every inch of her body, and for that, Hermione was grateful. She wasn't sure she could speak now if her life depended on it.
As Narcissa continued the slow, teasing touch, circling her own flesh, Hermione watched, almost hypnotized. She could feel it, more and more with each passing moment, as though that fingertip, that short, determined nail, ran along her skin as well. Narcissa's smile widened. "You can feel more."

With those taunting words, Hermione found her gaze, her attention redirected, and Narcissa's words had never sounded so all-consuming as they echoed in her mind.

*I've given you a problem.*

Hermione felt her shoulders flex back even more dramatically for a moment, and she had to brace her forehead on Narcissa's thigh against the strain.

*But I've left you with everything you need to solve it.*

There was a distinct smugness in Narcissa's mental voice that lingered even beyond the words.

*You're a clever girl. Use this sharp, beautiful mind of yours …*

The pressure between her shoulder blades relented, but the ache there was a strangely thrilling reminder of Narcissa's power, and Hermione shivered.

*…and that sharp little tongue.*

In that moment, Hermione's world narrowed down to a single task, a single awareness of two disparate desires that could be filled in the same way.

The taste was as intriguing as the scent had been, but as Hermione pressed the flat of her tongue between the lips, sensation distracted from curiosity. Hermione felt her legs squirm, clenching around the empty air between them as though searching for the mouth—her mouth—she could feel in her mind. Her head tilted to the side, slow, steady pulses giving way to equally slow circles around the clit, around the entrance below, and as Narcissa stiffened beneath her, Hermione whimpered.

It was all just a bit overwhelming, the empty physical ache between her legs and the overflowing desire in her mind, the taste of Narcissa under her tongue and the touch of that irresistible power in the strain of her back and arms and…

Hermione pushed her shoulders down, spreading Narcissa wider… letting go.

Narcissa was shifting, pressing her hips up against Hermione's mouth, demanding more, faster, but her mental control was unflinching even in the face of her own desire, and her commands kept Hermione's motions slow, teasing. She drew back, breathing lightly over her handiwork, feeling the cold tendrils of air ghost over herself as well. Everything she could see before her—red, wet, swollen—she could feel between her own legs, building, aching, aching—

Lips against lips again, teasing, exploring, devoting equal time to either side, to discovering every tiny sound she could wring from Narcissa's throat. A gasp. A whimper. A shivering, quiet little moan that echoed behind Hermione's eyes, and she saw stars. It felt as though Narcissa had caressed the very surface of her mind, igniting sensations of pleasure that could never be lit by skin alone.

Hermione's tongue seemed determined to try, though. She pressed into the entrance, just inside, flicking in, out, her own desperate breaths adding a trembling vibration to the motion that had her grinding herself aimlessly against the sheets beneath her as Narcissa jerked against her tongue. She had found something different, something sensitive, and she knew because the building pleasure that echoed between their minds was becoming something akin to torture. Orgasm threatened behind her eyelids and in the untouched pulse between her legs, but Hermione knew she wouldn't reach it until
she had given it first.

She drew back her tongue and moved up, drawing Narcissa's clit into her mouth.

The sound she earned in response was anything but quiet, and Hermione had never felt so powerful in her life.

There was a moment, suspended, where Hermione could feel Narcissa's heartbeat against her tongue. Then there was a command, *Look at me*, and there was nothing but Narcissa's hooded, darkened eyes, and the sensation of her tongue licking against Narcissa clit, against her own clit, hard and fast and wet and *throbbing* and too much, so much—

*Please. Please.*

The word was in Hermione's mind and it was *her voice*, Hermione's own need, her silent begging and Narcissa *knew*, she heard.

*Finish it, please.*

That word, again. Narcissa's, this time, and Hermione stopped licking, stopped breathing, stopped thinking, and hummed.

Behind Hermione's eyes, Narcissa's pleasure sparked white and hot and blinding, control fracturing enough that Hermione could press a palm between her own legs, giving her an anchor, something solid to tide her through the melting, unyielding pleasure spiraling through every synapse in her brain. It was *wrenching*, primal and fracturing… pieces of herself getting lost and scrambled and there was no telling if she would ever win them back from the magnetic, overwhelming depths of Narcissa's pleasure, Narcissa's control, Narcissa's mind…

Finally, Hermione felt her limbs go limp, trembling all over.

Her shoulders hurt. Her mouth was dry. And yet, both her chin and nose were damp and sticky. A shower might be nice. If she could stop shaking. If she could move.

Narcissa leaned over and pressed a kiss to Hermione's temple. "Relax, now."

It wasn't a command. The spell was gone. But the calm, soothing tenor of Narcissa's cool, collected voice was just as impossible to resist when spoken aloud.

Narcissa pulled her back into her arms, and Hermione slept again.

Hermione woke early, weeks and weeks of dawn routine dragging open her eyes despite the scratchy exhaustion sitting dry and heavy in the back of her throat.

Tea would make it better.

A shower would make it best.

Shower first, then.

A luxurious amount of time in the mind-numbing heat of the water later, a freshly clean and bathrobe-clad Hermione made breakfast in a daze, leaving a trail of half-closed cabinets and drawers behind her when she returned upstairs.

After doing her best to set down the tray she carried silently beside the bed, Hermione stared at
Narcissa's sleeping form for a long time. Until that rare, vulnerable moment in the library had finally seen exhaustion get the best of the other witch, Hermione had almost wondered if Narcissa ever actually slept. It had never much seemed to matter the hour of morning or evening: when Hermione was awake, Narcissa was already up and about and taking care of all manner of business in the running of her world. It wasn't a logical thought, but Hermione had almost begun to imagine that Narcissa was simply incapable of rest. Sleep settled strangely about her in a stillness almost too fragile to be real, the faint motion of the sheet as her chest rose and fell the only hint of life in an otherwise statuesque display of marble-pale skin and ghostly-golden hair against the red fabric.

As though prodded awake by Hermione's gaze, an arm moved beneath the covers, extending far enough to breach the air and emerge in the faint indentation where the younger witch had slept. A slow, leisurely stretch followed the first questing motion, and Hermione smiled.

"Good morning," she murmured.

Narcissa blinked up at her. "Already?"

The distinct lack of composure in that single word had Hermione battling back giggles. "Quite. I've brought breakfast," she added, scooping back up the tray and setting it carefully on the bed as she clambered back up to join the other woman.

"Breakfast?"

This time, Hermione did laugh, amazed by the bleary denial in Narcissa's one-word attempts to make sense of the morning. "Yes. Toast. Fruit. Tea."

When Narcissa stared down at the tray with the look of a starving creature who had quite thoroughly forgotten how to eat, Hermione lifted the cup of tea and pressed it into the other woman's hands. "Drink," she insisted with a smile, and Narcissa obeyed.

The warm liquid seemed to wake Narcissa enough to undertake the meal of her own volition. She worked her way through breakfast without pausing to summon any sort of clothing, apparently unconcerned with her own state of undress, despite Hermione's distracted blushing through the entire ordeal.

Once the food and drink had disappeared, Narcissa buried herself in the covers again with a heavy sigh, leaving only her nose, eyes, and the top of her head exposed above the crimson line of the sheet. "I have to go to the Ministry," she muttered through the fabric.

Hermione stared down at her, torn between a smile at the astonishingly cute display of displeasure… and a sympathetic annoyance over Lucius's continued ability to eat away at Narcissa's time.

"I don't want to go."

There was no poise or arrogance in those words, only an exhausted, almost childlike resignation. The nose and eyes slipped beneath the covers, leaving only a pool of white-gold hair in the sunlight on the pillow, as though the morning had melted Narcissa away for good.

Hermione slipped off the bathrobe and laid down beside her, tucking herself back under the sheet and tugging it down until she could lie face-to-face with the tired witch. "I'm certainly not going to tell you to go anywhere," she said, only managing to summon half a smile.

Narcissa's gaze visibly softened, and she rested a hand against Hermione's waist. "As much as I appreciate that sentiment—" she began. "—I do need to know. Lucius is no longer my problem, thankfully, but… I have to be sure he isn't a problem for you, either. Or my sisters. Or anyone else, if
I can help it."

Hermione let her hand slide down the pillow to rest against Narcissa's shoulder, twirling a strand of golden hair around the tip of her finger. "We can take care of ourselves, you know? All of us. You've done more than your share."

Narcissa did smile, then, and she bent her chin to press a quick kiss against Hermione's knuckles. "I know you can."

With that, she rose, disappearing into the bathroom for only moments before emerging dressed to face the day, all sign of exhaustion and indulgence thoroughly erased. She spared a quick kiss for Hermione's lips, then she was gone, leaving Hermione staring at the doorway with her fingers pressed against her mouth, everything but her eyes, nose, and forehead hidden beneath the covers, breathing in Narcissa's scent.

"I can't do this."

Hermione startled awake, disoriented and unsure how long she had been asleep. She hadn't intended on letting the day get away from her, but with Narcissa gone, she hadn't had the energy to get out of bed again. Coupled with the distinct lack of sleep the night before, this was really becoming a bit of an unfortunate pattern.

Narcissa stood in the doorway, hand gripping the plaster beside her as though ready to rip it from the wall. Her eyes were closed, brow furrowed, teeth clenched.

"What happened?" Hermione whispered. She cleared her throat, chasing out the last of the sleep. "Is everything alright?"

"He's getting off. No house arrest, no prison… A commuted sentence. They're replacing my supervision with… nothing but a few magical restrictions."

Narcissa was nearly growling out her words.

"What?" Hermione managed as she stumbled out of bed and tugged back on her bathrobe. "He's free?"

Narcissa's response was a bitter laugh. "Free? No. Nothing so simple as that. This is… I can't even…" She stepped away from the door.

Hermione moved closer, reaching towards Narcissa, but the other witch didn't see the motion, too caught up in her own descent into agitated pacing.

"This is the worst scenario I could have imagined, and I—"

Hermione finally managed to make contact, catching hold of Narcissa's shoulder and pausing her mid-stride. She slid her palm down Narcissa's arm until she could clasp their hands together, unsure how else to show her sympathy. "Is there anything I can do?"

Narcissa stared down at their joined hands for a long moment, then back up into Hermione's eyes. Slowly, she pulled away. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I just…" She leaned down, pressing a kiss to Hermione's lips even as she drew further away. "This isn't about you. I'm sorry. I… this if family, and I… I don't know… It's only…" A pained grimace flashed across her face. "I need Bella."

"Bellatrix?" Hermione whispered under her breath.
As though summoned by her name alone, a dark silhouette appeared in the doorway, and Hermione flinched back, clutching the robe more tightly about her frame.

"What've the bastards done now?"

Hermione didn't know whether to stay or to leave, to offer privacy or more of her helpless, ineffective support, but Bellatrix stood in the only doorway, so she had nowhere to run.

"They've ruined it, Bella. I can't leave things like this, and…” Narcissa cut herself off with a bitter laugh, leaning back against the plaster. "It's all my fault."

She slid down the wall, folding in on herself until she was sitting on the floor, head resting in hands braced against knees. Her shoulders shook, and Hermione had the impression there might be tears.

"Cissy," Bellatrix stepped further into the room, not sparing a glance for Hermione as she took up a rather intimidating position leaning over Narcissa's crumpled figure. "I doubt that."

The matter-of-fact words triggered another burst of pained laughter from the younger sister. "You don't understand. Per his request, I… I told the Ministry that Lucius hadn't done anything wrong since his sentencing. I swore my decision to leave was a mutual choice with no real bearing on his character or state of mind. I—" Narcissa paused, reaching into the pocket of her robes and tugging out a thrice-folded piece of paper. "In your own words, Madame Malfoy, he has done nothing warranting our concern in the past year. While your personal recommendation was further incarceration, we see no need for such drastic measures at this point in time. Instead, we will be partially commuting the sentence of Mr. Lucius Malfoy. He will no longer remain under house arrest. He may come and go from the Black residence at will, but his magic will be bound when venturing beyond the borders of your estate, to discourage any return to criminal activity."

"It's… it's essentially what they've done to you, except…"

"He can leave," Hermione whispered. "And she can't."

She wasn't sure either of the other witches had heard.

Bellatrix was quiet as Narcissa read the words on the Ministry-issued piece of too-thick, too-pretentious parchment. When it became clear Narcissa had nothing more to add beyond a steady fall of angry tears, Bellatrix said, "I suppose that'll mean we've got to get a car, or something."

To Hermione's astonishment, Narcissa laughed then. A great gasp of sound, still a bit choked with anger and regret. When her shaking shoulders finally began to calm, Bellatrix's wry, sparkling eyes narrowed. "Go, Cissy. He is no longer your concern."

"But, Bella, I—"

Her elder sister shook her head. "No." A thin, deadly smile crept up onto Bellatrix's lips. "I will see to any… trouble. You'll be missed, and don't think I would hesitate to steal you back if I think there's half a chance in hell of you not killing me for it, but you earned this. Take your freedom and run with it. Say hullo to Draco for me. I can deal with Lucius."

Narcissa met Bellatrix's haunting stare with a glance of warning. "I know well what 'deal with' means to you." To Hermione's surprise, Narcissa rose with no further warning, pulling her sister into a quick, firm embrace. "Thank you, though. Don't ruin your own future over… some misguided attempt to protect me."

"No such thing," Bella answered softly, lightly, but the weight of her stare belied her flippant tone.
In that moment, Hermione had two thoughts. First, there were things about Narcissa and her relationship with her sisters Hermione could never hope to understand. Second, for those few, caustic words sliding off Bella's lips in a dark, oily promise, Hermione almost liked the crazy witch.

Once Bellatrix had disappeared, it was clear the topic of Lucius was closed, and Hermione found herself rather tongue-tied as she aimlessly made tea for the second time that day. Sitting together in the kitchen, though, Hermione's curiosity got the better of her, and she found Narcissa far less tight-lipped about an equally intriguing subject.

"I… keep being surprised. You and Bellatrix… you actually get along quite well, don't you."

Narcissa chuckled. "As well as can be expected for sisters, most of the time."

Hermione stared down into her tea, a specific incident playing in her mind, but unsure if she should ask about it.

Narcissa stole the words before she could speak them. "You're thinking about the fire."

Hermione glanced up sharply, and there was a guilty little smile dancing about the other witch's lips. "Are you in my head?"

"Only a little," Narcissa said with a smirk. It faded quickly. "I'm sorry. You're just… very open to me, at the moment. I can't seem to make myself pull back."

Hermione considered the words. On one hand, there were things she didn't particularly want Narcissa privy to, but on the other… the knowledge of the shared trust in keeping this strange, intimate channel of communication open between them was a dangerously appealing thing. Slowly, she shrugged. "I… I don't mind. And yes," she added, hastening to distance herself from certain thoughts. "I was thinking about the fire. You were so furious. You… you hit her. It was the first time I'd really seen you and Bellatrix together. I'm still having trouble getting that image out of my head, even though you've both been… cordial to each other since, sometimes even warm."

Hermione wasn't sure what reaction she had been expecting, but Narcissa's bright, easy laughter wasn't it. "You are fearless today, aren't you? Where has this inquisitive little creature been hiding?"

Hermione blushed, looking away, but Narcissa didn't allow her to withdraw.

"I don't mind. It's… a complicated thing, Bella and I. When she was in particularly vicious moods, she used to make a game of pushing my buttons, trying to get under my skin and crack open my emotions. There were days she would taunt me for hours, she… she used to… make a celebration of her own… insanity. She took my distance as a personal insult. Why would I choose to feel nothing, when I could take the path she had chosen? The fire… the fire felt so much like those days. It was a callous, childish attempt at retribution, and one that threatened to compromise everything I had been finally starting to remake of my life. She lashed out like a child, and I reacted the same way. I'm not proud of it, but… sometimes, the most effective communication is not the most… proper. She and 'Dromeda were always far worse than she and I."

Throughout Narcissa's words, Hermione felt more and more questions prickling the edges of her mind, things she had never dared to ask before, but which suddenly seemed almost in reach, after the night they had shared.

Narcissa laughed again. "Ask, Hermione. You aren't going to have another chance."

Though the words were spoken lightly, they darkened the tone of the conversation. There had been
an ease, before, even with the complicated topic. Hermione had nearly forgotten with whom she was speaking. No, that wasn't quite right. She knew she was speaking with Narcissa, but it had felt different. She wasn't speaking to Lady Malfoy, that much was sure, but she hadn't been speaking to the women who would be leaving her tomorrow morning, either. She had been… discovering someone entirely other, some woman who might have been, in some other world, had they met in some other time. Someone willing to share her past, share her life, over many cups of tea on many afternoons.

Now, that feeling had passed, and it was a pensive, melancholy Hermione who dared her next question.

"There's something your sister said to me about you I've never been able to forget. Andromeda, that is. You defied Him. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. The Dark Lord. Twice. Perhaps more. How? And… why?"

To Hermione's surprise, another faint chuckle slipped from Narcissa's lips as she leaned back in her chair with a distant smile crinkling the corners of her eyes. "Andy always makes it sound so heroic. I'm not some foolhardy prodigy defying the master simply because I could. It was always for my son. The first… Draco was… intended to become a murderer, not yet even out of Hogwarts, and I… I disobeyed the Dark Lords intentions, convincing and binding another to take on the task and protect my boy. The next… My next small rebellion eventually spared me a similar fate to my husband and sister. I saved the Chosen One's life, but that was… incidental, I suppose, to finding out that my son was alive and getting him away from the battlegrounds at Hogwarts before anyone else had another chance to see him dead. I told the Dark Lord that Harry Potter had been killed by his hand, and in doing so… I may well have altered the course of history."

Hermione listened in silent wonder to the calm, quiet words describing some of the most courageous actions she could ever have imagined. "How?" she finally whispered. "Wasn't he suspicious? Was it… this?" She gestured vaguely in the air around her temple. "Did you have stronger skills with your mental abilities than… Him?"

Narcissa pursed her lips in apparent consideration "I've had a long time to give that particular conundrum some thought, and I suppose there is some small chance I could have bested him in an unnoticed battle of minds, but… I think my skill with Legilimancy and Occlumency has been given more credit than perhaps it's due, in this case. It helped. Of that much, I'm sure. But everyone expects deception and deceit from men. Women are underestimated. Men think us guileless. I made that my strength long before the time when Tom Riddle became the Dark Lord. He was terribly paranoid, near delusion about the loyalties of the men surrounding him, but I passed his suspicions until the very end."

"You're astonishing," Hermione whispered, then blushed at the blatant admiration in her own voice. Narcissa only smiled, gaze still lost somewhere beyond them both.
She fought the pull of sleep, but that warm, gentle smile was as comforting as any blanket, and her words grew softer than the pillows on which they lay, and Hermione gave in to the pull of the poems, closing her eyes.

She woke to find Narcissa's hands on her, gently stroking the curve of her hip and running up and down the length of her spine. The touch was so soft, so innocuous, that Hermione had no idea how long it had been happening, only that her skin was far more awake than she, already hypersensitive to Narcissa's touch.

She rolled towards the other witch, and the touch retreated.

There was a darkness in Narcissa's eyes that had nothing to do with the time of night, an intensity to her stare.

"Narcissa? Wha—"

"Shhh."

It was not an unkind sound, but the intent behind it was clear, and Hermione silenced herself, waiting.

"Can I… one last time, can I…"

Hermione's breath hitched, not from the thought of what Narcissa was asking, but because this was the first time she had asked at all, rather than giving in to Hermione's own request.

Without hesitation, Hermione nodded.

Narcissa's face and hands disappeared into the darkness for a moment, then returned, wand raised.

"Are you sure?"

There it was, again. That darkness behind Narcissa's eyes, a distance of sorts, and it sent a shower of contradictory shivers racing down Hermione spine.

Still, she nodded again, feeling strangely bound to Narcissa's initial hushing, unwilling to break her own silence.

This time, there was no further hesitation.

"Imperio!"

It was so quick. Hermione felt herself falling—no, floating—away from herself, into herself, into Narcissa.

Be still.

Hermione had forgotten how eerie it was, to hear Narcissa's sharp, seductive commands echo only once in her mind before they disappeared completely, as though they had never been, then to feel her body's joyful obedience to the forgotten intent behind some lost instruction. Narcissa was there, leaning over her, and some unimportant part of her wanted to rise, to bring their lips together, but her body was so heavy, so content in its frozen lethargy, and she couldn't bring herself to move even one muscle as Narcissa leant down to softly kiss her half-parted lips.

Move only to accommodate me. Do not touch me in return. Do not pull away.
So it began.

First there were fingers, reawakening her skin, relearning her flesh, mapping her body with silent, resolute intensity. There was a trembling determination in their motion, but Hermione could find no hint of the feelings behind it in Narcissa's eyes.

She heard them, though. Narcissa filled her mind with words as she moved, and Hermione grasped after them, desperate to hold on to the meaning, not just the heavy, heated emotions left in their wake.

_I could look at you forever. I imagine you've never really considered your own beauty. You were so tired when you came to us, lean and gaunt with survival, but still so much more vivid with life than anyone else who had walked in these halls for many, many years. Now…_

Fingers traced up the inner curve of her thigh, feather-light, almost tickling.

…_you've come into yourself._

Without warning, two fingers slipped inside of her, and Hermione gasped.

As one hand began to build a slow, deep rhythm between her thighs, the other ran the backs of nails across her stomach, triggering a ripple of muscles that made her inner walls clench in sympathy.

_You're stronger, now. That is only to be expected._

The words built in intensity along with Narcissa's physical motions, echoing against the surface of her mind with a steady thrum of truth and desire.

_More than anything, though… I can hardly believe you've managed to… keep your softness. Don't let our world make you hard, mindre. If you forget every other command I've given you, do not forget that your trust is an incredible gift, and the world would be a darker place should you lose your ability to give it away._

Fingers curled upwards, pressing, wringing another tiny sound from Hermione's throat.

_I was never kind to you. Not even now. I've been incredibly selfish. But your trust… I couldn't turn away from it. I'm not sure anyone could._

Hermione couldn't have said why, but she felt close to tears, then, even as Narcissa gently quieted her with a kiss. The heat between her legs was building fast, faster than she expected, and her body longed to struggle, to reach out and anchor herself against Narcissa, but her body surrendered to the inescapable combination of dominance, protectiveness, and possession that wrapped its way about her mind.

She came so quickly it almost hurt, Narcissa's lips drinking in her gasps and cries, not relaxing her hold on Hermione's mind even after the orgasm had faded away.

Her fingers made no motion to leave, either.

Hot, sure lips joined the hand between Hermione's legs, pressing quick, searing kisses up and down each of Hermione's thighs. Then, there was a tongue against her clit, lips wrapped around it, soothing, burning, demanding, and Hermione's gasps at another shuddering climax went unstifled.

The fingers withdrew, leaving her hollow and aching with something half satisfaction, half a strange, unfilled desire that Hermione sensed came more from Narcissa than her own delirious mind. Narcissa
wanted something, and she hadn't gotten it just quite yet.

When a tongue replaced the fingers that had been inside of her, Hermione would have squirmed away if she could, too sensitive, too sated, but Narcissa's command of stillness held her in place, and it took only one further instruction to have her wanting all over again.

*Let me give you more. One more. Perhaps another.*

It was only tongue, this time. Narcissa's nose pressed into the soft skin at the crease just below her stomach as her tongue traced torturously slow patterns on either side of Hermione's clit, only millimeters from where Hermione most desperately wanted it. Again. She did want it again. Already. So soon.

A whimper worked its way up her throat.

Narcissa drew back, sliding down to suck at Hermione's inner thigh, and the whimper of need changed into a whimper of protest.

"Hush," Narcissa whispered, but it wasn't a command laced with the edge of her magic, only a word, and Hermione took that as permission to ignore it. She couldn't speak—those motions were beyond her—but she could make her desires known in other ways. When Narcissa's tongue continued it's slow, delicate exploration of her thigh, Hermione's answering sound was one of desperate frustration.

"If you do that again..." Narcissa said. "I'll stop."

Hermione nearly whimpered at the sheer unfairness of it all, the arbitrary task of silence given to her rather than enforced by the spell, but she held back, drawing in a trembling breath and closing her eyes in resignation to whatever pace Narcissa so chose.

Perhaps in reward, perhaps in punishment, three fingers slid into her without warning. Hermione's back arched into the faint but welcome burn despite the spell's demands on her stillness, breaking her brief silence with a sharp gasp.

*Open your eyes.*

Narcissa sat back, waiting for Hermione's eyes to meet her own. She ran her tongue over a faintly-glistening upper lip and looked downwards again, watching her hand move in and out of Hermione as though hypnotized by her own motions. A thumb rested just beside her tired, needy clit, pressing against the base, offering only continued torment, no release.

In a flicker of motion, the thumb slid upwards and over, and Narcissa bit her lip at Hermione's answering moan. *You love this, don't you?*

Hermione didn't know what question her mind was so determined to answer, but as Narcissa's thumb brushed over her again and again, all she could hear was her own silent chant of *yes, yes, yes,* oh, please, yes.

Narcissa was smiling. A breath escaped in a huff of delighted laughter, warm and soft against Hermione's thigh, and the light of it, the sharp, heady joy of it raced along the connection between them, blooming white and brilliant behind Hermione's eyes.

It pushed her over the edge, and for a time, that light was all she could see through the pleasure.

When her vision cleared, a sharp determination had returned to Narcissa's face, and if Hermione had the energy to be worried, she might have been.
Instead, it was all she could do to close her eyes and lie still as Narcissa's lips disappeared between her legs again, soothing hot, bruised flesh with the softest, gentlest of motions. The moment stretched on and on, drawing an exhausted desire once more to the forefront of Hermione's mind, something thick and heavy and deadly as molten lava, and just as unstoppable. When she came for the fourth time that night, it was something like falling, something like flying, but this time, Narcissa was finally closing her eyes, letting herself revel in Hermione's pleasure alongside her, and the unrest that had lingered beneath the surface of each orgasm before finally fled in the wash of pure satisfaction.

Hermione felt her limbs set free, but there was a final command echoing in her mind, and she could do nothing to resist.

Sleep, mindre. Sleep now.

There was a place, here. Some place she had perhaps been, perhaps seen, but warped and forgotten in sleep. The London underground? No, there was grass, as bright and brilliant as the clearest weeks in spring.

She could not feel the grass. She could only watch as it parted and made way for the pale figure walking towards her.

"What are we doing out here?" Hermione said, dimly surprised to hear her own voice sound in this incorporeal place.

Narcissa did not answer, and Hermione saw a thin film of ice coated her pale, downturned lips.

"These are your dreams," Hermione whispered, a half-formed memory of ice-hewn manacles sparking to life in her mind.

Narcissa stepped closer still. She did not respond to Hermione's words.

"What am I doing here, then?"

In that moment, Narcissa was close enough to touch, and without thinking, Hermione did, pulling her into her arms. She kissed her, then. Fully, passionately, ignoring the cold scrape of the ice against her own lips, ignoring the bitter, salty taste of the water as it melted into her mouth. When Narcissa's lips were finally warm and yielding against her own, Hermione pushed her away.

"What are we doing here?" she asked one final time, pleading.

"You came to say goodbye," Narcissa said, closing her eyes.

Before Hermione could reach for her, she began falling backwards, arms crossed over her chest, collapsing into the grass, swallowed whole by the rich, thriving green that surrounded them both, and she was gone.

When she woke, she woke alone. She could feel the empty chill of the sheets beside her, no longer holding the warmth of another body, and with the helpless fear of a child alone in the darkness, she felt her heartbeat begin to race in her chest, like a rabbit running away from the great preying dawn, running towards some greener pasture of a lost night and a desperate denial, but she had already slept well past morning. Narcissa was gone. She couldn't run from it. She could no longer cling to any quiet, selfish wishes that intentions might have changed in the night, that there was anything she could offer the witch beyond the chance to reclaim her own life, and as Hermione's heartbeat began to slow, a hint of gratefulness began to creep in about the edges. Narcissa was gone, and had
probably saved them an incredible awkwardness in any further goodbyes.

Morning had long since broken. Narcissa's chambers were bathed in light. Fighting the weight of leaden limbs, Hermione sat, nudging something hard with her elbow as she propped herself upright. It was the poetry book. The one Narcissa had been reading from last night, and one Hermione could have sworn had been set aside on the bedside table before anything further had transpired between them. Sure enough, a corner of the sheets had been threaded between two of the pages, far too much fabric to be incidental, and Hermione found herself chewing at her bottom lip as she pushed it open.

There was a word scrawled in the margin, a single word that transformed the sonnet written beneath into… a letter of sorts.

Mindre,

Hermione was impossibly glad, then, that she was alone. She couldn't seem to read past Narcissa's handwriting, couldn't look down farther than that single word, the rest blurred and distant through the tears brimming in her eyes.

A drop fell on the page, smudging the start of the poem, and Hermione's gaze followed it down through the rest of the lines.

Mindre,

I think I should have loved you presently,

And given in earnest words I flung in jest;

And lifted honest eyes for you to see,

And caught your hand against my cheek and breast;

And all my pretty follies flung aside
That won you to me, and beneath your gaze,

Naked of reticence and shorn of pride,

Spread like a chart my little wicked ways.

I, that had been to you, had you remained,

But one more waking from a recurrent dream,

Cherish no less the certain stakes I gained,

And walk your memory's halls, austere, supreme,

A ghost in marble of a girl you knew
Who would have loved you in a day or two.

Chapter End Notes
Poetry credits to Edna St. Vincent Millay, again, with *I think I should have loved you presently.*
Chapter 23

Hermione Granger was unbelievably mad at herself for sitting in Narcissa's chair, yet here she was. Sitting in Narcissa's chair. Still.

Sitting might not be the right word. She was curled up, bundled in, far too small and contorted to be doing anything akin to sitting, let alone anything productive like reading. But here she was, surrounded by the books of poetry that had haunted their last evenings, shelves of countless afternoons of companionable silence towering behind her, and there was a dusty pillow tucked up against her chest that somehow managed to feel more like the missing witch that any of the soft, clean ones in her bedroom.

Hermione hadn't made breakfast for anyone that morning, least of all herself, but not even the occasional growl of her stomach could coax her away from this still, silent room. She wanted to be alone. Here. Alone with her thoughts and the drifting dust.

Narcissa was gone.

It might have been easier if Hermione wasn't happy for her. If she could sit here and feel nothing but that self-pity and not a small bit of anger, but when those darker thoughts were all wrapped up in this stomach-churning joy that Narcissa was finally, finally free to claim her life… the anger got all mixed up in guilt, and the self-pity started to feel an awful lot like selfishness, and all in all Hermione was thoroughly miserable and thoroughly exhausted and honestly wanted nothing more than to fall asleep in this musty chair and not wake up until summer.

Her neck was starting to cramp, though.

When she was finished being curled up in self-pity, she managed to distract herself with a book. It took three tries to find one with no first-chapter quoted poem or poetic prophetic incantation or anything remotely resembling poetry because, quite frankly, Hermione had never much liked poetry, and she certainly couldn't handle it right now.

Arithmancy. That was safe. Numbers were safe. She didn't know very much about them, about numerology and number theory and predicting the future but she knew just enough to know there was no connection to anyone she didn't want to be thinking about at the moment, and that was enough.

When the doors opened, Hermione hardly even heard it, so used to the quiet tread of the youngest Black joining her here at any given hour. It wasn't until the sharper, harsher footfalls were heard rounding the corner that her mind caught up with the unexpected sound.

She looked up just as Bellatrix entered her line of vision, footfalls faltering when she caught sight of Hermione a few rows of shelving away. Her eyes narrowed, hawk-like and hooded, and she leaned slowly against the books beside her.

Today, draped in her ever-present layers of darkness, Bellatrix's appearance mirrored Hermione's mood rather well. It looked right, felt right, to be dressed for mourning. No one had died, but something had certainly come to an end. Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it. What could she say? Bellatrix certainly hadn't invited conversation, and Hermione had no intention of apologizing for being here, or of wasting idle questions like "What are you doing here?" on the particular figure before her. She settled on a quick, determined glare instead, then returned to the pages of her book, tucking the pillow in her lap more closely against her chest. Whatever reaction Bellatrix's accusatory
stare was trying to elicit from her, Hermione had every right to be here, and she wasn't in the mood.

Bellatrix wasn't leaving, though. Her eyes bored holes right through the cover of Hermione's book. She couldn't focus like this. Glancing up again, she found her own glare being returned with twice the vitriol.

"What?"

Bellatrix's scowl deepened.

"Did you want to read?" Hermione asked, holding out her book and waving it in the air between them in exasperation.

As quickly as Bellatrix's combative stare had come, it disappeared, leaving her face entirely devoid of expression. "You are disgustingly like her."

For the bitter contents of her words, Bellatrix's voice was surprisingly quiet, and she left without further comment, uncurling herself from her place against the shelves and disappearing back between the stacks as quickly as she had come.

Hermione was left staring after her, wondering at those cryptic words, not quite able to find the concentration to return to her reading.

Only a few moments had passed when Hermione heard the doors crash open again, and Bellatrix rounded the corner of her nook in sudden fury. "She fucked you too, didn't she?"

Hermione choked on air.

Bellatrix stepped closer, nearly six feet of dark, accusatory rage prowling down the aisle towards her, and Hermione was frozen in her chair.

"She spent her last night fucking you like the little Mudblood whore you are, and now she's gone."

She halted only a few inches away. "I expect it of Andy, yes?" she said, voice incredibly light, high, but still knife-sharp. "Cissy, though… not even one day out of a decade of idiocy and you're already helping her make another silly mistake?" Bellatrix punctuated her words with a shrill laugh.

Hermione cringed back against the cushions. There might have been a conversation happening right now, but she didn't seem to be a part of it at all.

"Tsk tsk." The quiet recrimination had never before sounded quite so… threatening. "I almost thought better of my Cissy. And you…" The word dragged Hermione unwillingly into the one-sided exchange as Bellatrix braced her hands against the arms of Narcissa's chair, leaning close. "Never though you would be so naïve. Not again. Not after your last lover's spat."

Hermione could feel the static charge of skin too close to skin sparking between the tips of their noses, and she couldn't look away from fire in the other witch's eyes.

"Fool you once, shame on her. Fool you twice…" Bellatrix laughed again, and began backing slowly away. "And yet… here you are… sitting pretty like some bastard queen on her stolen throne. Maybe it's been you playing them for the fools all along."

"You knew she was leaving," Hermione gasped, finding her tongue and the strength in her body all at once. She pulled herself upright. "Why are you so angry at me? What does any of this matter?" Her voice broke at the end. Of course it mattered. It mattered to her. But to Bellatrix? It wasn't as
though this had been a secret, a surprise. What did it matter to her? What did the dark witch even want?

In an instant, Bellatrix was back, sharp fingernails digging into the flesh of Hermione's neck and jaw as she gripped her chin, jerking it upwards to meet her wild eyes. Hermione flinched at the sudden pain, but didn't pull away. She had nowhere to go. "What does it matter?" she hissed. "Oh, you innocent, filthy creature. You don't get to question me." A thumbnail slipped, dragging so harshly against her throat that Hermione felt the slickness of blood against her skin. "You don't get to be above this. From the start, it has been she and I. Children together, wives together, trapped and tortured and starved together. You are nothing in this. You are nothing in our lives. You are less than the dirt I walk on."

Hermione struggled to force words through her straining throat. "You helped me. You helped her! You told her to go!" It didn't add up, this anger, these words. None of it did.

Bellatrix laughed, then. "Of course. She earned her freedom. I would never grudge Cissy that. I would have done all that and more a thousand times over to help my sister, but you? You earned nothing, you, you filthy child!" Bellatrix's voice cracked, and Hermione flinched as though the sound itself had struck her, but the strange vulnerability in the sound sparked a slow, dangerous understanding. "She doesn't need you now." That hollow, aching emptiness was back in Bellatrix's voice, and Hermione was frozen in the face of it. Bellatrix was furious, yes, chest rising and falling rapidly, color high in her cheeks, but she was grieving. There was no immediacy to Bellatrix's rage. There were miles of distance in her stare, and even the finely-tuned weapon of her words seemed to falter, unfocused, misdirected. Bellatrix was missing her sister, and Hermione… Hermione was here. A convenient scapegoat. A vessel to fill with her anger and grief.

The realization was little comfort in the face of this empty, violent fury. "And you had the— the audacity to take advantage of her weakness." Bellatrix's voice cracked as though the sound itself had struck her, but the strange vulnerability in the sound sparked a slow, dangerous understanding. "You don't need you now." That hollow, aching emptiness was back in Bellatrix's voice, and Hermione was frozen in the face of it. Bellatrix was furious, yes, chest rising and falling rapidly, color high in her cheeks, but she was grieving. There was no immediacy to Bellatrix's rage. There were miles of distance in her stare, and even the finely-tuned weapon of her words seemed to falter, unfocused, misdirected. Bellatrix was missing her sister, and Hermione… Hermione was here. A convenient scapegoat. A vessel to fill with her anger and grief.

Bellatrix exited the room as quickly as she'd entered, and Hermione tried to wipe away the evidence of that bruising touch with the sleeve of her robes, less comforted than ever by the idea that Bellatrix should be technically unable to harm her.

Hermione's heartbeat was fast and thunderously loud in the silence that filled the library when Bellatrix passed from sight.

She paced outside the office for a long time.

She could hear the rustle of papers inside. She knew Andromeda was there. She could picture the scene, the quill tapping against her lip, the small black or emerald smudge it often left behind at the corner of her mouth as she contemplated the endless paperwork that accompanied her family name. Hermione knew exactly what she would find in that room, but if she didn't open the door…

If she didn't look, she could imagine it was someone else. Someone tapping a pair of reading glasses
against her lip instead of an ink-stained quill. Someone who would know she had been standing here long before Hermione made her presence known from the impression of her thoughts alone. Someone who Hermione would never find behind that door again.

Shaking her head, she knocked.

"Come in?"

Andromeda's invitation was tentative, and the illusion was broken.

Hermione pushed open the door.

"Oh."

It was just as she'd pictured. Andromeda's hand was raised, quill hovering at eye-level, and her wand waved away the smudge on her lip as soon as Hermione stepped in.

"I didn't expect to see you today. When food didn't show up, I… I thought you might have gone."

Hermione raised her wand and cautiously waved in the two bowls of steaming lentil soup she had left hovering in the hallway. "Ta-da?" she offered, biting her bottom lip. "Still here."

There was a long pause before Andromeda let out a nervous laugh. "I see that." The bowl settled gently on a rare clear spot amid the papers covering the desk, and Andromeda smiled. "Thank you."

"Can I join you?" Hermione asked.

"Of course."

They ate quietly. Andromeda stared at her paperwork. Hermione stared out the window.

Andromeda's spoon clanked against the bottom of her bowl and Hermione flinched.

"Hermione…"

"Will you keep teaching me?" she blurted out, hands clutching her bowl so hard that it scraped against the desk with a sound like nails on porcelain. "Magic, I—I was getting better. With you. I learned so much, but I know there's more and since then I—"

"—Oh, Hermione. Of course I will! If that's what you want, we can… I can…" Andromeda shook her head, hair falling over her shoulder and brushing the rim of her bowl. Hermione couldn't take her eyes off of it. When had it gotten so long? When had so much time passed? "It doesn't have to be this… strained. Between us."

"I know," Hermione whispered. "I'm… What? Her mind seemed to taunt her. Sorry? You don't have to apologize to her. "…past… that."

Andromeda arched an eyebrow. "Are you?" She stared into Hermione's eyes. "I'm not sure I could say the same thing. Why now? Why today? Is this about…"

She didn't finish the thought. Hermione's brain offered more than one answer. Is this about Narcissa? Maybe. Is there part of me that keeps wondering what could have happened if I met her and I was… like her, like all of you? I don't know. Maybe. Is this about Bellatrix? Of course it is. She… unsettles me. So does Lucius. And once I had you to stand between me and Them and then I had your sister but… I don't have either of you now, and… I don't think I want to. I need to be able to do this… all of this… for myself.
"Me," Hermione answered. "This is about me. And today… It felt like time."

Halfway through a stilted, tense lesson that jumped from awkward spellwork to awkward spellwork as the two witches struggled to return to some sense of normalcy, a knock sounded on the door to the study.

"Enter," Andromeda called. Her stare was even more perplexed than it had been when Hermione turned up earlier.

"My sincerest apologies for dropping in unannounced—" A distinct Scottish lilt rounded the corner before the witch it belonged to. "—but my afternoon opened up rather unexpectedly, and I thought I might come by."

Andromeda rose with a smile, greeting the esteemed headmistress with familiar joy and clasping their hands together. "Oh, no apologies necessary, Minerva; this is a wonderful surprise."

Hermione extricated herself from between her chair and the desk with some difficulty in the now too-filled space. The headmistress must have just come from Hogwarts, clad as she was in emerald-green academic robes and a hat almost too tall for the doorway, hair knotted in a remarkably severe bun that appeared when she set the hat aside. Hermione offered the professionally-dressed witch a nervous smile and a waist-high wave. "I'll… go put the kettle on? I'm sure the two of you are—"

"Allow me," the headmistress interrupted her, gesturing back towards the door. "If you'd care to show me to the kitchens, Ms. Granger, we could take care of tea and a bit of business all at once."

At Andromeda's inquisitive glance, she added, "I haven't come merely on a social call. I intended to speak to both your student and your house-elf today. It would seem she and your sister have uncovered something rather astonishing. Is Narcissa in today?"

Andromeda's eyebrows knitted together. "My sister? Our elf? Whatever for?" A hint of bitterness bled into her confusion. "And no, she isn't. Judging from the state of the affairs in this office, I don't believe she'll be returning, either."

"She's finally made it to France, then?" McGonagall offered a quick smile. "That is wonderful news. Do wish her my best when you write."

Andromeda kept casting confused, mildly annoyed looks between Hermione and the headmistress, clearly unnerved at being so thoroughly left out of the loop. "I—I'll be sure to do that," she finally offered, shaking her head.

Hermione opened her mouth to give Andromeda some semblance of explanation, but before she could manage a single syllable, McGonagall was speaking once more. "Shall we, then?"

She waved open the study door with a flick of her wand, gesturing for Hermione to lead the way. Casting a quick, apologetic glance over her shoulder, Hermione scuttled from the room.

"So, Ms. Granger…" McGonagall didn't waste a moment once they were in the corridor. "You've gotten my colleagues in quite a stir with this discovery of yours."

Hermione fiddled with the sleeves of her robes and continued quickly down the familiar path to the kitchens, unsure if the headmistress's words required an answer.

"High Elves, still living among us. Whoever would have imagined."
Hermione bit her lip. Her thoughts on the subject were a bit less tame than she supposed she ought to say aloud to someone like the esteemed Headmistress of Hogwarts. *Loads of people would have imagined. If any of them had bothered talking to their elves like a human being in the past thousand years.*

They arrived in the kitchens. Hermione made a bee-line for the kettle, but a wave of McGonagall's wand already had water pouring in and setting to boil. "Sit, Ms. Granger. I've got it."

Settling into her chair, Hermione felt distinctly fidgety and out-of-place. Minerva McGonagall was not supposed to be making the tea, but she couldn't deny the professional efficiency with which the headmistress made her way about the counters and cabinets, gathering honey and sugar and tea cups with poise.

"So. Narcissa told me what the two of you learned from your translation, but I must say, I'm far more interested in your response. She mentioned you were rather insistent on certain changes. What are you hoping to gain from what you've discovered?"

"Me? I—Nothing, Professor," Hermione stammered. "This isn't about me at all."

"Oh, but Ms. Granger, it is. The information you've uncovered could have repercussions well beyond a mere gain in knowledge."

"I—Well, yes. I should hope so. It's wonderful that we might be able to learn more because of this, but I don't think..." Hermione paused, shaking her head as the headmistress held up the sugar. "No, thank you." Tea was set in front of her, but Hermione didn't drink, opting to run her finger in circles about the rim of the cup instead. "I don't think it's fair to make this... about us. This isn't our history to... to demand from them, to make them translate for us, and it wasn't our history to get rid of, either. We've stolen so many centuries from the elves. I just want to give it back."

"Do you think it will be as simple as that?" McGonagall reclined back in her chair and clasped her hands together. In that moment, she looked every bit the stern, venerable Head of Hogwarts with her tightly disciplined bun of silver-grey hair and stern, unreadable eyes softened only by the faint laugh lines around them. "The serfdom of house-elves has served as a key element of wizarding culture for as far back as the most dedicated pure-blood families can trace their heritage. There are institutions entirely dependent on the free labor of house-elves that—"

"—I'm well aware!" Hermione interrupted, then flushed. "Sorry. I didn't mean to..." She shook her head, watching her fingers begin to fidget in the air alongside her words. "I know that there is going to be resistance. And I'm not suggesting we should try to erase the last thousand years and force every elf to go free... That's what got us into this mess in the first place, meddling with history and acting as though we have the right to make others do things against their will. But they deserve to know their past! Their legacy, the extent of their own culture and power and language and I... What we have now? It's... It's simply *awful*. There must to be a way to change things!"

McGonagall sipped her tea as Hermione spoke, face impassive. "What 'things' are you speaking of? What are you proposing we change?"

Hermione stiffened. She had been about to take her first sip of tea, but set her cup down again instead, not trusting her own hands. How could Narcissa have thought this was the right woman to help her cause? Here she was, sitting across the table, acting just the same as any other pure-blood Hermione might have had the displeasure of trying to sway. Somehow, she really had believed the Headmistress of Hogwarts might have been different.

"This!" Hermione finally said, gesturing jerkily in the air between herself and the elder witch. "We
can't keep doing this! For a start, actually talking to the ones whose lives are affected instead of constantly speaking over them and pretending they don't exist would be a nice! You were supposed to come and talk to Rommie today, not me, and yet here we are. I can't speak for her!"

McGonagall remained unmoved by Hermione's words, a single eyebrow arching in an otherwise closed face. She seemed entirely unconcerned with Hermione's discomfort. "And what would be gained by speaking to her? On all accounts, it seems the Black family's elves are content with their current situation. Beyond assisting in translation, it doesn't appear she would have any interest in—"

Hermione gritted her teeth, frustration mounting. "Rommie doesn't know what else there is to have an interest in! Contentment doesn't mean anything! It isn't happiness. It's just... not believing in even the possibility of any better alternative," she insisted. "At the very least, they deserve a chance to find out what else they're missing! They deserve... literacy. They deserve rights, they deserve protection from... from beating themselves to death when they can't carry out a command! We treat so many magical creatures as less than animals; who knows what other dark secrets there are in our past? You could at least try to pretend they mean something to you! Don't you feel any shame about this? Don't you—"

Hermione had hardly noticed herself rising from her chair as she spoke, didn't notice the rapidly escalating pace and volume of her words, so when McGonagall cut her off, it felt a bit like smacking her own head against the ceiling.

"—Have a biscuit, Hermione."

There was a tin of sugar snaps and ginger newts resting in the Headmistress's outstretched palm.

"What?"

"Have a biscuit, and take a seat. You're quite right, and we still have much to discuss."

Slowly, reluctantly, Hermione sat again, one restless leg skittering up and down beneath the table. McGonagall's placating tone had taken the wind right out of her sails, but it didn't make her any less wary.

Still, she took a sugar snap.

"I didn't mean to let that go quite so far, so my apologies. I was merely curious where you stood on your own, how you reacted to the usual, passive dismissal of your beliefs which you are sure to receive from the wizarding community at large. I promise, my own views align far more closely with your own than my words might have suggested." She smiled. "You have wonderfully strong instincts about this, and you have an admirable way with words, Ms. Granger, right up until your passion gets the better of you. To be frank, you're everything I could have hoped for."

Hermione clutched at her teacup, letting the warmth seep into her palms for reassurance that this quick change of tune was an authentic one. "I... thank you?" she managed. "I didn't mean to get so... loud." She felt her nose scrunch with embarrassment.

McGonagall smiled again and set down her tea. "I do intend to speak to the elves here today, don't worry, but I'll admit, I came with something else in mind as well. Ms. Granger, I want to offer you a job."

Hermione blinked. "A what?"

There was an inescapable déjà vu lurking behind those words, now, and Hermione had a hard time believing she was actually hearing them again.
"I'd like to offer you the opportunity to come and work at Hogwarts for a time. My esteemed colleague, Modesty Davies, Order of Merlin, Third Class, is currently teaching Muggle Studies, but her background is an astonishing one. She wrote a groundbreaking thesis on centaur colonization, and her anthropological studies into the culture and history of non-human magical beings is entirely unmatched in the field. A small field, I will admit, since there are still any number of lingering prejudices that tend to interfere with such studies, but I do believe, with your youth and your passion for this, you may well be able to help change that."

The headmistress paused, sliding the tin of biscuits back towards a frozen Hermione, who reflexively took a ginger newt.

"There is much to be done. Creating an action plan. Public education materials. Further study of the language. I would love for you to be involved in the whole process, Hermione. This is your discovery, after all, and I think, if we are able to get the right momentum going, there is a real chance for change, here. Perhaps now more than ever."

For a long moment, Hermione didn't respond, busy being caught of guard and brushing ginger crumbs off the collar of her robes. "I—I'm flattered," she said when she found her voice. "But I..." It wasn't until the but slipped past her lips that she realized how conflicted she was. What an incredible opportunity, one that seemed to promise a real future, something beyond these strange walls and beyond the drudgery of her life before all of this, and yet... "I'm needed here, Professor."

McGonagall looked distinctly taken aback.

"I've made promises. I couldn't possibly leave. Not yet. Not right now, so soon after..." She trailed off, shocked at the biting pain that lanced through her gut at even the thought of Narcissa. "Besides I —" She quickly redirected her words away from her most immediate regrets. "—I don't know that I'm really what you're looking for. I'm not... an academic. I'm so incredibly glad that I... that I had the chance to discover this, and I hope Professor Davies finds out so much more than I did, but I... I can't leave. I can't. Not now."

A few times during her stammering speech, the headmistress looked ready to interrupt, but by the time Hermione finished, she was frowning with reluctant resignation. "I can't say I agree with your words, but the decision must be yours, in the end. I do believe you underestimate yourself, Ms. Granger, so I only ask that you continue to consider my offer."

Hermione slowly nodded, rising and gathering up their empty teacups. She carefully reheated the rest of the water with a wave of her wand. "We should be getting back to Andromeda. She's waiting on tea," Hermione said. She felt jittery, the offer still hanging heavy in the kitchen air. As she poured a cup from the kettle, McGonagall's hand grasped her forearm, pausing her motions.

"You will consider this, won't you?"

Hermione flushed. The headmistress wasn't going to let her get away with her non-answer. "I will."

Hermione felt her eyes being searched. After too long a pause to be entirely comfortable, McGonagall nodded. "Very well."

As they began their walk back towards the study, the headmistress seemed to be hesitating, her feet moving more slowly than before, lingering at the bend of each corner until the the door of their final destination was in sight.

"Is something the matter?" Hermione finally asked, nearly spilling Andromeda's tea as she ground to a sudden halt.
McGonagall stopped. "I… not exactly." Her words emerged slowly, each one carefully calculated to follow the last. "I must confess, though, an ulterior motive in my invitation today, one which I cannot allow you to take lightly. I planned on waiting until you were safely under Hogwarts roofs, but since that no longer seems an imminent reality, I believe it best we discuss this now."

Hermione reluctantly scuffed her toes against the floorboards, eyeing the doors to the study at the end of the hall longingly. She had had quite enough surprises for one day, and more than enough ulterior motives to last a lifetime.

"The information you discovered would be an incredible asset to Hogwarts, Ms. Granger, but so, too, would your magic."

Hermione stiffened.

"There is remarkable potential in you for the exploration of raw magic, and I—quite selfishly, I'll admit—was hoping to be able to work with you." McGonagall held up a hand, forestalling Hermione's words. "I understand, from what Andromeda tells me, that you've always had reservations. I just hope you can forgive my interest; raw magic has been my personal obsession for decades, and I've scarcely begun to scratch the surface."

Hermione's shoulders were stiff with an immediate anger she wasn't sure she had a right to feel. This wasn't all that much of a surprise, after all. Or, at least, it shouldn't have been. She always had a feeling those particular two words would come back to haunt her, raw magic, and it wasn't as though the headmistress's interest showed ill intent, either. No, this annoyance was all her own, her lingering hesitance to give anyone else access to this strange, still largely unexplained side of her magic. Nobody even knew if she could actually do it, for Merlin's sake!

"I can't understand why everyone is so eager for me to try this," Hermione said. "Andromeda explained. A bit. But her reasons were…" Hermione paused. Somehow, she couldn't imagine that the esteemed Headmistress of Hogwarts would have allowed Andromeda to leave her office that day had she known about the plan to free Bellatrix using Hermione's magic. "…personal."

McGonagall arched an eyebrow, but didn't inquire further. "You do realize only two witches alive today have ever been able to even access this sort of magic?"

"No, no I didn't," Hermione admitted. "I only know… you and Andromeda were discussing it. And me. When I visited Hogwarts. You sent me away, and when I came back…" Hermione couldn't bring herself to ask for an explanation point-blank, but that peculiar interaction had been bothering her since the day it happened. Especially after learning Andromeda's intentions for the magic. What had she told the headmistress? "…you seemed… irritated with her."

"Oh, I was," McGonagall said. "I was incredibly disappointed when I learned she had let her license expire. I had been thinking all along that she was preparing to instruct you herself, and then—"

"License?" Hermione interjected.

McGonagall's eyes widened again. "The use of raw magic is strictly forbidden under Ministry law, Ms. Granger. For academic study, a license may be acquired from the Department of Mysteries. I helped Andromeda earn hers many years ago, but it must be renewed every five years, and she stopped doing so during the war. Under the supervision of someone with a license, others may learn, but as I am now the only one in possession of such, I am the only one qualified to instruct you."

"And… the book she borrowed from you?" Hermione pressed, wondering if she might actually get a full answer after all this time.
"Andromeda still intended to teach you, but it has been over a decade since she had any contact with raw magic. At my insistence, she borrowed my theoretical text to brush up before she went to apply for the license again. Which she has yet to do," the headmistress concluded, narrowing her eyes in the direction of the study.

Hermione followed the line of McGonagall's stare, eyeing the familiar end of the corridor with some trepidation, but all the questions she could ask of this particular witch had been answered, and Hermione was… satisfied. Satisfied with that explanation. Satisfied… and grateful. Grateful for her intention to help with the elves, grateful for her candid answer and… intrigued, she had to admit to herself, with the idea of raw magic, of a power only two witches alive in this age had ever so much as meddled in.

"Alright," Hermione said.

McGonagall's stare speared her immediately. "Hmm?"

"Yes. Alright. I… I'm not optimistic about it, but I'd like to know more. About raw magic. Can I… Would you be willing to come back if I… if I can only promise one afternoon? I don't know if there's any point, really, and I don't want to waste any more of your time, but I—"

"Certainly, Ms. Granger!" A smile had slowly spread across McGonagall's face as Hermione spoke, and by the time she cut in, there was an almost giddy excitement in the headmistress's voice. Hermione was hard-pressed not to smile at the sudden enthusiasm. "Next week, shall we say? Around the same time? I would hope I can convince you of further study beyond an afternoon, but if it is to be just the one day, I assure you, it will not be a waste of time for either of us." She shook her head. "It was… criminal of Andy, really, not to work with you sooner."

Criminal, Hermione mused, biting back the sudden burst of exhausted laughter that was ready to explode from her chest. Criminal, indeed. McGonagall had no idea just how criminal Andromeda had intended to be with Hermione's magic. That… that was all in the past, though. This was a new opportunity. She didn't get those too often, so she would grab this one while she could. She would give it a day. One day. The headmistress had earned that much on her honesty alone. Anything more… would take a trust than Hermione wasn't sure she had left.

She left Andromeda and McGonagall to their tea, making a hasty dinner before retreating back upstairs. The company had been a welcome distraction, but now that she was alone, she could feel something biting at the lining of her stomach, a gnawing, piercing emptiness that throbbed with sudden pain and vertigo when she bypassed Narcissa's door on the way to her own bedroom.

It was incredible, what a different kind of pain it was, being left instead of doing the leaving. It didn't matter that it wasn't sudden, wasn't unexpected, that she thought she was prepared. There was no preparing for this, for something she hadn't wanted to admit had been the center of her world disappearing overnight as though it had never been at all. At least with Andromeda's betrayal, there had been… instant closure. There was no going back from that. This, though… in this, the closure had happened before anything had even begun, so even the closure had started to feel like… a beginning of sorts. She had gotten so used to going forward that she had almost been able to forget she was already at the end.

After getting ready for bed, Hermione found herself in the corridor once again, standing outside Narcissa's empty chambers. She pushed open the door, but didn't light the lamps. Slowly, she crossed to the bedside table and picked up the book of poetry, moving by memory and feel alone. Just as she was about to leave, a ball of light popped into existence by the door, and Hermione's heart skipped a beat.
"Oh!"

At the squeak of surprise, Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. "Sorry, Rommie. I didn't mean to startle you. It's just me."

"Apologies, missus. Rommie hadn't realized... Rommie thought everyone had gone," she said, ears twitching as she stared down at the floor.

"No, no, you're absolutely right, I just wanted to... I was just..." Hermione sighed. "Never mind. I didn't mean to interrupt your chores. I'll get out of your way."

They circled round each other, and Hermione passed through the doorway as Rommie disappeared further into the room. A few paces down the hall, Hermione glanced down at the book in her hand, then turned back, catching the door with the toe of her boot before it could fully close.

"Rommie... what does mindre mean? In the old tongue?"

Rommie's brow furrowed, lips scrunching up. "Mindre? Where has missus heard that word?"

"Oh, just... something Nar—the Lady Malfoy said once."

Rommie's ears fluttered in apparent bemusement. "Mindre is, well missus... Rommie knows that word well. Mindre is... food. Fruit, the one the Mistress loves so much."

Hermione's eyes widened. "What fruit, Rommie?"

Rommie popped out of existence with a snap of her fingers, popping back a moment later with a green fruit larger than both the outstretched hands in which she held it. "Mindre."

Mango.

Hermione laughed. She kept laughing. She laughed until her gut felt as though it would come rattling through her ribcage. Rommie was backing away slowly, probably alarmed at the sudden, wild mirth, or maybe because of the tears streaking down Hermione's cheeks. "Thank you," she gasped out.

Rommie slowly set the fruit on the floor, then pulled away, avoiding sudden movements, as though confronted by a confounding, feral creature. When her hand was safely back at her side, she popped away into thin air, leaving Hermione to stare up at the ceiling, marveling at the catharsis of her own uncontrollable laughter. It gnawed away at the bitter heaviness still weighing inside of her piece by piece. She sank down to the floor, pulling the mango into her lap alongside the book of poetry, and by the time the laughter faded, she felt lighter. Almost too light. Light enough that, if not for the weight of the fruit and paper in her lap, she might as well have floated away and forgotten herself completely.
"I think I'm beginning to understand why more people don't do this," Hermione gasped, leaning back in her chair. She and Andromeda had been working on healing for the past four days, and while she was finally getting a hang of this strange, draining sort of magic, it had been an exhausting learning curve.

Andromeda chuckled, inspecting the sprig of Devil's Snare sitting in the pot between them. With its thick outer skin and touch-sensitive tendrils, it was the perfect specimen to practice healing upon, since Hermione had balked at the idea of Andromeda making even small injuries on herself for Hermione to work with.

"Excellent. You completely repaired the interior; only a faint scar on the vine itself. Well done. I'm impressed."

Hermione smiled, warming despite herself at the praise. "I don't feel like I'm making much progress, though. If I tried to do it again, I know it would be sloppier, and all I want to do is take a ten year nap."

"That feeling isn't going to go away," said Andromeda. "I know you're used to practicing something until you've perfected it, but this sort of magic simply doesn't work that way. You're pulling on your own reserves. You only have so much energy on any given day; that isn't going to change. Your technique is exceptional already. The only other thing practice could help you with is pushing past your limits without passing out, giving more than your body would usually be willing to relinquish before it starts feeling unsafe. Merlin forbid you'd ever need that. You aren't living through war."

There was a heaviness to Andromeda's voice Hermione hadn't heard in quite some time. She often forgot about Andromeda's past, her years as an Auror. It was hard to imagine the warm, kindhearted witch teaching her was the self-same woman who had fought directly against the forces of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, but somehow, it wasn't as hard to imagine it in the face of the Andromeda she had seen interacting with Bellatrix. She had seen fire, then. She could hardly imagine the days when she had thought Andromeda was the safest, kindest of the sisters.

Ever since Narcissa's departure, Hermione had thrown herself into these magic lessons with abandon, working herself ragged to slowly but surely chase other thoughts to the back of her mind and keep them caged there, and it was surprisingly easy to fall into old patterns. Andromeda was unfalteringly polite and earnest towards her again, never straying onto the strange paths they'd walked before, but Hermione still felt it, the old undercurrent of past mistakes running beneath their every calculated interaction.

She had almost asked, two days into their new lessons, if Andromeda would help her cast a Patronus. They had been coasting through more traditional spellwork, and even Hermione marveled at how confident she felt with her unbound magic. Andromeda was laughing as Hermione struggled to undo a silly miscalculation: the waterfall she had conjured in place of the right-hand window was splashing away happily in the corner… and making a rather dramatic cloud of spray where it hit the floor. As the droplets were flung back upwards into the room, Hermione was left with a frantic few seconds in which to get all the paperwork out of harm's way. There were any number of perfectly reasonable responses—a shield charm, a bubble, even an umbrella—but she didn't have time to think of any of those things, so instead, every bit of parchment in the entire room had sprouted multi-colored, feathered wings, and was flapping happily about, many taking merry birdbaths in the pool at the foot of the waterfall, completely destroying the purpose of the spell in the first place.
For a while, Andromeda was laughing too much to do anything, but she eventually calmed enough to undo the various enchantments and return everything to its proper state, none the worse for the spontaneous magical swim. "Hermione," Andromeda gasped. "You need to remember how difficult it would be to do any real damage in here. Do you really still think I would let you practice in my office if there was anything that could be hurt by a bit of water?"

Hermione was left smiling sheepishly. Certain old habits died harder than others.

"That being said, the fact that you maintained the waterfall and cast a complicated transfiguration like that tells me you need more of a challenge."

There it was, that twinkle in Andromeda's eye, the infectious joy Hermione had always felt when the other witch was fully invested in and enjoying her time as a teacher. Hermione's mouth had opened, the thought of finally conjuring a Patronus ripe on her lips, but then Andromeda's hand had grasped her forearm, and her breath fled in a huff instead. It was an innocent touch, but it didn't matter. In that instant, Narcissa flashed before her eyes. Narcissa sitting in the library, sharing one of their first emotionally vulnerable moments as she told Hermione that her happiest memory was of her son. Narcissa's clear, fierce gaze witnessing Hermione summoning that first hint of silver. Summoning the spell with the help of anyone else felt... like a betrayal. As silly as the thought was, Hermione couldn't push past it.

So she hadn't asked, and their lessons had turned to healing instead.

Now, it had been six days since McGonagall's visit, and the thought of stretching her magic tomorrow was becoming more and more appealing. She hadn't expected to be this excited, but she had spent the past week back in the thick of spellcraft and theory, and the thrill of learning new things had crept up on her again. By Merlin was it a welcome distraction.

Andromeda may well have been more excited than she was. Ever since McGonagall had told her what they would be doing upon her return, she had taken every opportunity to mention just how thrilled she was that Hermione would finally be exploring this side of her magic. She wanted to be there, and Hermione couldn't think of a polite way to say no, so whatever happened tomorrow would be happening with an audience.

As Hermione poured her energy into a final blistering burn at the base of the distinctly abused Devil's Snare, she watched the charred darkness flaking away bit by bit to reveal the fresh wet green beneath. This was such a unique sort of magic. Andromeda's words came back to her and she almost smiled. It's a rush of its own, healing. It really was, watching something broken come together again like new at her behest. Being able to take the very life force she wasn't using and channel it into someone who needed it more. For a moment, she could almost feel the presence of the Devil's Snare itself, a faint light behind her eyes that grew brighter as she fed it. Nearly addicting. Andromeda's voice seemed to echo in Hermione's mind, and she flinched. The memory of the rest of what healing magic had the potential to do stole the smile off her lips before it could bloom.

"I—I think that's enough for today," she said, shakily pocketing her wand.

Andromeda looked up from her inspection of the plant. "Everything alright?"

Hermione offered half a nod. "Fine. Just tired."

As Hermione made to step around her chair, Andromeda's hand reached out, just brushing the back of Hermione's hand before it caught the tips of her fingers. It took a surprising strength of will for Hermione not to immediately pull away. "Hermione, what just happened? You look like you've seen a ghost. I know you've had enough healing, but there are plenty of other things we can do that don't
—I'm through for today," Hermione insisted. "I'm sorry, I just—"

"—Talk to me? Please? I thought everything was going well."

Andromeda's palm slid in line with her own, clasping their fingers together, and Hermione stared down at the resulting mess of skin and nail and bone with a detached sort of wonder. "It is, Andy," she heard herself say as though from a great distance. "I'm glad we've been able to do this again. And I'm looking forward to tomorrow."

Andromeda smiled at the abbreviation of her name. Her fingers squeezed gently. "Me too."

Hermione could feel it, then. There was intent in the gesture, in the placating, almost pleading warmth of Andromeda's words. In the grand scheme of the games being played under this roof, Andromeda had done nothing more than pull a new board off the shelf and hold it out to see if Hermione would set up the first pieces, make the next move. It was a small thing, and Hermione felt no pressure to accept the invitation. She was tired of these games. Run dry on intimacy.

"I'll see you then," she said with a smile, reclaiming her own hand. She hardly recognized her own voice. She sounded... so sincere.

The smile didn't reach her eyes, but she didn't give Andromeda a chance to see that before she made her escape.

"What do you feel, Ms. Granger, when you cast an unbound spell?"

McGonagall had spent scarcely a moment on pleasantries when she arrived.

"Well, Andromeda taught me to use colors, ma'am. I see different spells as different shades of—"

"That's seeing. What do you feel?"

"Um..." Hermione wasn't used to being looked at like she had the answer. More than that, she wasn't used to not having an answer, either.

"This is not your ordinary magic, Ms. Granger," said McGonagall, not allowing Hermione time to gather her thoughts. "Or, perhaps it would be better said that this is the most ordinary of magics. Where charms and transfiguration and defense are branches of magic and unbound is a method of using it, raw magic is magic, the very core of what it is to be a witch or a wizard. When you cast an unbound spell, you are drawing upon it directly, grasping it with your mind alone rather than with words and motions, so I repeat; what do you feel when you cast an unbound spell?"

"It started as a tug for me, Hermione."

Andromeda's voice made Hermione twitch. She had almost forgotten the other witch in the shadows, leaning against the wall in the far corner of the atrium where they all stood.

"When I managed unbound magic for the first time, I could feel it pulling at something inside of me in a way that caged magic did not. The most I managed to do with that was control how much I pulled, using more or less of my magic at my will, but—"

"—Enough, Andromeda," said McGonagall, holding up a hand. "I do not want to place too many expectations in the girl's mind. You and I have been held back, I believe, by what we know to be
true about the nature of magic and our own access to it. She has few such notions."

Hermione remained quiet, thinking about what Andromeda had said. A tug… Hermione had felt something like that before. Not when using her own magic, but… when she had fought with Lucius, when she had shredded the dark thread that bound his magic to Narcissa's. There had been a moment, when her spell collided with his chest, she could have sworn she reached down inside of him and… ripped something out, something rotting and twisted and dark, and the next day… Narcissa had said she had done something impossible.

"I don't usually feel anything," Hermione said, interrupting a quiet debate that had sparked between the other two witches. "But I have. Once. Before. And it felt… physical. Like I had cast something that wasn't so much magic as it was… me."

If Hermione hadn't been feeling so nervous, she might have laughed at the way both Andromeda's and McGonagall's eyes lit up at her words.

"That's it!" Andromeda exclaimed as McGonagall asked, "Can you do it again?"

Hermione fiddled with her wand. "I… I don't think so. I've only done it once. Maybe twice, and both times I was… distracted."

"Distracted?" Andromeda pressed.

Hermione looked away. "I was… afraid. Um. I didn't have time to think."

Andromeda stepped towards her. "Afraid? When were you—"

"—If we had more time, we could emulate that through meditation," said McGonagall, and Hermione had never been more grateful for an interrupted sentence.

"Hmm?"

"It isn't uncommon that witches and wizards find themselves most in touch with their own magic when their mind is empty of everyday thoughts, worries, and pleasures. In fact, I have my suspicions that many of the wizarding academies in Asia work with unbound magic without realizing it at all. However, since you've only given me a day, meditation isn't the path we should take. Dare I presume you experienced this in conflict? A duel? Something similar?"

"Something like that," Hermione admitted.

McGonagall nodded. "As I suspected. Andromeda hadn't the patience for meditation, either. She had to be pushed past the point of distraction before she could draw on more magic than would have naturally come to her. Here. Stand across from me."

McGonagall waved her arm to the left and Hermione followed, nearly tripping over her own feet as she centered herself across from the other witch.

"You may use your wand however you see fit. Disarm me, defend yourself, take any action you can conceive of."

"Why am I doing that?" Hermione asked apprehensively, eyeing the headmistress's wand.

"I am going to push you, Hermione," said an alarmingly calm McGonagall. "I intend to see how your instincts react as you attempt to resist. More importantly, you will see how your instincts react. Andromeda, if you please, a shield charm."

Andromeda seemed to know exactly what McGonagall was asking for, and she carefully crafted a shimmering dome within the atrium around the other two witches.

"I—I don't know about this," Hermione stammered. "You're... you're the headmistress of Hogwarts, and I've never—"

She struck before Hermione had a chance to prepare, an unspoken spell flying off the tip of her wand in a streak of crimson light.

Hermione ducked.

Another spell landed near her feet as Hermione scuttled to the side.

A third spell crackled against the shield behind her and McGonagall chuckled. "You're supposed use magic, dear, not play Quidditch."

Hermione reluctantly planted her feet. "I've never played," she muttered, resigning herself to this impossible task. She finally raised the wand in her hand as more magic whirled her way.

Her own attempt at a shield charm was little protection against the other witch, fracturing after only a single spell, and when she managed a few half-hearted hexes of her own, McGonagall brushed them aside like a cat shaking off raindrops. "I don't know how to duel!" Hermione insisted as she ducked again. "I've never done this!"

"Stop thinking about your inexperience. Focus on the magic!" McGonagall insisted. A flash of red struck Hermione's thigh and she winced. It was nothing but a minor stinging jinx, but it was not a pleasant feeling. "You're trying too hard to stay in control."

She paused in her casting, allowing Hermione a moment to catch her breath. "I don't think this is going to work!" Hermione insisted. "I don't even know what I'm supposed to be doing, let alone how, and... I'm not afraid of you. I'm just... kind of aggravated that you keep pushing me around with magic, but I'm not worried enough to... to do what I did before."

It wasn't like her, to be so forthright, but she had been looking forward to figuring out this new piece of magic, and this was useless.

The headmistress was frowning. "When have you had cause to be so genuinely scared for your life that you—"

"—I'd be willing to give the meditation a try!" Hermione frantically added, not ready to discuss those terrifying interactions with Lucius when Andromeda was listening intently across the room. "I-I'll even give it another few days, if I have to," she insisted, trying to find a spark of her earlier enthusiasm.

"You'd never get the hang of emptying your mind in time," Andromeda said as she banished her shield charm.

"No, you wouldn't," McGonagall murmured. "But there may be another way. You want to make progress today, yes?"

Hermione nodded. "Of course. That's why I—"

"Then I'm going to need you to trust me—"

"I do, that's what I just—"
"—with a memory. Concentrate on the time you think you used raw magic."

Hermione had only a moment to digest that statement before McGonagall was raising her wand again, and Hermione was stepping back. "Wait just a minute, I—"

"Conmemorio!"

Hermione didn't have time to focus on anything. Images began flashing though her mind with blinding clarity, closing her off from the room.

She was five, in Diagon, watching her father's face bent over the guestbook at the front desk... She was ten, reading a dirty newspaper in the nook between the owlry and the knickknack store until her mum came out and pulled her away... She was sixteen at the Ministry. Rushing in late at The Three Broomsticks... Eighteen, with Andromeda, in the lift.

No, she cried out in her own mind, No, no further.

There was that first dinner in Black Manor, all five gathered around the table, Andromeda's lingering touch as everyone else fled the room... There was tea, a glimpse of Harry Potter, an aggressive Ronald Weasley, and Narcissa's Patronus summoning them back to the burned husk of their home... There was Bellatrix, sleeping in a chair, waking from one nightmare into another, clawing at her own skin... There was Narcissa, finding her in Diagon, summoning her... home.

No, said the increasingly desperate voice in Hermione's head. No more, you can't watch this, you can't...

There was a date, one of many, a bit of biscuit held up to Hermione's lips by slender fingers accompanied by a warm, half-real, teasing smile... There was Lucius, pressing Narcissa across the room, taunting her... There was the Ministry again, the day of the hearing, Narcissa leaning over her, waking her up and no, no, no, this is private!

She felt, it then, the foreign presence swirling about in her head, someone else's magic, something that didn't belong, seeking something. Desperately, disoriented but determined to make this stop, Hermione yanked it, gathering each probing tendril and pulling it into her until she was nearly sick with the wrongness of it, full to the brim with this toxic, alien power until the pressure was so strong she could do nothing but fling it away, pushing and pushing until...

Something snapped.

She was somewhere else. Her own memories were gone, and she stood in a strange, misty landscape at the edge of some highland cliff, rugged outcroppings dotted with greyish moss visibly only an arm's length away, everything else eaten up by thick, damp fog that fell away beside her, roiling over a precipice into some great chasm below. Something sat beside her, a heap of old, worn fabric, emerald and crimson crosshatching that fluttered in some unfelt breeze and... something else, something was moving, squirming in the pile of cloth, like the bulge of a parasite crawling beneath a tartan skin. Shuddering, lost, Hermione reached out, pushing aside the fabric with trembling fingers until...

Something leapt out at her with a yowl, and she fell backwards, tipped over the cliff, just recognizing the thin, striped face of a tabby cat before she was lost in the mist again.

"That's quite enough, Ms. Granger."

In a moment of pure disorientation, Hermione felt herself flung back into her own body. She fell forward onto the floor, bracing herself on hands and knees as her breath heaved in and out of her
lungs. "What was that?" she gasped, dropping her wand from between her quivering fingers as she stared down at her own hands.

"Raw magic."

McGonagall's voice sounded strange, garbled. Hermione leaned back, slowly convincing her legs to stop shaking and let her sit on them as she looked up. She gasped. Where the poised, collected woman had been standing, a nightmarish creature now crouched, furry legs emerging from the hem of black robes, claws sprouting through emerald boots and topping the ends of tabby-mottled fingers. The headmistress's face had fared the worst, wiskers popping through pale cheeks above a sharp, snaggle-toothed grin, pupils slitted amid a patchwork of fur between hairline, brow, and jaw.

Hermione fell backwards as her legs failed her again, covering her mouth with her hand. What had she done?

"I'll admit," McGonagall murmured, working her jaw in circles as it slowly returned to a more human shape. "I expected you to react with your own magic rather than lashing out at mine, but the fact that you found my Animagus form and forced a partial transformation…"

It took the disappearance of the last of the fur for Hermione to grasp that no real harm had been done, but the terror still held her heart in a vicelike grip. "You used Legilimency on me! You had no right to do that," she gasped, struggling to her feet. "You had no right to… to touch my mind, to—"

"Oh, Ms. Granger, no! My sincerest apologies! I didn't realize you even knew of Legilimency. This was an entirely different spell. It was meant to immerse you in your own memory, not share them with me. I saw nothing, nothing at all, I… I was only hoping to guide you back to the time you mentioned, when you had last touched raw magic, and I—"

Hermione kept backing away until she hit a wall. "I could have hurt you!" There was still a sharpness to the headmistress's nails, a hint of something feral about her apologetic smile. "You were in my head! I felt it, I—I lashed out and you changed and I could have… I could have killed you!"

"Hermione, no, I had everything under control, I—"

Still shaking her head, Hermione reached out blindly, finding the edge of the doorframe and pulling herself bodily from the room, fleeing down the corridor the moment her back was turned.

After the incident with McGonagall, Hermione withdrew from human contact for a while.

She couldn't put it behind her, the sensation of someone meddling with her mind uninvited, her violent reaction, the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach when she touched McGonagall's magic for the first time, and the wild, heady disorientation when she followed it to the source and then… that thing, the disfigured monstrosity she had created with her magic…

Never again.

She had never felt so shockingly out of control. Every other time she used her magic, even before she knew what she was doing, it always felt so… cohesive. It followed rules, patterns. There was order. This… raw magic… this was chaos. There was no rhyme or reason to what she done to the headmistress. Or to Lucius, all those weeks ago. There was just panic.

She buried herself in the library and her chambers for days, weeks, only venturing out of her own reclusive studies to prepare meals.
She had made the mistake of cooking for five only once. She had stared too long at Narcissa's meal when it wasn't taken away by the elves, and had almost broken the plate as she flung the food into the garbage. It took nearly two weeks to notice that Lucius's plate remained as untouched as Narcissa's that first day. In the beginning, the elves were taking it and bringing it back untouched, but when she questioned them, no one had seen him since the trial. His absence grated at the back of Hermione's mind from that moment on. What was he doing, out in the world, unguarded, unwatched, and magicless? Bellatrix had sworn to keep an eye on him, but if he wasn't here…

Spring suited Hermione well. The turn of seasons had brought nothing but wind and rain, drumming day in and day out against every echoing wall and window and rooftop. There was never a moment of silence. Even when the rain let up for an hour, for an afternoon, the eaves dripped and the floorboards groaned, as though the house was bleeding water into its own muddy grave.

She wrote Narcissa twice. Well, no, that wasn't exactly true. She wrote at least fifteen letters, but only sent Venze away with two of them. In the first, she was as brusque and professional as she could manage, letting Narcissa know that nothing had gone wrong in her absence, that everything was as calm and quiet as could be. "A bit eerie," she admitted. "I haven't seen Bellatrix since the morning you left, but Andromeda has been checking in on her, and swears there's no trouble."

She had scrapped two whole rewrites of that particular letter because she couldn't seem to stop writing "I miss you," at the end, and she couldn't send it. Not like that.

Venze returned with a single strip of ivory parchment clutched in his beak. "Thank you. And you? Are you well?"

It was unsigned, but Hermione would have recognized that handwriting anywhere.

It took twelve tries to send her reply. She wrote so many letters, confessed so many feelings and regrets, tried to make light of things, tried to explain McGonagall and her magic and, once, even hinted at Andromeda's kindness as more than friendly, but her skin crawled with the thought of actually trying to provoke jealousy, and that particular draft had ended up in the fireplace. Twelve tries, and in the end, all she sent was, "Yes."

After all, Narcissa had given her… essentially nothing. No news of her own well-being, no words wasted in feelings or longings or even stories. "Thank you. And you? Are you well?" said nothing beyond the bare minimum exchange of human pleasantries, so Hermione said nothing in return.

She regretted it almost immediately, but Venze was already a speck on the horizon, and night was already falling.

Sunlight woke her for the first time in months. Real sunlight. Not the limp, tired nonsense that lurked in the winter air or the wet, foggy fakery that sometimes fought through the clouds between bursts of early April rain, but a soft, warm sunlight that, were she still sleeping in Diagon, Hermione would have expected to be accompanied by birdsong and children's laughter in the streets below.

As it was, it was a quiet sunlight, but it pulled at her through every window with its calm allure. While cooking breakfast, Hermione realized how long it had been since she went outdoors. She had always been pale, but this endless winter and dreary spring had sapped her energy in a way no past turn of seasons had. She finished cooking, snagged a book, and gave in to the pull of the weather.

The day was even more beautiful when she was out in the thick of it. She carefully dried off one of the few undamaged wooden benches with her wand and settled in to read. It wasn't until the shadow
of the house crept up on her and stole the sunlight that she got up again and started down the path to the main gardens.

As soon as she rounded the corner of the house, she froze.

This wasn't right.

There were…

Thorns.

Thorns everywhere.

Thorns on vines. Huge, thriving, wet, leafy vines that seemed to stretch all the way from the vegetable garden to the back of the house and up to the first floor windows, and each vine coated in a riot of points and pricks and barbs. These were not the type of thorns seen every day, either. They were thick, meaty, and multi-hued, tipped in rich greens and all the colors of autumn, some red, some brown, burnt orange and yellow-gold, too. There were vines absolutely bristling with them and others with only one or two every few feet, and that wasn't all.

These weren't the vines of crawling roses. These were strands of ivies, curls of pumpkin, slumps of tomato, grape, and melon battling with heaps of kudzu and horse briar, and every one covered in harsh, unwelcoming thorns.

They were everywhere. Not just on vines, but on every growing thing in sight. Thorns on vegetables. Thorns on fruit. Thorns on the petals of a bloody sunflower!

As she stepped nervously further into the garden, Hermione felt tiny thorns crackling and crumpling on the blades of grass beneath her feet.

She found Bellatrix in the depths of the vegetable patch, humming eerily to herself. Her head was bowed, seemingly oblivious to Hermione's approach, and she knelt in a mound of dark, wet soil, hair hanging down around her face in unkempt curls, sweat beading on her temples as she yanked an offending weed from the dirt. She brushed aside curls and sweat alike with the back of her arm, leaving a smudge of brown at her hairline. As she did, Hermione caught sight of the rows and rows of black lines crisscrossing her forearm, and her breath caught. She remembered that horrifying vision Bellatrix had shown her, the young witch being punished for her gardening hobby because of nothing more than a similar streak of dirt, and she remembered, too, the agonizing fire that had ripped into Bellatrix's arms when the witch had tried to curse her, punished so many years later for a distinctly less harmless hobby.

Not wanting to startle, Hermione dragged her feet on the last few steps, watching Bellatrix's shoulders stiffen in response. When she was only a few meters away, the other witch looked up at last. She yanked a final weed violently from the soil, and Hermione flinched.

"How?" she asked. "More importantly… why?"

Bellatrix looked down again, tossing the weed into a pile of similarly unwanted scraps of green. "Boredom." A grin split her face as she tested the strength of a particularly wicked-looking thorn beneath the sepal of an early-blooming iris with the tip of her finger. "And a nice little surprise for Lucius, if he ever decides to show his miserable face here again."

"You can't even do magic out here!" Hermione spluttered.

Bellatrix shrugged. "I can do magic upstairs."
"What?"

"I enchanted the seeds."

"You what?"

Bellatrix rolled her eyes, uncoiling from her crouched position and brushing dirt of her knees. "Well aren't you slow this morning, pet."

Hermione flinched at the word. It had been a while since she had one of these conversations. The ones where Bellatrix was cool, collected, and taunting, but not malicious. After the barely restrained violence of their last interaction, Hermione was on edge, and that cruel, proprietary form of address had irked her on even the best of days.

"I. Enchanted. The. Seeds." Bellatrix punctuated each word with a step, crushing the center of the pile of weeds beneath one dragon-hide boot as she invaded Hermione's personal space.

"You enchanted the seeds," Hermione echoed slowly, backing away. A nearby vine stole her attention from the witch before her. It seemed to be moving against the slope of the hill, against the breeze, creeping towards her foot. "Enchanted the seeds to do what, exactly?" she asked, taking another nervous step backwards.

Bellatrix bent down again, stroking the creeping tendril with the tips of two fingers. "Shhhh, little one," she murmured. "Wouldn't want to scare the Mudblood, now would we?"

As the deranged woman muttered to the foliage, Hermione continued backing up. "Oh second thought, I don't think I want to know."

Bellatrix glanced up with a wide, toothy grin. "Oh, but aren't you curious?"

Other vines began to move, shaking and twitching amid the brown lumps of leaves, all that remained of last year's autumn bounty after the winter snows turned their vibrancy to mush.

"No?" Hermione squeaked, feeling her backward tread interrupted by something thick and prickly waiting at ankle height. She leaned forward, barely retaining her balance. A glance over her shoulder revealed the pumpkin vine she'd seen earlier nudging its way up her robe, questing all the way up to her neck before pausing at the skin it found.

Bellatrix was still grinning. "Isn't she beautiful? She'd take a nasty bite if she thought you meant me any harm."

Hermione gulped as the vine slunk downwards again, retreating once more into the grass. The others followed suit, growing as still and, if not lifeless, then passive, as they had been before.

"How?" asked Hermione. She didn't really want an answer, but a sick sort of curiosity demanded it anyway.

"Oh, I didn't have to dig too deep to root these beauties in the family protection spells." A quick pout darted across her lips. "Not just for me. They'll protect Andy, too. And Cissy, if she ever turns up again." The grin was back. "Not the Malfoy bastard, though; not anymore!"

The protection spells. The ones that had almost prevented her escape all those months ago, fleeing from Bellatrix's half-truths and Andromeda's lies. "That's... brilliant," Hermione admitted. "Terrifying," she hastened to add. "But brilliant."
Bellatrix's eyes narrowed. "I know." She turned back to the flowerbed. "Best be careful who you cross, pet. These thorns aren't bound like I am. One wrong thought…" Bellatrix laughed.

She didn't need to finish the sentence for Hermione to get the picture. She shivered, then turned, casting a few glances back over her shoulder as she made a hasty retreat from the swaying orchestra of thorns and the maestro of madness humming away in its midst.
Chapter 25

The library had never looked so good. No one was using it as a hiding place anymore, so Hermione banished the dust, cleansed the windows, freshened the air, and finally, finally found a more magical solution to reorganizing the books. There were original locations for them, after all, places these books belonged, and with the right nudge, they made their way home with ease. By the time she had made her way through the main stacks, the shelves themselves seemed to breathe more easily, no longer unbalanced with the weight of pages that did not belong to them. Even the ladders seemed more cooperative, as though she had finally earned their trust.

The pile of books by Narcissa’s chair remained untouched.

Hermione eyed them every time she came in, but there was always something else, one more stack, one more row of shelving.

Tonight, there was the back.

She worked her way cautiously though the racks of scrolls, afraid of damaging the most valuable pieces in the Black collection, but these age-old relics had stayed mostly where they belonged over the years, only needing a gentle prompting to straighten their own edges and stop encroaching on each other's space. One particular scroll kept chittering at her any time she got too close. She left it be.

There were more books behind the rare scrolls, low-sitting shelves nestled in the darkness beneath the rear windows. Last week, Hermione had taken one glance at these and left them alone, noting all sorts of dark arts texts: Poisonous Potions, The Breeding and Keeping of Dark Creatures, Theory of the Fractured Soul, and Mastering Malicious Intent, to name a few.

Today, she took the time to explore, escorting misplaced texts to other shelves and curing even this darkest of sections of a bit of its gloom. Hermione didn't see scrolls piled up at the end until she knocked them over, wincing as the brittle parchment clattered across the floor. Nothing seemed to be damaged, and Hermione breathed a sigh of relief as she waved her wand to gather them up, escorting them to their own rack with the other scrolls, a section that had emptied as she sorted the rest. Upon her return, she noticed one scroll left behind, partially pinned by the shelving. Tugging it out, Hermione caught sight of an eerily familiar diagram, an oddly-proportioned human drawn in the center of a da Vinci circle, one set of limbs clearly depicting the usual Vitruvian Man, but with strange, inhuman appendages marking a second pair, superimposed in a glimmering, silver ink. Cautiously, she unrolled it further, and gasped at what she found. This was an Animagus transformation, diagram after diagram illustrating something Hermione had seen before, in someone else's mind, accompanied now by scribbled notes in the margins around the ancient, unreadable text.

This was it, the scroll Bellatrix had been reading the night… the night she ate the gardener, the night she nearly killed her sister. As tempted as Hermione was to fling the scrap of parchment away from her, she couldn't seem to stop staring at it, unable to read the original words, but understanding the message left in Bellatrix's nearly-illegible scrawl all the same. This was no traditional animal transformation. This was an ancient pure-blood ritual, something dark and twisted, designed to create a powerful alternate form, not whatever reasonable, earthly creature actually existed at the core of a Wizard's being. And the end, the final picture… Hermione bit the inside of her mouth so hard she tasted blood. That was no mortal beast. It was massive, drawn with a dwarfed human beside it for scale. It had huge, powerful limbs and a long, wiry torso and claws and teeth and… haunches, haunches like a bear, ears like a jungle cat, rows and rows and rows of teeth like a shark in a great, gaping maw…
Merlin. No wonder she ... she absolutely devoured the gardener. No wonder it all happened so quickly.

Hermione rolled up the scroll as quickly as she could and shoved it to the bottom of the rack, making her way out of the library with a skittish stride, mentally shaken, still cringing at what she'd seen.

*The things pure-bloods do for power.*

Andromeda came to her chambers a few days later.

"I'm sorry," were the first words out of her mouth, and, reluctantly, Hermione let her in. "I know what happened... with Minerva... that wasn't fair to you at all. She keeps asking if she can come by and talk to you again, but I—"

"No."

"—thought you would rather have your space." Andromeda offered a placating smile. "It would appear I was right. It's been weeks, though. I had to see if you were alright."

"I won't do it again," said Hermione, determined to make that unwaveringly clear.

"I understand."

"Never," she insisted. "I couldn't control it, I don't understand it, and if that's what it can do, I don't want to."

"I understand, Hermione," Andromeda echoed, voice still soft. "But I don't want you to let one bad experience pull you away from trying new things, I—"

"—Not that new thing."

Andromeda chuckled, holding up a hand. "I understand. All I was going to offer was... a dueling lesson. You're right, that's something we've never really worked on, and as important as healing is, wouldn't it be better to be sure you can keep yourself from needing it to begin with?"

"Dueling..." Cautiously, Hermione nodded. "I... I think I might like that."

She did. Hermione liked dueling perhaps a bit too much. She enjoyed the ritual, the crossed wands, the bow, the moment of eye contact where she and Andromeda were the only people in the world, where they acted as one synchronized circle of restrained, ready magic... until the first spell was cast, and then it was just Hermione, alone in a blur of color and light for a few mindless seconds until Andromeda unfailingly snuck something through her defenses, and everything started all over again.

She didn't mind losing, either. After all, this was new, and Andromeda wouldn't hurt her, just push her, let her stretch her mind and her magic and her reflexes until she could keep up for longer, stay on her feet even after taking a hit, cast spells through her own shield charms. She could measure real, tangible improvement, without the wall of exhaustion she had run into learning healing, and it was so refreshing, practice with a purpose.

There were mishaps, of course, strange mishmashes of curses accidentally crafted by Hermione's less-than-scripted spellwork, so there was laughter, good natured teasing, and an entirely contrived rivalry that started to feel a lot like... friendship.
Then, Andromeda was called away to Hogwarts, and Hermione was left behind, alone, in a very different sort of solitude from her self-inflicted isolation. She had a lot of days to think. She thought about McGonagall's job offer, about her promise to Narcissa, and, mostly, about what her life was, here. What was she doing, spending day after day scraping some semblance of a fulfilling existence out of making breakfast, reading books, and flinging around magic for fun? Was she allowed to feel like this wasn't enough? Was she allowed to miss… other human contact? The bustle of distant but present life ebbing and flowing through Diagon streets, the tempting promise of Hogwarts, or even her mother, living who knew what sort of life somewhere in Mould-on-the-Wold with money Hermione practically forgot she was earning? Narcissa hadn't written again, Bellatrix was like a ghost, drifting between the gardens and her upstairs realm without a word to anyone, and Andromeda… Andromeda was trying too hard, being too nice, taking too many liberties with Hermione's good will under the guise of their rekindled friendship.

Time hardly felt real, here. It was too easy to get lost in the surface things. With Andromeda away, there was nothing to stop Hermione from finally admitting to herself that it was time. Her dues had been paid.

It was time to leave.

Andromeda returned to the manor in fine form, storming into her office in a flurry of robes and an armful of papers. She passed Hermione in the hall, pausing just long enough to say, "I have fifteen things to do, but I'm going to need a break. Come by in… two hours? A duel would be perfect right about now."

Upstairs, Hermione stared at her packed bags, fingering the note she had almost left on Andromeda's desk that very morning, the one she had agonized over writing, and which, now, she wouldn't use at all. She would go downstairs again in two hours instead and… tell her then. In person. She wouldn't take the easy way out. She could say goodbye. She could do that much.

When she finally pushed through the office doors, she found a fuming Andromeda scribbling away at a bit of parchment so violently Hermione feared she would rip right through. "Andy, I—"

"Do you see all this?" Andromeda muttered, barely even glancing up. "Want to know what it is? Bellatrix. All of this." She flipped through a stack of papers as thick as her wrist. "All of this, and I still don't know if they'll even hear my petition. All I want is this bloody job, and I can't keep commuting from this godforsaken cesspool of a house every day to do it!"

Hermione felt her insides recoiling, cringing away from Andromeda's mood. She had clearly picked the worst day imaginable to do this. "I'm sorry. But I—"

"There's nothing else for it. She's got to come back. I'm telling her to come back. I need her here."

Andromeda glanced up sharply. "She doesn't have that luxury! She doesn't get to just leave like this."
Leave me here with our sister while I'm trying to start my career again and I—"

"Andy. No."

"She doesn't get to do this, Hermione!"

"You did."

Andromeda's eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

"You did! Or have you forgotten? You told me the moment you had a chance, you got away from this place. How can you—"

"I came back!"

"Because you had to!" Hermione insisted. "And you're trying to leave again! Right now! Can you honestly say you would willingly choose this? Of course not! None of us would! Not you, not me, not Bellatrix or Narcissa or Lucius or…"

Andromeda's mouth opened, but Hermione wasn't finished.

"No! You wouldn't! You had to lose *everything*. That's what got you back here this time. You lost your husband, your daughter, and… and now that you've got something again, a job, you're running away as fast as you can! You don't get to harass Narcissa into coming back. Would you wish that on her? Would you? Losing her son, again, losing everything but you and Bellatrix and this… this place, just so you can have an easier time running away again?"

Andromeda had stilled, mouth open in clear shock. "I—Merlin."

Hermione raked her fingers through her curls, trying to get hold of her sudden flare of temper.

Andromeda's eyes narrowed. "Did my sister..." She shook her head. "No." She turned towards the window before she could see Hermione flush crimson. "That was… harsh of you."

Hermione didn't respond.

"Did my sister do this to you? Whatever she did in all those months the two of you were—"

"No!" Hermione spluttered.

"You just called me a coward."

"I did no such thing! I—"

"Did she do this? Make you this… cold?"

"I'm not... I'm not *cold* and… and if anyone… That was you! Do you still not understand what you did to me? I was a *child*. I knew *nothing* about the world, about magic, about… about love! You—"

"—Can we not do this now?" Andromeda interjected. "I asked you here to duel, not to—"

"*What?*

"I don't want to have this conversation with you again! I thought we were past this, I thought—"

"Fine! *Incarcerous!"* Hermione snarled.
Andromeda barely raised her wand in time to deflect Hermione's spell, and another was already spilling off the younger witch's lips. "Langlock!"

This one hit true, pinning Andromeda's tongue to the roof of her mouth.

"You want a duel, fine," Hermione spat. "You want to act like you've done nothing wrong, fine. You—oomph!"

A silent spell caught Hermione off guard, propelling her back against the wall in a whirl of paper and red sparks.

In the precious seconds Andromeda wasted freeing her tongue, Hermione landed a stinging jinx, leaving Andromeda to snarl a more mundane curse of pain rather than a magical one. "Bloody—"

"Expelliarmus!"

"Not a chance," growled Andromeda, deflecting Hermione's spell into the corner beside her. In another instant, Hermione was on the defensive, confronted with a flurry of spells she'd never seen, Andromeda's wandwork fast and unrestrained, and too soon, Hermione was backed against the wall, disarmed, a spell flying towards her chest and…

She grabbed it. She grabbed it with her bare hand, or maybe that was her mind, but either way, she held a riot of magic in her grasp for just a moment, and it burned at her like a live flame in between her fingers, so she flung it away, right back at the witch it had come from, and Andromeda fell flat on her ass, skidding back until she hit the desk, breath knocked out of her lungs, wand knocked out of her hand.

Hermione felt her own feet dragging her forward until she leaned over the other witch. "You hurt me. You had all the power in the world compared to me and you were ready to have me give up the tiny bit I had so you could… so you could, I don't know, feel better about what you did to Bellatrix? Feel better about wanting her dead? I thought you were sorry. I—"

It was only then that Hermione realized Andromeda was crying. "I hate it," she whispered, and Hermione froze. "I hate being trapped, Hermione. I—I do stupid things, when I feel like I'm backed into a corner… I ran away, I married someone I didn't love, all to get away from here and I just…"

She laughed, then, a strangled sound. "It broke me, Hermione. Growing up here, I…I was nothing, I was the mediocre child living in the shadow of Bellatrix's power, Narcissa's beauty, I... I was jealous of everything, even the… the violence, the misery, I felt so invisible and so trapped."

"That, that doesn't give you the right to…"

"I used you! I'm sorry!" Andromeda gasped. "Is that what you want to hear? I felt cornered again, chained to my sisters like nothing had ever changed and you were there and I—I thought I could do it differently, this time! I thought I could use you without hurting anyone. I thought, if I just… if I just loved you I could…"

Hermione let her wand fall onto the desk. All the fire had gone out of her. The accusations were gone. She said her two cents and won another apology she wasn't looking for and… and what now?

Andromeda was crying on the floor and Hermione felt her own eyes watering in response and she didn't want to care. She didn't want this woman to be able to make her feel anything anymore, but here she was, slumping onto the floor beside her and pulling Andy into her arms and feeling tears drenching the collar of her robes as apologies spilled aimless and ineloquent into her ear.

She waited until the tears stopped before she pulled back, staring at Andromeda's chin, unable to
look into her eyes. "I'm leaving, Andy."

"You… what?"

"I'm leaving. I packed up this morning and I… You've done so much for me. In some ways… you may well have saved my life, the first time we met. But I'm not that girl anymore. I can't live my whole life by the whims of your family. I'm going upstairs, I'm going to write Narcissa, tell her you're okay, you didn't mean whatever you demanded in that letter you sent, and then I'm going away."

A finger appeared under her chin, lifting it, drawing her gaze to Andromeda's eyes. Hermione expected anger, expected demands, but instead, all she saw was a calm sort of wonder. "You've changed," said Andromeda. "Last year… you wouldn't have even thought about how you could or couldn't live your life. You were just… determined to stay alive. I—I'm happy for you, Hermione. And you're right. As much as I might want to keep you here… I don't have that right." She stood, extending a hand to help Hermione up. "Come on. Did you catch your cat?"

Hermione winced. "Merlin, I nearly forgot."

Andromeda shook her head. "Let him stay until you get settled somewhere new. He's getting fat and alarmingly happy here, but it won't hurt him to stay a few more weeks. I'll write that letter, then I'll help you bring down your things."

"Thank you?" Hermione managed, following Andromeda from the room on unsteady legs. She felt drained, but… almost… peaceful? She had just closed a lot of lingering, half-open doors, and now she could almost see it, her next steps, stretching golden and untouched into the fog of the future.

The front door swung open just as Hermione dragged the last of her things into the Atrium.

"Stupefy!"

Hermione drew her wand the moment she heard the spell, but she wasn't the target. Instead, she watched in horrified confusion as Andromeda slammed backwards into the wall, head cracking audibly against the wood. As she crumpled, Hermione almost stepped out of the shadow of the stairwell, ready to run to her, but in one step, she finally saw who had pushed through the door.

There was Lucius, wand raised, a ragged snarl of a grin etched on his face. Flanking him to either side were two men Hermione had never seen before, but they were dark figures, unkempt and wild-eyed, and Hermione instinctively pulled back into the shadows.

"Well, that was easy," said one with a slimy laugh. "Thought you promised us a fight?"

Lucius's nose wrinkled. "We got lucky, Antonin."

"What's all this junk?" the other asked, kicking Hermione's largest bit of luggage.

Lucius shrugged, scanning the room. "It probably belongs to the girl." When he made to open it, Lucius shoved him forward. "Enough, Rowle. We're not here for that."

"Yea, yea," Rowle muttered. "Rough up the place, kill the blood traitor sister, wipe the Mudblood, blame it on Bella, chain 'er up like you saved the bleedin' day. I know the plan. Still don't think it's gonna make the Ministry let up on you." He picked up a silver candlestick from the mantle, tossing it up and down as he spoke before pocketing it deep in his robes.
Lucius ignored him. "Come along. Bellatrix will be on the third floor. We can take care of the Mudblood on the way. Spread out. One stairwell each. Make sure no one comes down as we head up."

Hermione cast a silent disillusionment charm as Antonin walked past her. Once he had rounded the corner, Hermione slunk up the main stairs, not daring to look at Andromeda's still form against the far wall, following instead as silently as she could in Lucius's wake. She saw him pacing towards her chambers just as she reached the top of the first flight of stairs. Heart in her throat, she darted round the corner and sprinted for the third floor.

"Bellatrix!" she hissed out the moment her foot struck the landing.

She took two steps down the hallway before a spell struck her right in the chest. "Petrificus Totalus!"

One of the men had beaten her here, the first, and his wand pressed against her frozen throat when she tipped backwards against the wall. "Ah-ah-ah. What have we here?"

"What was that?" Rowle rounded the corner, almost stabbing the other man in the chest with his wand.

Antonin pushed aside the tip with a noise of disgust, "Watch where you put that thing, Thorfinn. I never should have broken you out of Azkaban, you miserable excuse for a Death Eater."

"You got 'er?" Rowle ignored the other man's insult, grinning at him instead. "Pretty, for a Mudblood." He leered at Hermione, poking her in the collarbone so hard she almost tipped over. "We'd better go say hi to dear ol' Bella, then."

"No need to search, boys." Bellatrix's approach had been so silent that both Death Eater's jumped when she spoke, and Hermione would have, too, if she had any control over her body. She struggled against the spell, but it had already done its work, settling into her muscles and locking them tight without leaving even a trace of magic for her to work with. She wanted to call out, to warn Bellatrix of their intentions, but her mouth was frozen shut, and she could only hope her frantic eyes were conveying something more than anger and terror. "I'm right here."

"Bellatrix!" squawked Rowle, coughing as he choked on her name.

"Dolohov. Rowle." She said their names with about as much pleasure as one might feel when biting into rotten fruit.

"Bella," Dolohov murmured, glancing nervously down the stairwell behind him. "It's been too long."

His words sounded like a greeting to an old friend, but his twitching eyes shattered any illusion of warmth.

He breathed an audible sigh of relief when Lucius reached the top of the staircase.

Bellatrix's eyes narrowed. "Lucius." Her wand hung from the end of a disarmingly relaxed wrist, but her stance was wary, and Hermione felt a flicker of hope. "However did you get in here? I really would have expected the family wards to be... less than charitable."

"Bellatrix." His tone matched hers in cold, crystal clear disdain. "Did you really think I stayed married to your sister for over twenty years without collecting a bit of the family blood."

Bellatrix stiffened. "I never did like your cronies, Lucius," she quipped. "They aren't welcome here."

Lucius's eyebrow arched, amused. "Well, I never did love your sister," he said with a shark-like grin.
Dolohov chuckled behind him as Rowle let out an audible snort. "And I don't give a rat's ass about being welcomed by you."

The men behind him hissed and cawed with nervous laughter, scraggly teeth gnawing at the air, meaty, unclean hands slapping against thin, bony thighs. Bellatrix's nose wrinkled with disgust, and that was all the warning they had.

Quick as lightning, her wand was out, and spells were flung with deadly, stunning efficiency. Hermione watched in frozen awe as all the legendary dueling prowess of the Dark Lord's right hand blossomed before her eyes, and Lucius's men fell one after the other in a shower of light and fractured cries of pain. As Dolohov was struck in the chest by a bolt of sapphire light and toppled backwards off the stairs, Hermione felt the magical bindings around her limbs falter and fail, and she staggered to keep her balance as Bellatrix faced Lucius alone.

"Just you and me now, Luci," she said, matching his grin with equal fire. She batted aside his spells with eerily smooth motions, casting her own without words, without pausing or flinching or giving ground. Lucius's face contorted in concentration, spellwork tight and focused but barely keeping up with her wild abandon. She laughed through the blaze, and Hermione was mesmerized, watching them circle each other, one the clear predator, the other the defiant prey. Jets of green light spluttered from the tip of Lucius's wand and vanished like smoke into the whirl of Bellatrix's cloak. Splinters of wood ripped themselves from the walls at Bellatrix's command, spinning towards him in a shower of needle-sharp mahogany. They smashed against his shield, turning to sawdust, but the dust crept beneath his silvery protection, rising in a swirling storm that tore through his robes like paper, peppering them with holes until his ankles were raw, chapped, and bleeding. It was only then that he managed to banish the dust, still fighting seemingly endless jets of red and purple light that sparked from Bellatrix's wand between spurts of wild laughter.

It was… almost beautiful. Hermione couldn't stop watching, amazed and quite frankly happy to watch Lucius getting his due at the hands of this fierce, fearless, deranged witch.

With a crack, Bellatrix's wand lengthened, transformed, uncoiling itself into a whip of black, gleaming wandwood which snapped through Lucius's shields like tissue paper, coiling around his neck. He gasped, clawing at the tightening noose around his neck, and Bellatrix nearly cooed with pleasure. "You thought you could defeat me, here, in my own home? You, the Dark Lord's favorite chew toy, take on his most trusted, his most loyal servant?"

Lucius's face was turning red, crimson, rapidly approaching purple, and he seemed to have given up trying to unwrap Bellatrix's spell, clutching the whip ineffectively with both hands instead.

Bellatrix spat at him. "I should have killed you decades ago."

A sudden, purple sneer darted across Lucius's bulging face, and he yanked at Bellatrix's whip with both hands.

She stumbled, off balance, and he used her own momentum against her, dragging her past him, pushing her forward even as he staggered to one knee, and in an instant, the coiled wood about his neck disappeared.

Bellatrix had been propelled into the stairwell.

In a flash, Lucius was on his feet again, coughing, shaking, but spitting spells through it all, pressing the now magicless Bellatrix further and further down the stairs as she screamed in sudden fury. Hermione staggered to her feet, frantically dashing after them, tripping and stumbling to the landing where she found Bellatrix backed against the corner window, bleeding from a gash in her leg.
Lucius seemed to be milking his unfair advantage for all it was worth. "Yes," he hissed. "You should have killed me when you had the chance."

He stepped closer, wand tip dragging from her shoulder to the crease of her arm, leaving another bleeding cut behind. Hermione frantically raised her wand, a spell on the tip of her tongue, but Bellatrix's eyes locked with her own, and she froze.

"Stay back!" Bellatrix snarled.

Hermione stumbled, protests dying at the look of unadulterated rage on the dark witch's face.

Lucius's spine tensed at Bellatrix's words. He glanced over his shoulder, spotting Hermione only half a meter away, and before she could come to terms with Bellatrix's command, he flung up the rug at her feet, stopping her in her path. As the fabric wrapped around Hermione's ankles, he raised his wand once more, pressing it directly between Bellatrix's collarbones. "Your pride will be your undoing," he snarled, and Bellatrix closed her eyes. "Avada—"
Bellatrix's bleeding arm snapped upwards and ripped Lucius's hand away from her throat.

"—Kedavra!"

The bolt of green light struck the ceiling and a shower of cracked stucco rained down around them.

Bellatrix gripped Lucius's wrist, clenching her fingers as tight as a vise. She bent it backwards until he barked in pain, then kept bending, kept twisting, until he was staggering away from her. She put her other hand to his chest. She shunted him, shoved him, dragged him bodily across the floor, ignoring the fruitless, misdirected spells that spat from the tip of his wand as the two of them passed within an inch of Hermione, still kicking her way free of the rug. His ankles cracked against the bottom stair and he let out a yelp, but Bellatrix wasn't stopping. His slender frame was no match for her fury, the tendons in her neck straining as she drove him up one stair, then another, smiling grimly as he stumbled and clawed ineffectively at the hand around his wrist. His questing fingertips found the cut he had made on her arm, but when he tried to dig in, she let go of his robes just long enough to snap his ring finger like a twig.

Hermione watched from the foot of the stairs, frozen in shock as Lucius bellowed in pain. It was such a melodramatic display of strength, cruel and primal and physical and unnecessary. Bellatrix could have disarmed him in a heartbeat, could have waited for Hermione's help, but no, of course she wouldn't do that, not when she could drag Lucius Malfoy up seventeen individual stairs, not when she could let his ineffective curses render the ceiling into a mess of blackened wood and shattered plaster, not when she could break a few bones on her way to reclaiming her magic on the landing.

Hermione found her legs again and followed at a cautious distance. It was evident that, whether or not Bellatrix actually had everything under control, she had no interest in allowing anyone else to assist her, so Hermione bit her lip, twisted her wand around and around between her fingers, and kept herself out of the way.

In another moment, Bellatrix had Lucius pinned against the wall. A battle of wills seemed to be warring between the hands that gripped his wand. She bore down on him, ignoring the thick trails of crimson from the cut on her forearm, while he frantically pushed back, eyes wide and wild.

She won.

She drove his own wand into the flesh at his throat, unrelenting, their hands tangled together and wet with blood. "Whose pride, Lucius?" she spat, voice low and feral with fury. "Avada Kedavra!"

The words ended, not in a green flash, but in a scream of pain. Bellatrix's back arched in apparent agony, and Lucius began laughing. "Did you forget so easily?" he gasped. "You'll have to do better than that, you crippled bitch."

Lucius's words only served to enrage the wild-eyed woman. She yanked his wand from his hand. "You think the Ministry crippled me?" she snarled, breath still rapid and shallow with pain. "Crucio!"

"What are you doing!" Hermione cried out as she watched a new line of blood burst and blacken on Bellatrix's forearm.

"Imperio!" screamed Bellatrix, letting the agony of the curse tear from her lips in another spell instead of a cry of pain. "Crucio! Crucio!"
Over and over and over again, the words ripped from Bellatrix's lungs, furious and helpless and doing nothing but adding agony upon agony to Bellatrix's bleeding arms, the tallies spreading one after another, curls of smoke wafting into the air as the Ministry's punishment carried out its wrath.

As Lucius continued to laugh in the face of Bellatrix's self-inflicted agony, Hermione choked on a scream.

Bellatrix's arms were no longer charring, the cuts no longer blackening under the Ministry's curse. There was no time between her pain-filled spells for the magical flame that seared beneath her skin to put itself out. Instead it was beginning to catch, tallies sparking into one another, burning white-hot and bloody on the surface of her skin, smoldering like a hotbed of coals in the tattered remains of the sleeves of her cloak, lighting her on fire.

Bellatrix's words were burning her alive.

Lucius's laughter grew as his wand fell from her bleeding, blackening arms, but even as Bellatrix lost control of her fingers, she was pressing closer with single-minded intent, driving a knee up into his gut and bracing her shaking hands against the wall behind his head, pressing her burning arms against his throat in a dreadful parody of an embrace.

There was no more laughter, then.

His skin caught fire in a heartbeat, no magical safeguards in place to turn his flesh to charcoal the way Bellatrix's always had. The fire blistered his skin in an instant, his breath wheezed from his chest in sudden, agonizing bursts, and a wild, feral gleam lit Bellatrix's eyes with a fire not only from the reflected flames. There were screams, the air grew thick with the stench of burning hair and flesh, and it was long after no further sounds escaped Lucius's lungs that she finally let go, staggering backwards from his still-burning form and falling to her knees as she let out a brutal, wordless scream, half triumph, half agony.

Hermione didn't know whether Lucius was dead or alive, didn't know what had happened to the other two men, what had happened to Andromeda, but she did know that the fire on Bellatrix's skin wasn't burning out, wasn't charring over now that the curses had stopped, and in fact was still lingering, catching, spreading, eating its way up towards her shoulders and blistering the backs of her hands and after what it had done to Lucius…

Hermione felt a terror like none other gripping her heart, something primal, irrational, all-consuming, and she staggered across the floor, falling at Bellatrix's side. She didn't have time to think, time to feel any new fear. She reached out, grabbing Bellatrix's burning forearms through the flame, and it was all she could do to fling magic blindly through her own blistering fingers and into the witch beneath them.

In a pain-filled second, she felt herself falling, slipping into something that felt nothing like herself and everything like fire and agony and fields of burnt, crackling vines with molten thorns of heat and power. It was a landscape flung straight up from hell, everything burning, sky and earth and vines alike, all of them burning, burning to the root, flaming towards a… a spark of something, something in the air, silver and pulsing and beautiful and oh, Merlin, who knows. Hermione's mind was in fragments. Lucius hadn't been moving. Lucius was probably dead. Someone must know, someone must be coming but this, whatever this was, it couldn't wait, Bellatrix couldn't wait. The light was dimming, Hermione didn't know how or why but she knew that was bad and it was now or never, as the silver burst into clear blue flame and…

Hermione lashed out, ripping through every vine with a single sweep of an unseen hand, scattering brittle leaves and thorns and acres of ash to the winds, leaving nothing but a barren, blackened
wasteland behind. A single ragged crow flew mournfully overhead, piercing the dust-filled sky with its keening cries. It fell to the earth at Hermione's feet, shuffling between unrecognizable stalks of remnant growth, rooting through the crumbling soil, scratching towards something shimmering, fragile and coated in tarnish and soot, lingering just beneath its claws.

A sound pierced through the landscape. "Hermione!" It shattered the dead, eerie peace of this place. "Hermione!" That was her name.

Hermione fell into herself with a gasp. Andromeda stood in the stairwell, staggering up towards them, clutching a bleeding lump at her temple with one hand.

"Bella!" she gasped, catching sight of the burns on her sister's arms, the gash on her leg. She reached out, stumbling up the last two steps, but Bellatrix cringed away. "Let me heal you!"

She drew back even further. "I can do it myself!" she snapped, voice hoarse and furious. She clawed at Lucius's wand on the charred floorboards, fingers barely functional. She pressed the tip against her thigh, muttering something under her breath, but nothing happened.

She flung the wand away in disgust, letting out a groan as she did. "My wand! Get me my wand."

Exchanging a terrified glance with Andromeda, Hermione obeyed, wincing as her own burnt fingertips cast the summoning spell. Bellatrix's wand flew up the stairs and into Hermione's waiting hand, only for Bellatrix to snatch it away again, dragging it furiously along the gash in her leg. Nothing.

Bellatrix screamed again. There was no fire, no new pain, but she stared down at her hands in evident horror and just screamed. Hermione shut her eyes against the agony of it, unable to bring herself to press her blistered fingers against her ears instead. When the sound gave way to sudden, ringing silence, Hermione cracked open her eyelids.

Bellatrix was staring right at her. Her lips parted and the screams gave way to cold, piercing words. "What have you done?!"

Hermione scrambled backwards along the floor. "M-me? I… I only… You were burning, I—" A harsh realization slammed into her like a punch to the gut. "I put out the flames," she whispered.

Andromeda was staring at Bellatrix in apparent shock. "You certainly did. You… you've cut the trace," she whispered, not even glancing Hermione's way. "I can feel it. It's gone. You—you did something. To her magic, Hermione you… you didn't just change it. It's… gone. Completely. Bella… There's no magic. At all."

"No," gasped Hermione. "That's not what I—I wasn't trying to—I only wanted…"

Bellatrix had been right, right not to trust her. One push and… gone. She staggered backwards, her worst fears for raw magic churning up through all the other terrors of this night. Her hand touched something, something warm and yielding, and she snatched it back, jerking to her feet. There was Lucius. Or, what was left of him. The fire had seared all the way through his neck, past the skin, through muscle and sinew and straight through to the bones of his spine, charred charcoal black against the red blood on the floor below. An image of Bellatrix's arms, of the fire eating all the way through to the bone, flashed through her mind, and Hermione gagged, unable to breathe, and she ran.

She ran down the stairs, tripping and stumbling over hunks of wood and what may well have been another body, out into the atrium. She grabbed her winter cloak from the peg by the door where it had hung, untouched, for months, but right now… she had never felt so cold. She pulled the hood up
over her head and tied it with fumbling fingers, tight and child-like, beneath her chin. Stumbling, mindless, she grabbed the handle of her suitcase and let out a gasp of pain, but she didn't let go, summoning the peaceful, familiar color of a healing charm from the depths of her mind and pushing it down through her hands, feeling blisters cool and retreat back into her skin, even as fatigue immediately spiked through each of her limbs. She grabbed her other bag and pushed through the doors, out into the grounds, into the fading afternoon light.

She had just wanted to leave! That was all she wanted today! Not a fight with Andromeda, not Lucius's return, not…

Her brain rejected any of the thoughts that followed, any of the deaths, the curses, the ravaged field laid bare and barren at Hermione's hand somewhere inside of Bellatrix Black. She could taste tears on her lips, too numb to feel them falling from her eyes.

Just as she reached the gate, she heard footsteps behind her. She fumbled with her wand, trying to right it without dropping her bag, but it caught in the lining of her cloak, and she wasn't quick enough.

Bellatrix snagged her by the hood and secured her grip by digging into Hermione's hair, slamming her down on her knees in the middle of the pea gravel drive. Bellatrix's arms were still hatched with blackness, irritated and raw, but it was clear Andromeda had healed the worst of her injuries. "You will fix this," she hissed, digging her nails into Hermione's scalp.

"Let go of me!"

"You will fix this, you will fix me, or you will die, you filthy, meddling—"

A resounding crack split the air far too close for comfort, and Hermione's ears rang.

"Release the hostage!"

Hermione felt her hair tugged even harder as Bellatrix whipped around, turning towards the voice of an unfamiliar woman.

"Relinquish your wands! Put your hands on the ground! Don't make any sudden moves." The voice continued its demands. "We represent the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Auror division."

Bellatrix unclenched her hand with a growl, and Hermione was just able to catch sight of two cloaked figures standing on the other side of the gate, wands raised in their direction, before she obeyed the half-heard commands, dropping her wand and suitcases and pressing her palms into the gravel.

When she cautiously looked up again, the two figures had stepped closer. "On the ground, Lestrange," pressed the second individual. This voice was masculine, mid-range and rough and… vaguely familiar, but a hood concealed his appearance. The woman's hood hung about her shoulders, and Hermione blinked up at the intimidating frown on an otherwise youthful face. She couldn't have been much older than Hermione, with long, dark hair pulled back in a harsh ponytail, features that hinted at Asian descent, and a physicality to her stance that belied her small stature.

Hermione dared a glance over shoulder, watching as Bellatrix slowly knelt in the drive. She raised her hand, reaching with painstaking slowness to twirl her wand up into her hair, and while the man made a small sound of warning, he offered no further complaint when she finally rested her hands beside her knees.
The male Auror tugged a bit of parchment out from a pocket of his robes, rubbing out the creases against his thigh before clearing his throat and beginning to read. "The Ministry of Magic received intelligence that, at twenty-six minutes past three this afternoon, the reserve magic dedicated to restricting Bellatrix Black became unteathered. We request immediate—" Here, the hood of the cloak bobbed up and down in a clear glance at the aforementioned witch. "—confirmation of death, requiring the witness signatures of two Aurors and the caretaking individual, as well as testimony regarding the circumstances of death—"

"—Don't read all that," the woman interrupted, snatching the paper out of his hands. "Evidently, she isn't dead."

"Just following protocol," he grumbled. Another bob of the hood accompanied his glance back and forth between Bellatrix and his colleague. "Erm… What is protocol, now?"

"We bring them in, of course, and anyone else on the estate. You." Hermione found herself skewered by that intense, probing stare. "What can you tell us about what happened here today?"

"Take off your hood," the man interrupted. "Identify yourself."

Before Hermione could decide whether it was more pressing to obey the original command of keeping her hands on the ground or the latest request, Bellatrix spoke. "You first," she demanded, and Hermione winced.

"I—"

A sudden crack cut off Hermione's reply, and another cloaked figure appeared in the drive. "Drop your wands!" a low, rasping voice commanded. The figure was small, hunched, with scraggly, sickly-looking yellow hairs poking out from the deep cowl of the hood he wore. Hermione was confronted with the rather astonishing sight of three distinctly serious individuals all pointing their wands at each other in apparent confusion.

*It's like some sort of strange masquerade*, Hermione's brain supplied, the disjointed mental image surfacing through her continued panic.*No one knows who anyone is. More threats, though … less dancing.*

"I said drop them!"

Hermione heard rustling behind her. A glance revealed that Bellatrix had decided to take advantage of the situation by sitting upright.

"You drop your wand!" the Auror wizard insisted.

"I represent the Ministry of Magic," the most recent arrival replied. "Drop your wands. I won't repeat myself again."

"We're with the Ministry," said the woman. "Auror division."

Slowly, the other figure's wand arm began to relax. "Department of Mysteries. Inspector Gretiwarrel."

Hermione's breath caught. She had heard of them, the *Unspeakables*, but she had never so much as set foot in that part of the Ministry. She'd never met anyone who had.

"What are you doing here?" the hooded Auror demanded as he and his partner slowly lowered their wands.
"I could ask the same of you."

The woman put a restraining hand on the his arm. "We received misleading information that Bellatrix Black had passed away. As you can see, that hardly seems to be the case. We'll be taking her back to headquarters, assuming there isn't a jurisdiction problem?"

At the pointed question, the Unspeakable stepped towards the gate. "That remains to be seen. I'm here partially on behalf of the Improper Use of Magic Office. Restricted spellwork was recently performed here without a license. I'll need to execute some tests. All parties involved will be escorted to Azkaban awaiting trial."

Hermione's blood went cold.

The woman looked taken aback. "Azkaban? What improper use restriction would—"

"—That's classified, ma'am."

Her eyes narrowed. "Requesting permission to perform an identification charm on your wand."

Inspector Gretiwarrel raised it without hesitation.

As their exchange continued, Hermione noticed a sound behind her, breathing so low, so heavy and rattling, that it became a steady growl at the edge of her hearing. Slowly, so as not to draw the attention of the wizards at the gate, she turned her head.

Bellatrix's eyes were unfocused, staring straight through the gate and into the uninhabited reaches beyond, but her posture had transformed into a crouch, limbs tense, coiled, fingers clenched into fists. "I'm not going back," she hissed, beginning to gather her legs beneath her.

"You are who you say you are," the female Auror muttered when the Unspeakable's wand glowed briefly green. "But you've got to give us more information. What happened here?"

"Bellatrix, stop!" Hermione whispered as the others spoke. "He isn't talking about you. It's not like it was your magic that cast the spell he's talking about, I—"

"Don't move!" The male Auror seemed to have finally remembered there was someone else he was supposed to have his wand on, and the attention of all three turned immediately towards Bellatrix.

She didn't stop, glaring daggers as she stood.

"Stupify!"

The Auror's spell flew towards the gate, struck something Hermione couldn't see, and soared off impotently across the field.

"Bloody… pure-bloods… Bloody wards," he muttered under his breath, poking at the space between the bars with the tip of his wand. A shower of golden sparks appeared at his touch, flint striking iron, and the air rippled. "You. Let us in."

When it was clear his wand was now pointed her way, Hermione stood and nervously approached. She pressed her palm against the gate, but it didn't budge. She hadn't really expected it to. "Can I use my wand?" she nervously asked.

"Yes," he replied, and Hermione looked up, still trying to place that voice. It was no use; the hood left his face too shadowed in the glare of the setting afternoon sun at his back.
Hermione picked up her wand, quickly motioning the gates to open for her.

Nothing.

The same Auror let out a resigned sigh. "You. Back on the ground. Lestrange. Let us in."

Bellatrix cackled.

The Auror shook his head. "You lot never know what's good for you. Cho, can you get through this?"

As Hermione knelt again, she could see Bellatrix glancing over her shoulder, then back Hermione's way. She could practically see the gears turning in her head, weighing the pros of running away before they could get in against the cons of losing her chance to force Hermione into returning her magic.

"I can try," the woman muttered. She had been studying the invisible defenses as her partner was making his demands. "But I still want an explanation," she added with a pointed glance at the Unspeakable. "I need to know what I'm working with."

When the Unspeakable reluctantly nodded, she pushed up a sleeve and started casting silent spells at the gate in a series of increasingly complicated wand motions.

"That Death Eater tampered with her own magic." Inspector Gretiwarrel spoke slowly, each word emerging with the pain and reluctance of a pulled tooth. "Which is, of course, strictly illegal and a highly volatile spell. She was likely attempting an escape."

Bellatrix snorted. "If I'd been running, you'd never have found me, you incompetent fools." She stood at her full, intimidating height, chin up, jaw squared. "I won't go back there," she repeated, voice eerily calm. She stepped closer to Hermione, grabbing the collar of her robes and pulling her upright despite a squawk of protest. "And you don't go anywhere either, pet. Not until you fix me," she hissed, breath hot and close against Hermione's ear.

There was a moment of stillness, all eyes on the dark witch, but then the two Aurors returned to their attempts to break through the wards. When the Unspeakable joined their efforts, Hermione could feel Bellatrix tense at her back. She growled out a sharper warning. "Cowards! Coming after a witch in her own prison. I've killed far better wizards for less, I've—"

Hermione's breathing was rapidly approaching panic. "Surely there's... some way we can resolve this. I can explain everything, I... It wasn't her! I was the one who used the raw magic. I—"

The Unspeakable looked up sharply. "You?" A creaky, disturbed laugh echoed from the depths of his hood. "You know not of what you speak, child. That is magic well beyond your means."

"I did!" Hermione insisted, ignoring Bellatrix's nails digging in to her shoulder in warning. "I didn't mean to, I just—"

The hood shook dismissively. "Why defend her? Has she threatened you?"

"I'm threatening her now," said Bellatrix, giving Hermione a shove to make the hand on her shoulder more visible to their audience.

Hermione tried to shrug her off, but her grip was like iron. "No," she insisted.

"Hush, Mudblood." An eerily gentle hand wrapped around Hermione's throat.
"No! I was the one who messed with her magic, I—"

"The Ministry attack dogs aren't going to listen to you," Bellatrix murmured in Hermione's ear, voice sing-song and taunting.

"—it was an accident, we were in danger, I had to—"

"I'm getting though," the witch at the gate grunted, voice low and strained with concentration.

Bellatrix spat out her crudest insult yet, and Hermione flushed.

"You don't have to take her to Azkaban!" Hermione insisted, still trying to find some other way to do resolve the increasingly fragile situation. They didn't know. Bellatrix couldn't fight back against magic. If they went after her… if they threw her back in a wizard's prison… "If you'd just wait a moment and—"

"You honestly believe we'd let that magical invert loose at your say-so?" sneered the Unspeakable, derisive, wheezing laughter spilling off the ends of his words.

Hermione's jaw dropped. "She's not—she isn't a—"

"She's a Death Eater," grunted the hooded Auror. There was something so familiar about that condescending tone… Hermione just couldn't quite place it. She must have heard him in the Ministry, she supposed, or somewhere else in Diagon.


"Silence!" the Unspeakable thundered, and the wards collapsed in a shower of golden sparks.

The Aurors didn't hesitate, body-binding Bellatrix with simultaneous charms. Her hands slid from Hermione's shoulder and throat as she fell, and Hermione let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding.

The Unspeakable approached, conjuring a pair of wrist cuffs that gleamed, oil-like and slickly shimmering, in the afternoon light. Hermione couldn't seem to look directly at them; her eyes slid off to either side over and over again, and she knew instantly she wouldn't want that magic against her skin.

"Wait," she insisted. "What are you going to do with her? Andromeda should be here. She—"

"—will be going straight to Azkaban until we get to the bottom of what happened here," the Unspeakable cut her off. "And if you attempt to interfere again, you will join her."

Hermione felt angry, helpless tears pricking at the edges of her eyes. This wasn't how this day was supposed to have gone! Her skull felt as though someone had reached inside and cracked it open, packing in one nightmare after another on top of all the things she couldn't bear to think about until her brain was stuffed to the brim with nonsense and miscommunications and pain.

"If you continue to cooperate, whoever you are, we can take you right back to the Ministry for questioning," the still-hooded Auror offered. "You tried to help us get in, at least. Don't mess this up for yourself." His words were slow, placating, but to Hermione, he sounded nothing but insufferably condescending.

"Release the binding," Gretiwarrel demanded. "I need her wrists together."
The moment the spell dropped, Bellatrix ripped free of her captors, spitting fury. "You dare lay hands on me, you unworthy inbreds! The next to touch me will be the first to die. I—"

Hermione watched the fruitless struggle in a cold, distant wonder. Even without magic, even with the wounds on her arms beginning to open under the strain of her fury, Bellatrix was a force of terror, something wild and untamable. As the Auror's struggled to bring her wrists together, the Unspeakable did not even approach, waiting, silent and disinterested, for the others to subdue her. Spells, insults, and anger fractured the air around them, and Hermione couldn't push away a gnawing guilt, almost grief, rising inside of her. She had done this. She had taken the last agency this fierce, broken woman had to her name, the last of her hobbled power, and now she would be taken from her life, from the last of her family, from a gilded cage to an even crueler prison… They would take her for Hermione's crime, and once they found out what had actually happened today… they would never care what Lucius had done. They would only care that Bellatrix had taken his life. She had been living on borrowed time, and Hermione had stolen the last of it.

"You'll get the kiss for that!" The hooded Auror was clutching his face, and Bellatrix had blood under her fingernails. "I'll make sure of it, you scumbag."

The kiss. Hermione shuddered. These three ministers of the law cared nothing for justice, for truth. Bellatrix had blood under her fingernails, yes, but far more blood from Bellatrix's ravaged arms slickened the Aurors' palms, and Hermione couldn't take her eyes from that black, blistered skin. That was the Ministry's justice. That was law.

What would they do to her, an unknown, just one of the irrelevant rabble, if they ever believed her capable of the magic she'd cast today?

What further torture could they inflict on Bellatrix Black? Would this finally be enough to earn her the kiss?

As Bellatrix fell once more at the wizard's feet, taking a stunner directly to the gut, Andromeda's words rang through Hermione's mind with stunning clarity. "Bella deserves a second chance … a first, honestly. I'm not even sure she had that much… she's committed so many crimes… but she's always come back to me, to Cissa."

Bellatrix's face was pressed against the ground. She spat gravel from between bleeding lips, eyes boring into Hermione's with dark, unyielding fury.

"The only person who should decide the fate of Bellatrix Black is, well, is her. I want to see if she could have that. If she could live a normal life … maybe she'll go out and get herself killed but… maybe she won't."

"Bloody hell! What is that?"

Hermione's memory shattered, and she followed the Auror's stare out over the fields… directly to the garden.

Or, perhaps more aptly stated, the garden was following the path of the Auror's stare directly towards them. With breathtaking grace, vines were creeping towards them, a slow, seething tide of menacing greenery and glinting thorns, pressing closer with every breath. All wands turned towards the sea of foliage, and Hermione felt an almost painful spark of hope. Maybe, if they were distracted, if she had another chance to talk, to explain, they could—

The Auror woman cursed. "There's still protection spells on the land. I don't know why I didn't feel them before now."
Bellatrix laughed, spitting blood from her mouth. "My warmest welcome," she slurred, pulling herself to her knees and pressing an arm against her stomach. She flashed a wild, conspiratory grin towards Hermione, her anger forgotten in temporary triumph, and another memory fought its way to the front of Hermione's mind.

"Was she bound?" It was Narcissa's voice, now, Narcissa's haunting words. "Of course she was bound. My sister resisted the bond by … embracing her madness. I resisted it by rejecting everything I've ever felt. She took everything around her and pulled it into herself, filling to the brim with more love and anger and pain than any one human could hold."

The vines crept ever closer, and Bellatrix cackled as the Auror boy yelped and kicked at the first encroaching tendril.

"Silencio!" Bellatrix's laugh was cut short by a dismissive spell, and Inspector Gretiwarrel pushed her back to the ground with the heel of his boot.

Hermione flinched at the casual violence of the motion. There was no need for that, no need to muzzle her with magic, to beat her when she was long since down. Hermione stepped closer, but a sharp glare from the Ministry witch stopped her in her tracks.

Three muttered phrases and three harsh wand motions later, Hermione felt her stomach drop once again as the vines stilled and slumped back to the earth at the Unspeakable's command. She watched as he raised the cuffs again, tapping them with his wand, prompting the slick, uncanny metal to peel open. "No more tricks." He dangled them in front of her eyes, taunting her.

"You could set her free."

She could practically see Andromeda's imploring stare in mind's eye, hear the fear of rejection in her voice when she first tried to tempt Hermione with her deranged plan. She could see something else, too, staring at the lifeless vines slumped all over the hillside. She could see that fierce, protective gleam in Bellatrix's eyes as she'd kept Lucius from Narcissa time and time again, the steel-sharp loyalty she wielded in defense of her family as effectively as she wielded her deadliest spells. Lucius's corpse flashed behind her eyes again, but no nausea accompanied the image. Instead, all she could feel was a cold sort of… relief.

Oh, hell. She'd done half of it already, hadn't she?

Hermione raised her wand.

"Freeze!"

She ignored the woman's command, catching the subsequent disarming spell before it could touch her and pushing, reaching out through the grounds, gathering, building, filling every vine and flower and tree with a pulse of magic, something half-formed and golden, charged and bristling and…

The vines answered. They rose from the soil, writhing and clawing their way across the last space between them, moving quicker than before. Thorns raked over the gravel, clambering up the hems of cloaks and over the shoulders of the startled, shouting Ministry officials. The vines snatched the wands from their hands, and when they tried to reach for them, to take them back, the vines hoisted them up in the air, wrapped up in spines and a sea of relentless green.

Hermione reached out blindly through the fray, almost tripping over her suitcases and just managing to grab them up instead. Her hood caught on something and tore down the middle, so she untied it at her neck, letting it disappear into the mindless hunger of the sudden jungle. She found Bellatrix's arm
by the slick warmth of blood alone. Before the injured witch could pull away, Hermione waved her wand and yanked her side-along with whatever exhausted magic she had left. The last thing she saw as the world warped around them was a too-familiar face bearing the red marks of Bellatrix's fingernails, the face of Ronald Weasley, staring down at her from where he dangled by his ankle, upside-down, his cloak and hood lost to the shredding fury of the vines, with a look of stunned, appalled recognition clear on his face.
"Where are we?" Bellatrix snapped the moment they tumbled to a stop. She scanned the room with a sharp, wary gaze, apparently unaffected by the hasty Apparition.

Hermione ignored her, closing her eyes as she tried to catch her breath. She didn't think she'd ever be used to it, the darkness pressing around from all sides as they pulled through time and space, away from the Manor, away from the Ministry officials, away, perhaps, from a stint in prison.

Then again, she may have just earned herself more than a mere visit to Azkaban.

"I said," hissed Bellatrix, limping closer and grabbing the collar of Hermione's robes. "Where are we?"

Hermione reluctantly opened her eyes again. For a moment, she thought something had gone terribly wrong. This room shouldn't have been so bright, brimming with all imaginable shades of yellow and pink, floral curtains, abstract art… but that window was in the right place, as was the stairwell.

"This was—"

A scream pierced the air as an unfamiliar woman's head appeared in the doorway to their left.

"—my mum's apartment," Hermione hurriedly finished. "And we had better go."

"Who are you? What are you doing in my house!" the woman demanded, brandishing a wand.

Hermione grabbed Bellatrix's wrist and pulled her towards the stairs. "So sorry. Wrong address."

Bellatrix resisted, glaring over her shoulder at the confused woman, but Hermione was beyond any hint of patience. "Walk, just walk," she whispered. "We need to get somewhere else, someplace safe."

Bellatrix ripped her arm from Hermione's grasp, but followed a pace behind her as she fled down the stairs.

"That was an idiotic idea."

"Well, it was the first place that came to mind."

They half walked, half ran up the darkening street. Shops were just beginning to close, and patrons trickled out of doors and down sidewalks alongside them.

"Where are we going?" Bellatrix demanded. "I'll be recognized, soon. You'd better have some sort of a plan, or I'll—"

"—I'm working on it!" Hermione snapped, stopping in her tracks and spinning around to face the other witch. Bellatrix nearly slammed into her, halting her momentum just in time with a clear wince of pain. "Where's the nearest Portkey hub? Mattendam or… Carkitt! That'll work."

Hermione turned and set off again, setting a pace just fast enough to empty her head of anything but the need to keep moving but not so fast as to draw unwarranted attention to them. They reached the market in a matter of minutes, but Hermione pulled Bellatrix down a side alley before they stepped into the well-lit square. She ripped open the one suitcase she had managed to keep with her; must have dropped the other one when she grabbed Bellatrix back in the drive, or in the apartment, or in
the middle of the road, honestly, for all the attention she paid to it. Shirts and cleaning robes tumbled
to the cobblestones until Hermione found the cloak she was looking for. "Here," she said, tossing it
to Bellatrix. "Put that on." She began stuffing everything back in. "People have been staring. More at
the blood than at you, I think, but I haven't got the energy to do anything about it."

Bellatrix was glaring at the cloak that had landed around her feet. She made no move to pick it up.
"See here, you senseless Mudblood. I'm not going to—"

"—We don't have time to argue," Hermione pressed, and to her astonishment, Bellatrix's mouth
slammed shut. "Come on."

She led the way back into Carkitt Market, keeping to the shadowy places beneath shop overhangs
and out of the half-circles of light at the mouth of each alley. Soon, they joined the bustle in the
queue for Pordibi's Portkeys, a flood of witches and wizards in their business best, hoping to skip the
Floo traffic by taking one of the crowded public Portkeys home for evening.

"I've only been here once," Hermione admitted, digging around in the pockets of her robes. "My
uncle passed away and we had to get to Fennig for the funeral, so I—bugger!" Hermione hissed. Her
fingers poked right through the lining of the pocket where she'd been keeping a few spare coins. "I
don't have any money. I don't suppose you—"

Bellatrix gave her the most exasperated look Hermione had ever been on the receiving end of. "Yes.
I've been keeping fifty galleons on me at all times while I've been locked up in the countryside. Let
me just pry them out from between my ribs."

Hermione winced as the fierce words turned heads around them. "It's no use then, we'll have to…"

Hermione trailed off as, in the space of a few seconds, Bellatrix's hand shot out, half-hidden behind
the hem of Hermione's cloak, and picked apart the thread holding a small pouch at the belt of a
middle-aged man beside them in the crowd. "You didn't just—" Hermione squeaked, but Bellatrix
cut her off.

"—It's done." She plucked three Knuts and a Sickle from the pouch, then tossed it lazily at the man's
feet. Hermione's heart was pounding, but the man merely bent over, weighed his fallen money once
in his hand with a grumble, then tied it more tightly against the front of his thigh.

"Idiots," Bellatrix added with an eerie little laugh. "Charmed against thieving spells, not against
thieving fingers."

The last minutes in the line passed painfully slowly, but soon enough, they were inside. Hermione
stared around the crowded shelves, trying with minimal success to read the names of the various
wizarding villages scrawled on bits of parchment to label the scraps of rubbish and empty cubby
spaces all along the walls. Appleby, Barnton, Fennig... Ilkley... Lower Flagley, Puddlemere... Caerphilly... isn't that in Wales?

Just beside the overseer's desk, she finally spotted it. "That's ours."

should have known. The Ministry will be on us in—"

Hermione ignored her, quickly stepping up to the witch with the schedules. The overseer had the tip
of her wand in her mouth, a magazine dangling limply from her wrist, and a look of rather impressive
boredom etched across her face. She hardly reacted as Hermione passed over her coins and reserved
their spot on the next Portkey, but the quill hovering by her head scratched something onto the
parchment pegged into the board beside it, so Hermione hoped for the best.

The Portkey made its return journey a moment later, a bit of green sea glass that might once have been the bottom of a bottle popping into existence in the cordoned-off center of the room with a single witch attached. She took only a moment to get her bearings, then spun on her heel and joined the exiting queue leaving through the opposite wall. An attendant gathered up the glass and returned it to its shelf. "Mould-on-the-Wold departing in thirty seconds!" he bellowed with his wand at his throat, voice carrying through the crowd.

Two potbellied wizards joined them by the placard. Hermione managed only a slightly deranged smile in greeting, but there was no time for an exchange of pleasantries. "Grab on!" said the same attendant, and not an instant after four fingers had touched the glass, Hermione felt as though a hook had wrapped its way around her stomach and jerked her forward. Bellatrix's shoulder slammed into her own and she heard a grunt of pain before the howl of the wind drowned out anything else and the world blurred around them in a sea of swirling color even more disorientating than the nothingness of Apparition; her forefinger clung to the edge of the glass fragment as though she had grown an extra joint, green and eerie and bulbous and completely undetachable and then—

Her feet hit the ground, knees too bent to support her weight. She staggered directly into Bellatrix who stepped back, allowing Hermione to tip the rest of the way over and skin the palms of her just-healed hands. The Portkey landed right beside her face on the dirt, and a set of fingers immediately picked it up. Hermione lifted her chin just in time to see three witches whirling off the way they'd come, heading back to Diagon for the night. Picking herself up off the dirt, she took in their surroundings. They seemed to be in the middle of… a barn? They were standing in one of many old, empty stalls, and the rafters above them were packed with greyish, crumbling hay.

"Why…?" Hermione muttered, brushing off the dirt from her fall. She hastened to follow the two men to the door, hoping to see some more obvious sign of civilization, but found only a field of wild grasses stretching away into the night. "Where…?"

"I thought you knew what we were doing," Bellatrix snarled, coming up behind her.

One of the wizards had already made his way out of the barn, but the other paused at Hermione's confused questions and her companion's obvious ire. "First time in Mould-on-the-Wold?"

Hermione hesitantly nodded. "Yes, I've used the Portkey hub before but… I thought we would be in town?"

The man smiled warmly. He had rosy cheeks and the sort of half-kempt middle-aged balding that seemed a universal sign of fatherhood. "Depends what sort of village you're visiting. Mould-on-the-Wold is the progressive sort. We've got Muggles and wizardkind alike, so we've got to keep the pop-in spot a bit out of the way, make sure no one sees us coming and going."

That made sense, Hermione realized. Her last venture had been to a purely wizarding town, one where any Muggle wandering too close to Fennig through the mountains would find themselves wandering home again in a daze, with no desire to venture that way again. She had never really thought how it would be, living somewhere with Muggles in the midst of a wizarding community, rather than on the other side of a wall, the way things were in Diagon. She had spent time in Muggle London, marveling at the ways in which technology was slowly but surely encroaching into territory only magic had reached before, but to have both together…

"I can show you ladies into town, if you'd like?"

"That would be wonderful," said Hermione, relieved.
Bellatrix elbowed her sharply in the ribs. "We can't trust him," she hissed.

Hermione glared. "Don't be paranoid," she muttered under her breath.

The wizard took one step directly into the grasses and disappeared from sight, and as Hermione cautiously followed, she realized there was a path of stones leading across the field, a meandering trail where the wild growth was merely an illusion.

"Crassdon Yates, at your service," their guide introduced himself as he huffed his way along the path. He made surprisingly quick time for his stature, and Hermione kept an eye on Bellatrix as they went, noticing her limp growing more and more pronounced. She needed medical attention, but Hermione still felt drained from… whatever she had done.

"Is there anywhere in particular I can help you find?" Mr. Yates offered after a few minutes of silence.

Ignoring Bellatrix's hissed no from behind her, Hermione weighed her options. She had gotten this far on pure adrenaline and the vaguest notion that, if she got to Mum, she would have somewhere to rest, somewhere she could get her bearings, think over what had happened and what she wanted to do next, but finding her had already proved more of an adventure than she'd thought. "I… I wanted to surprise my Mum with a visit, but I don't actually have her new address," she cautiously admitted.

"You're dragging me to your mother?" Bellatrix sneered.

Crassdon cast a warm smile over his shoulder. "I know near everybody in the area; been living here some forty years."

"Virginica Trum, then? She must have moved in recently. I—"

"Sure!" he said, voice loud enough to send a flock of crows cawing from the brush and disappearing into the trees. "Marvelous woman, your mother. She's right up the lane from me and my wife." He laughed, then. "Of course, so is everyone. You know what they say. Small towns…"

"Friendly people," Hermione offered, making a half-hearted attempt at amicability.

"Nosy people," Bellatrix huffed.

The field had long since faded into trees, and the trees quickly gave way to lovely, cobblestone streets lined with quaint, one-story houses just barely as tall as the wrought-iron streetlights dotting the uniform hedgerow. Crassdon Yates left them at a vine-covered gate with a wave. "Say hello to your Mum for me!"

"I will," Hermione replied. "Thank you!"

Bellatrix was already halfway up the path, and Hermione hurried to catch up.

"See?" she said. "He was perfectly nice."

Bellatrix ignored her.

"We're never going to get anywhere if you glare at everyone we—"

Bellatrix stopped in her tracks and spun to face her. "I will only humor this so far. You will recover here. You will replenish your energy. You will do nothing that could draw the attention of the Ministry. I will have my magic, and then I will never hear one word from your filthy lips again."
Hermione felt the blood rushing away from her face as she was uncomfortably reminded that the strange cooperation she had received thus far was contingent on Bellatrix's missing magic. Before she could reply, Bellatrix rapped sharply on the door and stepped aside, leaving Hermione with only time to shoot a shaky, unseen glare towards the other witch before light spilled out onto the patio.

"Hermione!"

"Hi! Hi, Mum. Can we come in?"

It was an awkward, quiet half hour as Hermione's mother bustled around the kitchen, casting nervous glances towards Bellatrix every few moments as she cooked dinner Hermione wasn't sure she had the stomach to eat. Their greeting had been a stilted exchange of hugs and explanation. Hermione was torn between the reflexive childhood desire to spill everything, to blurt out every mistake and fear to the woman who had raised her, but her mum had taken one look at Bellatrix Black when she pushed back her hood and had said with all the certainty in the world, "I don't want to know, do I?"

"Smart woman," Bellatrix had answered with a threatening smile, and that had been that.

When Bellatrix retreated into the washroom after an absolutely silent dinner, Hermione and her mother finally had a chance to talk. Her mum stood by the window, absently stroking the feathers of an owl Hermione had never seen before. "What's his name?"

She smiled proudly. "Mizar, after my father. I've only had him a week, but he's wonderful."

"I'm happy for you. It looks like you've got a good life here." Hermione paused, joining her mother beside the sink. "I'm sorry to barge in on you like this, but I didn't know where else to go," she admitted.

"I thought that one couldn't leave the house," her mum said, jerking her thumb towards the back hallway.

"She… I… thought you didn't want to know."

Her mother skewered her with a stare that would have had a grown man quaking in his boots. "Well, I know better than to ask when there's a Lady from the House of Black in the room, don't I?"

Hermione turned away, helping to clear the table. "She's no lady. She's—" Hermione's words stumbled to a halt. The owl was gone, and she could now see a folded paper on the windowsill over the sink. It had a picture of her father on the front, the same one in the obituary clipping she'd packed with her things just this morning. Above the photograph, the paper read In Loving Memory, and beneath, Carcinus Trum, loving husband and father. Memorial Service, February 20th, 4pm. Glenward Pond, Mould-on-the-Wold. She picked it up with shaking fingers, opening the funeral program and staring at the progression inside without reading a single word. "Mum…"

"Oh."

Hermione slowly turned towards her. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Her mother fidgeted with a towel, wringing it between her hands. "Hermione, I—"

"I watched the newspapers, at first, every day. I was waiting for a service announcement, a letter, anything. I—"

"I couldn't afford that, Hermione."
Hermione's eyes widened, looking around at the warm, well-furbished kitchen, the decorative glass jars of seeds and herbs hanging above the mantle, the new, sturdy furniture. "Couldn't afford—"

"—We had a small, intimate ceremony. He wouldn't have wanted—"

"—He would have wanted me there!"

"He wouldn't have wanted you to have to take off work; he knew how much you… cared about him. He didn't need you to come all the way out here, just to—"

"—I was his daughter!"

"Hermione, don't make this into—"

"—I was your daughter!"

There was a moment of stillness as the two women stared at each other across the kitchen table. 

"And now you're… what, some kind of fugitive?"

"Mum, I—"

"It's alright, Hermione. I heard on the radio. The whole wizarding world knows Bellatrix Black is on the loose again. The Ministry is searching everywhere."

"Already?" Hermione gasped. She had lost track of time, getting them here. It had all seemed to pass so quickly, a blur of mostly mindless running, not thinking, not ready to confront what she had done.

"Did you think she could get away with that? With breaking out of that house and taking you hostage without anyone—"

"Wait—hostage—what?"

"I didn't want to say anything while she was in here, of course," she whispered conspiratorially, stepping closer. "I know how dangerous she is! I'm amazed she let you out of her sight. I'm so sorry I didn't believe you before, when you were working for them… I had no idea—"

"I'm not a hostage, Mum!" Hermione insisted, backing away.

"Keep your voice down," she hissed, glancing back towards where Bellatrix had disappeared. "I'm trying to help you! I've already sent Mizar off to the Ministry. You'll be safe, soon. They'll lock her up for good this time. She can't hurt you."

Hermione stared at her mother with wide, horrified eyes.

"That's our cue to leave, pet."

Bellatrix emerged from the shadows of the hallway. How long she had been standing there, Hermione didn't know, but she had clearly heard the only part that mattered. The world seemed to be turning more slowly, every motion like pushing through molasses, the light in the room too-sharp, shiny, and dreamlike. Her mum's wand was rising, Bellatrix was ducking back into the hallway, and a flash of light outside the window signaled the arrival of entirely different guests.

Hermione spared one more look of betrayal for her mum, grabbed her suitcase from beside her chair, and threw herself after Bellatrix. People were pouring in through the front door, cloaked figures, wands raised. "Bellatrix!" Hermione cried. "Wait!" She had disappeared around another corner, and
Hermione struggled to catch up as a bolt of crimson light split the air over her head.

"Don't hurt my daughter!" Hermione heard her mother yelling, but the Ministry wizards didn't seem to pay her any mind; another spell nearly took off her arm and something crashed to the floor at her feet.

Hermione tripped over a fallen picture frame, stumbling into the wall as she finally caught up to the other witch, grabbing her hand and feeling her shoulder nearly ripped from its socket as Bellatrix yanked her into the nearest room, slamming the door behind them. "Get us out of here," Bellatrix snarled.

"Where?" Hermione half sobbed, mind blank. This was it, this was as far as her plan had gone. There were no more places in her mind, nowhere she could bring them that would be near as safe as she'd hoped they could be here. This was the end of the line.

"Diagon!" Bellatrix snapped.

"We were just there! They'll be on us in a second!"

The door burst open and Bellatrix flung herself at it. A scream rang through the house as someone's foot was caught against the jam when she slammed it closed again. "You had your chance, Mudblood." Bellatrix's eyes were determined, focused, lacking all of the wild fury from before. "Now, we do this my way."

Hermione had only a second to make up her mind as another spell impacted against the door, splintering the wood of her mum's nice, new house. She reached forward, caught hold of Bellatrix's shoulder as she fell away from the breaking door, and turned them roughly on the spot, spinning them back the way they'd come, into the Diagon night.

They landed just outside the new Leaky Cauldron, and Hermione was incredibly disoriented. She had been aiming for the Diagon she knew best, her first home, the inn, but, of course… the inn was gone. She stared blindly through the window into the crowded pub, trembling all over.

Bellatrix didn't wait for her to get her bearings. She yanked away from Hermione the moment they touched the ground, and it wasn't until Hermione heard a scream from across the way that she realized Bellatrix was nearly out of sight. They had lost the cloak in the flight from Mould-on-the-Wold, and a young couple on the other side of the street had clearly recognized the infamous witch. For a moment, Hermione considered turning, running the other way, giving up on whatever madness had possessed her to think she had anything to gain from helping Bellatrix Black. Their luck couldn't hold forever, after all, and the young witch and wizard who had spotted her were already darting into the nearest shop, wide-eyed and frantically exclaiming who they had just seen, but Bellatrix had paused at the next corner, glaring impatiently back towards her, and… Hermione gave in, bolting after her.

The street sign above their heads notified Hermione that they were headed down Knockturn Alley, a place she would not have dared venture in the brightest hour of the afternoon, let alone in the grimy darkness of night, lit only by the faintest, foggiest of streetlights and the sickly green glow from a storefront selling poisonous candles.

"What are we doing here?" Hermione cringed away from a nasty window display of shrunken heads and a tank of bloated, swimming human hands which reached for her as she passed and clunked against the glass like listless, multi-headed eels.

Bellatrix ignored her, leading them up to a door from which hung a prominently displayed CLOSED
sign glinting red with warning. Bellatrix ignored the sign and jerked open the door with such force that the lock ripped clear through the rotted framing. Hermione hovered outside, nervously reading the wooden placard which announced the shop as *Borgin and Burkes*. Though that door was a world, Hermione knew, which she had not yet touched, even in all her days living under the same roof as Death Eaters. This alley was a different sort of darkness, the mundane underbelly that lurked beneath the shimmering strangeness of pure-blood society. Children did not wander this street, and parents who turned desperate enough to walk through these doors seldom returned with all the same parts they’d had when they entered. She remained, hovering, indecisive, until a gray, shivering husk of a witch approached, lurching down the street towards her. She carried a tray laden with what may well have been whole human fingernails. A mossy grin leered up at Hermione, creeping closer without uttering a single word.

She tripped through the entryway of Borgin and Burkes and yanked the broken door closed behind her.

A stooped, oily-haired man waited behind the counter, staring at Bellatrix in obvious astonishment, speechless and terrified. He kept bowing, over and over again, mouth hanging open. "M-Madame Lestrange, er… Madame Black, you—"

"Can it, Borgin. I haven't time for your simpering today. Give me the key."

"The k-key," he stammered, turning immediately to the shelves behind him. "The key, the key, I-I swear I—"

A clamor echoed distantly in the street outside, words unintelligible, but Hermione had a feeling it wasn't good news.

Bellatrix made a noise of clear impatience. At the sound, Borgin tripped over something behind the counter, falling against a stack of shelving. Bellatrix growled. "Useless." She quickly stepped past Hermione, pushing through a swinging partition designed to keep customers out of exactly where she seemed determined to go. She ran a finger down a single row of the glass-encased shelving, stopping just below Hermione's line of sight.

She yelped when Bellatrix smashed through the glass with her bare fist. She pulled back, triumphant, clasping the string of a gnarled, wooden key between two fingers.

She shoved the key into Hermione's hands and, for the second time that day, Hermione felt an invisible force hook into the place behind her navel, fingers glued to the key, feet lifted off the floor.

The Portkey dropped them in pitch darkness. Hermione scrambled to untangle her wrist from the string on the key and pull out her wand. When she did, a muttered "*Lumos!*" revealed trees towering around them on all sides, massive things, trunks stretching up as high as Hermione could see without any sign of branches, unblemished bark glinting with a strange sheen in the light of Hermione's wand. They looked almost… slimy, slick and oily, as though they had just emerged, damp and newborn even in their ancient size, from the boundless womb of the earth.

"This way," Bellatrix said, pacing off between two of the great trunks in a seemingly random direction. Hermione scrambled after her as an eerie screech pierced the night, not wanting to be left alone in this alien forest.

A few paces into the darkness, a more obvious clearing formed. At its center stood a peculiar building. It looked to have sprouted right from the hillside, crumbling and dank and thatched by the roots of the tree at its back. Bellatrix slid the Portkey-key into the lock of a lopsided door flecked with bits of yellowed, peeling paint and pushed it open. Hermione saw then that the house extended
much farther than it appeared, and the inside was sturdy and dry, if dusty and not particularly well-

furnished.

They entered a single room shaped in a halfhearted mimicry of an oval, with strange, flat wooden
walls here and there to support the five doors that marred its edges. The walls were dark-stained and
seemed to push in around them, contributing quite thoroughly to the claustrophobia of being
underground. Scattered missing planks in the walls revealed dry earth just behind them, which did
nothing to help the impression of pressure waiting on all sides. A set of mismatched wooden
furniture dotted the space; a low, heavy table next to a stack of three-legged stools, a ragged wicker
chair, and a flat plank of wood with an oddly angled side piece on four uneven legs that, had there
been any sign of a cushion, Hermione might have guessed had once been some sort of lounge. All of
this was lit from above by a faint, bluish glow that seemed to originate in the roots of the tree
themselves, clearly visible over their heads like a great looming nest of interwoven, bioluminescent
serpents.

"Where are we?" she whispered, stirring up a cloud of dust with even the faint breath of her words.

A single set of footprints in the thickest layer of dust led past the door—Bellatrix’s. She had limped
half the circumference of the room, pulling open each of the other doors to peer inside.

Finally, she found what she sought and disappeared into the last of the outer chambers, ignoring
Hermione's question. Dumping her now distinctly raggedy suitcase on the floor, Hermione followed.

"Where are we?" she demanded again, peering into the almost complete darkness on the other side of
the door. Dim light revealed the frame of a bed right beside the entryway, but there were no glowing
roots here, so the rest of the room was in shadow. She couldn't find the other witch. "Bellatrix, where
—"

"—The last hideout," a disembodied voice snapped. The earthen ceiling deadened the sound.
Hermione still had no idea where Bellatrix was standing. "Death Eater hovel. There were three
Secret Keepers; two of us are dead." She chuckled, almost wheezing, but the sound died in a cough.
"Now there's just me. If I die…" Another cough split the darkness. "Place's yours, Mudblood."

"How do you know the Ministry hasn't found this?"

Motion to her right made her jump. She could just make out Bellatrix's pale skin only a few feet
away, leaning against the bedpost. Had she been there all along? Had she moved so quietly
Hermione hadn't been able to hear?

Another flash of white marked her sudden grin. "They didn't. Oh, they tried," she chuckled. "After
all, if you walk twenty miles into the forest and over a couple mountains, you pop out in
Dumbledore's backyard."

"Dumbledore's…"

"Hogwarts," Bellatrix snapped, then descended into a fit off coughing again. "This is the Forbidden
Forest, pet, the lovely place where you're far more likely to get eaten by a tree than found by the
Ministry, and you aren't leaving—" Bellatrix stepped closer, limping directly into Hermione's
personal space. "—until you give me back my magic."

"Bellatrix, I—" Hermione swallowed thickly, instinctual fear returning now that the adrenaline had
passed, fear of all she knew this witch was capable of at war with the knowledge that Bellatrix
wasn't as dangerous as she had been before. Her sense of self-preservation fought against her desire
to get the truth out and over with, to admit she didn't have the faintest idea how to go about returning
someone's magic. And even if she could... the thought of being in this place with Bellatrix and her magic sent a cold chill down her spine. "—I'm so tired, I don't think—"

Bellatrix growled again, that haunting, feral sound of anger Hermione wasn't sure how a human throat could produce. "You don't think. That's what got us into this mess, isn't it? You never think you just do."

Bellatrix moved closer, and Hermione backed slowly into the light. "I—that's not—"

"Like a little wind-up toy. Twist—twist—twist... Pop! You've run head-first into something that's none of your bloody business."

Bellatrix had followed her back into the central chamber, out into the blue glow from the roots above, and for the first time, Hermione got a clear view of her injuries. Andromeda's healing didn't seem to have stuck. Her arms were half bruise, half blood, with scrapes and cuts clear on her face from the fight in the driveway. As she moved, she continued to favor her right leg.

"Bellatrix, let me heal you." She wasn't at all sure she could actually do it, but had begun to worry whatever had happened back in the manor was far more dangerous than she realized at the time.

The underside of Hermione's knee slammed into something hard. She winced, realizing she'd backed all the way up to the table.

"You? You? Heal me? Who was it lying half dead in my chambers last winter? Who was it who couldn't cast a healing spell to save her own life? Who was it who couldn't even lift a finger against me when I had her strung up by her pretty little throat!" Bellatrix finished with a growl, grabbing Hermione's neck in a now too-familiar grip.

"I've learned a lot," Hermione whispered, refusing to back down, refusing to rise to Bellatrix taunts. She used their too-close proximity to press the tip of her wand against Bellatrix's leg, closing her eyes and letting the whirl of healing colors fill her mind, feeding empty, exhausted energy through her wand and into Bellatrix's broken flesh beneath. She staggered forward, putting even more pressure against her own throat, but when Bellatrix took a startled step back, she was able to lift her wand and wrap her fingers around Bellatrix's wrist, trapping the wand against her bleeding skin.

She could feel the headache pressing just behind her eyes, something there stretched too tight, too thin, but the cuts were closing again, turning into the familiar black crosshatched tallies they'd been before, and Hermione felt a wash of relief fleeing her body along with the last energy she possibly had to spare.

"Stop that!" Bellatrix snarled, eyes wide. She jerked her arms free, a strange, almost fearful fury in the glare she shot Hermione's way.

"You could at least... say thank you," Hermione gasped, reaching out blindly to brace her hand on the table behind her, then half collapsing onto it in an explosion of dust.

Bellatrix laughed. It was an incredibly derisive sound, piercing and unforgiving in its intensity. Hermione clutched her temples, the sound ratcheting her headache up to a new decibel of pain. "Thank you? Thank you? Thank the scum who got me into this mess in the first place? Thank the little girl who thought it might be fun to rip away generation's worth of perfectly crafted pure-blood magic?"

She stepped forward, carefully testing her leg, mouth twisting into a sneer of cruel mirth as it easily bore her weight. "The pretentious Mudblood who thinks she's so special with her sticky-fingered
power and—"

"I was trying to save you!"

Bellatrix lashed out, kicking the table so hard that Hermione flinched and tumbled to the ground. She dropping her wand as she caught herself, palms protesting as they scraped across the floorboards. "You were trying to destroy me!"

Hermione rolled onto her back, staring miserably up at the witch standing over her, delirious enough with exhaustion to consider making a snow angel in the dust. "You were going to die! You were on fire, you—"

"Better dead than tainted by your filthy, disgusting, cowardly…"

Bellatrix didn't finish. She bent over and grabbed Hermione's fallen wand, shoved it back into her hand, and jerked Hermione's wrist straight up in the air to force the tip against the pale flesh just above the line of her corset. "Fix it! If you're not too tired to make excuses and to waste my time with healing charms, you can fix this! Now!"

Hermione pulled back against Bellatrix's grip, whimpering at the strain in her shoulder, but Bellatrix was freshly healed, and Hermione still felt like her veins were running with lead instead of blood. "Let go!"

"Not till you give it back, you thief, you filth, you—"

"I can't!" Hermione whimpered. "I can't; I don't know how!"

"You what?" screamed Bellatrix, digging her nails into the tender skin of Hermione's wrist.

"I can't!" Hermione insisted, making no move to rise from the floor. She could feel the start of tears pricking the corners of her eyes. She knew, the minute the first got out, she wasn't going to be able to stop the rest. "I've never done it on purpose; it was an accident!"

Hermione had never seen Bellatrix look so entirely out of control, chest heaving as breaths came fast and shallow through flared nostrils. "Liar!"

She dragged Hermione upright by her right arm alone, and Hermione saw stars burst across her vision as her shoulder strained in her socket. "Let go of me!" she yelped. "I'm telling the truth!"

Bellatrix released her, only to stalk forward, pushing her across the floor, shoving her backwards one pointed step at a time until she was pressed into a corner. "You useless infant! I'll show you what it is, what it means to cross His right hand, what happens to those who betray me—"

Knobs of metal jutted out of the ragged wooden wall beside them—drawers. Bellatrix yanked one open without giving it so much as a glance, reaching inside and pulling out a knife, a curved, gleaming talon of silver that seemed to sprout as easily from between her fingers as her wand always had, the weapon a flawless extension of a predator's deadly grasp.

"—who think to manipulate me, to abuse my patience, you pathetic little—"

"Evanesco!" Hermione gasped, and the knife vanished.

Bellatrix stared at her empty hand in confusion. Finally, she laughed. "Oh, you foolish, foolish
Hermione watched Bellatrix reach for her wand again. She flung up a shield charm, forcing them apart, but the dark witch was back in an instant, unimpressed with Hermione's descent into defensive magic. She pressed bodily against the shield, grinning when she felt it shudder, sensing Hermione's weakness.

The spell fractured. Before Hermione could cast another, Bellatrix had her hand pinned against the wall. The other knotted in her hair, jerking her head back, forcing Hermione to stare into wild, furious eyes.

"Even at my most vulnerable, I can break a Mudblood with my bare hands."

Hermione jerked her wrist one more time, sending a pulse of angry red, no spell in particular, blasting up towards the ceiling. Her magic struck the great glowing roots above them in a shower of white-hot sparks and a burst of violet light that sent the two witches staggering apart. Hermione watched through dazed, half-blind eyes as Bellatrix started towards her again, knowing she could push her back, could bind her, could probably hold her off—just barely—with her wand and her wits for as long as she had either one, but... Hermione felt no pride, no great triumph, in scrambling to hold back this feral, declawed creature with every scrap of energy she had. In this moment, she was barely holding her own, and she was the one who was supposed to be holding all the power.

Bellatrix prowled closer, moving in as though for the kill, not a care in the world that Hermione still had her magic, still had the power Bellatrix had abused for so long, to torture or kill or maim with a flick of her wrist and... Hermione couldn't even make herself lift her arm. She was tired, drained from this day, from running and fighting and healing spells and her wand hung heavier than anything she'd ever carried before, dragging her down.

But it wasn't her wand. It was everything it stood for. It was her magic. What she had done with it. The heart-wrenching scream when Bellatrix had realized she couldn't heal herself, couldn't cast a single spell.

It was a useless, crippling guilt she hadn't let herself feel until now, and it was crushing her.

She dropped her wand, slumped to the floor, and buried her face between her knees.

Giving up on restraint, she let the tears come. "I'm sorry!" She wiped her face on her thorn-torn sleeve as she tried to form words, not looking up, breaking her apologies with great heaving breaths that weren't helping her calm down in the slightest. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I never meant to—I d-didn't know what else to—how to—"

Bellatrix hadn't killed her, yet, so she dared to look up through her tears.

"—how to save you. I'm sorry."

She just... stood there, sneering, staring down at Hermione in wide-eyed, wrinkle-nosed disgust.

"Bellatrix, I—"

"Don't you ever speak my name again."

She spun on her heel, robes swirling around her, and stormed through the nearest door. It slammed closed behind her, clattering in its frame as dust and dirt rained down from the root-rafters above.

Hermione was left alone, sitting on the floor of this empty, filthy cottage, unsure how her life could
have gone so thoroughly to hell in one single, horrible evening.
Chapter 28

Hermione didn't unpack her bag. Alone on the floor in the wake of that furious exit, it took her all of ten minutes to decide to leave. What good could she do here? Serve as Bellatrix's punching bag? Lose her mind? Her life? She'd done more than enough already. Maybe it had all been one mistake after another, but at least it was something. Now? She had no obligations left, no reason not to just… let Bellatrix go at it at her own. Magicless, alone in the woods… No one to terrorize and nothing to do it with. No one else would be this daft, this completely suicidal, to get close to the madwoman, magic or no. Out here, hiding away, Bellatrix had no one to hurt but herself.

Or her, of course, as the faint throbbing in her shoulder and the scraped rawness of her palms were quick to remind her. If she stayed, she could only expect worse. Instead, she could do what she intended to do all along.

Leave.

If she went along with the Ministry's nonsense story, claimed Bella had threatened her, kidnapped her, left her to die...

There may yet be a life for her out there.

Perhaps the Ministry could pull it out of her, the truth, but… there were ways she could twist that. There were truths she could tell that wouldn't send her to prison. In everything that had happened these past few months, Hermione could almost forget that Bellatrix had tortured her, nearly killed her... And not just once, either. Hermione wouldn't need to lie about the fear.

And nothing they could make her say would cost Bellatrix her chance at making it. Hermione wasn't the Secret Keeper. She knew how that spell worked. In theory, at least. She couldn't speak a word about this place. When they inevitably asked where their missing Death Eater was, she would answer with an honest "I don't know."

She couldn't go back. She couldn't make it so this day had never happened, but she could go forward. She could see if that job was still waiting for her at Hogwarts. The chance was slim, after what she'd done, but perhaps the unrealized dream of her magic might lure McGonagall to take her in after all. If not... there were other beginnings, fresh starts.

She had done it before.

She could do it again.

But first, she had to sleep.

She scouted out the other rooms, avoiding Bellatrix's claimed door. She found one kitchen, one washroom, and two more bedrooms. She took the one farthest from where the other witch had disappeared, cast every locking and protection charm she could think of, and passed out on a decrepit, canopied bed halfway through banishing the worst of the dust.

Banging at the door woke her some time later. Hermione groaned and rolled left, feeling her shoulder protest. Straining, she could just see a clock on the wall in the dim light from the occasional blue root peeking through the wood-paneled walls, but the second hand wasn't so much as twitching.

"Come out, come out, sleeping beauty!"
The light, mocking words were at odds with the heavy knocking that preceded them. Hermione shook her head, trying to dislodge the incredibly deep sleep still sitting heavy on her brain.

Her delay turned Bellatrix's sing-song lilt into full-blown fury. "Open this blasted door you lazy mutt!"

Hermione struggled with her wand in uncooperative fingers and staggered to the door. "What could you possibly want?" she croaked.

"What?" came Bellatrix's snarling reply.

Coughing the dust out of her lungs, Hermione tried again. "What do you want?"

A peculiar silence descended.

"B—" Hermione stammered out a single letter of her name before she remembered the eerie words ending their last encounter. *Don't you ever speak my name again.*

Hermione shook her head and said it anyway. "Bellatrix? Are you still there?" If the woman wanted something from her, she was going to use her bloody name. If she just wanted to kill her again, some small added anger would be the least of her problems.

The silence stretched. Hermione rubbed her eyes, half wondering if the knocking had just been some part of a too-realistic dream. It wouldn't be the first time an angry Bellatrix had set her bolting upright from a nightmare.

"I… I require your assistance."

Her eyes widened, startled awake. The words were quiet, but Hermione could clearly hear the gritted teeth trying to prevent them from escaping. Half-demand, half-request… Hermione was curious enough to begin dismantling the protection charms on her door.

She opened it just a crack. "Yes?"

There stood Bellatrix, foot tapping against the floor, eyes darting from side to side, as though expecting someone to emerge from one of the other chambers at any moment and catch her at Hermione's door.

"What can I do for you?" said Hermione, keeping her offer cautious and reserved.

Bellatrix's jaw tightened, lips pursing, nose scrunched, as though biting down on the bitter taste of her next words. "I can't sleep in this."

"What?" Those five syllables made no headway into Hermione's still sleep-addled brain.

"My corset," Bellatrix snapped. "I put it on with magic, and I can't get it off without it."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Oh, hell." She bit her lip as the explicative slipped from her mouth. She shook her head, unsure she'd heard right. "Your…?"

Bellatrix growled, that inimitable, eerie sound of hers that seemed to emerge from someplace even deeper than her diaphragm. She turned her back to Hermione. One hand reached up and jerked her mass of curls out of the way to reveal a latticework of black strings Hermione had never paid much attention to in the past.

"There's a reason these things went out of style with the Muggles back when handmaidens did."
Hermione had noticed the fashion before, the throwback to a century long since passed. It was common in the upper echelon of the wizarding world, but Bellatrix's corsets were usually half-covered by her inner robes and dark, heavy cloaks, and the feature they were most designed to advertise… wasn't in the rear. Now, aside from the usual skirts below, the corset was the only swathe of black amid the pale gleam of her surrounding skin, and Hermione was a bit… intimidated. "How should I—"

"You're supposed to be the clever Mudblood. Are you a witch or aren't you?"

Bellatrix flicked her wrist in the air in a pattern Hermione almost recognized. Was it just a dismissive gesture, or was that a charm? Should she know it?

"Figure it out."

"Right, yes, I—right." Hermione lifted her wand, trying to sort through knotting and tying and unraveling spell colors that would fit with the motion Bellatrix had just made, but with dark witch's toes tapping against the floor in such dramatic impatience, furiously embarrassed and rushed, Hermione cast too quickly, and she watched in alarm as the strings pulled even tighter.

All air left Bellatrix's lungs in one sharp burst. Dragging in a shallow, ragged breath, she gasped, "Are you trying to kill me?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know what I'm doing, I—" Hermione's hands shook so much she dropped her wand. Before Bellatrix had a chance to get even angrier, she hurried forward and started picking apart the knot by hand, tugging at the thick, slippery chord with her fingernails. It was slow, but once the first knot had been undone, at least the enraged witch could breathe. "—think I got it."

"Thank god," Bellatrix snapped.

"You couldn't just…?" Hermione let her words die. Cut it off? had been the end of the thought, but it might not be the best idea to antagonize the angry woman who had all but killed her with said cutting object some not-so-distant hours past.

"Hmm?" Bellatrix muttered as Hermione continued to pull the unnecessarily long threads out of their eyelets. "Rip it with my bare hands?"

"I was thinking scissors," Hermione admitted, words quick with her nerves. "Or a knife."

To her surprise, Bellatrix snorted. "Have you ever tried to cut something Cissy gave you?"

Hermione blinked. Her fingers stilled for a moment, and she looked down at the blouse she wore. While her cloak, trousers, and half-open outer robes were all her own and had been sufficiently ruined by their encounters with thorns, dust, dirt, and Ministry employees, the blouse had been a gift from Narcissa. Its unblemished, pristine, wrinkle-free white was almost blinding in the blue light. "Oh. So your sister…?"

"If you're going to ask me something—" Bellatrix snapped, strings chafing Hermione's fingers as her shoulders violently twitched. "—finish your bloody questions. That's an appalling habit."

Hermione gulped. "Nothing, nevermind, I… I didn't really have one."

"Yes, you did."

Why are there so many cursed strings? came to mind, but Hermione wasn't about to actually say it aloud. "I was only… a bit surprised, I suppose. Narcissa gave this to you? It hardly seems her style."
There it came again, that derisive exhale that almost sounded like a laugh. "Hence, I am the one wearing it, not her. While the rest of the world spirals into decline, I choose to stay in a better age."

Hermione frowned, unseen. "You've made other concessions. To... modernity."

Bellatrix sniffed. "Minimally."

Hermione reached the bottom, sliding the last of the ties free from their tiny eyelets. "There." She breathed a sigh of relief. "Done."

Bellatrix tugged the front of the offending garment forward, widening the swathe of pale skin between the two sides of the leather as she verified her freedom.

Hermione gulped. A few black lines appeared between her shoulder blades, longer and thicker than those on her arms, but clearly charred with the same cruel magic. The corset loosened further with Bellatrix's next draw of breath. On the right, another tally-mark appeared, this one red-edged, swollen and fresh. Hermione reached out, almost touched it, but caught herself at the last moment, not wanting to startle her.

"Is there anything else I can—"

Before Hermione could finish her reflexive offer, Bellatrix spun to face her. "Can you fix my magic?"

Hermione blanched.

"Just as I thought."

As she paced back across the central chamber towards her darkened doorway, Bellatrix dropped the corset on the floor and stepped on it, leaving Hermione to quickly turn away from the eerie sight of blue-lit shoulder muscles and far too many black hatchmarks rippling with her angry stride. She felt approximately as useful as a human pair of scissors, as summarily dismissed at the black leather lying on the wooden floor, and she knew it had all been utterly intentional.

Sleep eluded her after Bellatrix had gone. She still felt those ties slipping between her fingers, still saw the Ministry's punishment clawing its way across her body, and she saw it all with the almost overwhelming realization that, without her magic, Bellatrix had—for all her bravado—been defeated by even this simplest of tasks. When Hermione had used magic against her, it had done nothing but infuriate. Magic, even without any of her own, offered nothing but a challenge, a game to Bellatrix. The strings of a corset, though… Those had become a brick wall. A cage. The immovable object that finally stopped the unstoppable force.

Hermione couldn't leave her here.

The minute she thought it, she rejected it. By Merlin, she had earned an end to this! She had earned the right to leave! She was packed and teatherless and deserved nothing less than complete freedom from the nightmarish women who had ruled the last too many months of her life.

Hermione flung herself up off the bed and began bustling around the room. She found the lamps, cleaned them with a few flicks of her wand, and set them alight. A strange wooden sink allowed her to wash her hands with distinctly out-of-place water systems she could find no explanation for, though there was no sign of a shower in this room. Finally, she banished every single piece of dust from the walls, bedsheets, even the air itself. She could breathe deeply again.
It wasn't enough distraction.

Every time she paused, Hermione's thoughts circled back to the witch in the other bedroom, stuck on the hellish merry-go-round her life had become. Her suitcase seemed to pulse every time she caught a glimpse of it from the corner of her eye. She bargained with herself, trying to piece together a compromise that would get her off this ride, sanity intact, but it all boiled down to one cruel reality: If Hermione left her here Bellatrix might die. No, not might—would. Perhaps not straight away, but without magic... how would she eat? How would she cook or clean or clothe herself for winter? She couldn't even overcome the simplest enchantments on her own corset; how would she fare against the creatures surely lurking beneath these haunted trees?

In theory, Hermione could help with that. She knew how to do a good many things the Muggle way. If she could show her...

And then what?

If she stayed, that might very well be her instead, a body found dead in the forest by some poor wandering soul. She couldn't be on guard forever. If Bellatrix caught one whiff of weakness, she'd have her face down on the floor again with a knife in her spine.

Unless she could prove herself useful.

She let her forehead thunk into the wall, but it didn't chase the thought away.

She remembered how willingly, albeit grumpily, Bellatrix had followed her in their flight from the Manor, through Diagon. When she believed Hermione could put her magic back in order...

Practical. Bellatrix was mad, and violent, and dangerous, but by Merlin was she practical. Her knack for self-preservation was uncanny. Hell, Andromeda had told her as much the first day they'd met. *The most resourceful, devious, cunning survivor I've crossed paths with.*

Would that be enough?

Hermione groaned, flopping backwards into the bed she still hadn't bothered to get a good look at. At least it was clean, now. She couldn't believe she was even *considering* this. What did it say about her, that she couldn't just let this woman destroy herself? Why couldn't *she* be the pragmatist? Why did she have to care?

After all, it didn't seem survival would suffice this time. Teaching Bellatrix to live like a Muggle... The proud eldest of the noble and most ancient House of Black would never agree to that. The promise of teaching her to survive on her own would be met with nothing but scorn. *Unless...*

She did have something Bellatrix wanted. She still had magic. Bellatrix wouldn't take Hermione's offer of simple survival, not so long as there was any chance of regaining what she'd lost.

And Hermione wasn't sure she'd give it to her, even if she could. As wrong as it felt to have stolen someone's magic, it was hard to justify returning that kind of weapon to someone who had killed with it before, someone with little incentive not to kill again.

Bellatrix didn't know that, though.

Bellatrix didn't have to know.

Bellatrix—this Bellatrix, magicless and isolated Bellatrix—couldn't read her mind.
Hermione could struggle against guilt alone. She could think herself in circles like these for hours on end. She could regret staying, regret leaving, regret breaking Bellatrix's magic and regret not regretting it at all. But so long as she kept her thoughts to herself... so long as Bellatrix believed she intended to fix this... she might just be able to save her.

And save herself the new guilt of leaving her to die.

This is the worst idea I have ever had.

Before she could change her mind, Hermione picked herself up off the bed, stepped out of the room, crossed the blue-lit central chamber, managed—barely—not to trip on the fallen corset, and knocked on Bellatrix's door.

Muffled curses echoed from within.

Hermione waited.

The door stayed closed.

"I'll do it," Hermione called, a slight quiver in her voice. "I don't know how, but I'll try. If I've done it once, I must to be able to do it again."

The door flung wide, and Hermione was immensely glad to see Bellatrix had found clothing somewhere. She had changed into yet another iteration of black-on-black, which blended into the unlit bedchambers rather too completely, but something looser, less restrictive. "Do not play games with me, Mudblood. You will lose."

Hermione gulped. "No games. I—Your sister asked me to do something once. To give you a chance at making your own future. That much was truth, and she intended to. It just couldn't be a future with magic. So if you can be patient, and the Ministry doesn't come to burst the door down, I'll do my best. That's all I can offer you."

Bellatrix narrowed her eyes. "What do you want?"

"Hmm?"

"What do you want in return?"

Hermione blinked, then shrugged. "Just what you offered before. Don't kill me. Don't...attack me when you lose your temper. I won't hold back with my magic just because you don't have yours, and I won't always be this tired. You hurt me, I leave."

"The Ministry will be on you in seconds."

"I'll take my chances."

Bellatrix crossed her arms over her chest. "I want more guarantee than your good will. You should take a vow."

Hermione fidgeted, shifting her weight from foot to foot. "That's not how this works. I've seen enough of what magical contracts can do. I'm already trusting your word that your Death Eater friends aren't going to descend on this place and kill me. We try this based on trust, or I'm gone."

Bellatrix stiffened. "I could rip out your throat before you could get out the door."

Hermione tried not to let the other witch see the chills that raced down her spine. "I could have had
"my wand pointed at your throat this entire time. I trust I don't need it."

"I don't trust anyone, Mudblood."

"You could start by not calling me that," said Hermione, the wire-tight tension of the conversation making her lightheaded and a little bit fearless.

Bellatrix's eyes narrowed. "Now that would be courtesy, not trust. No Mudblood will ever earn courtesy from me."

Hermione shrugged, taking a step back. "Suit yourself."

As she took another three steps away from Bellatrix's door, that same, eerie growl filled the air between them. "You dare walk away from me?"

"No," said Hermione. "I'm walking towards bed. Tomorrow, I may well walk out the door. You don't factor into it."

"Granger."

She froze. Not exactly what she'd been expecting, but… still. A name. She hadn't imagined it would be that easy.

"Don't push your luck, girl. You may think you know how to play this game. You will lose."

Slowly, Hermione turned to face her once again. "I know." She had just wasted a useless power play and all she had gotten from it was proof that Bellatrix could say her name just as derisively as she had always said Mudblood. "I don't want it to be a game. You keep telling me I should see it that way but I… I'm here. You're here. It's in my best interest not to draw any attention for a while, and it's in your best interest to keep me alive. If we're going to live with each other, I'm not going to put up with how you treated me back at the manor. You don't have a third floor to hide on. I'm not getting paid to be tormented and pushed around. Can we not just try… civility?"

Bellatrix's eyes were narrow, calculating. "No."

Hermione blinked.

"No. I think you're forgetting. You owe me. You did this. You can trade your cooperation for your life, but I don't pander to fools, Granger. You get a name when you earn it."

"But you just—"

"—For now, you earned it. I am occasionally known to be generous, and my generosity extends to useful Mudbloods. Should you cease to be one, should you attempt to deceive me in any way, well." Her voice lowered, sickly sweet with threat. "Then you're just a Mudblood again, and you shan't be alive long enough to whine about civility."

Hermione chose her next words very, very carefully. "I could take that threat for what it is and leave right now, but I'm not going to. I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt. One more time. Because I—well, yes. I think we just got somewhere, you and I. I've never minded being useful useful. It's what I agreed to, so your threat means nothing. I intend to help. I'm tired. I'm choosing sleep. Semantics… Semantics can happen in the morning."

She took another step backwards and a brush with the table forced her to look where she was going. She waited for another argument to sound behind her, another taunt, another threat, but only silence
followed her out of the room.

She had the last word.

How… unexpected.

Back in the strange bedroom Hermione refused to think of as hers, she had the startling realization that she wasn't scared. She didn't regret it. Yet.

That was new.

In ways she didn't much care to think about, her time with Andromeda, with Narcissa, had changed her. Black Manor had been a strange reality. She'd had a chance to live the childhood she'd never and had grown up all at the same time. Rediscovering wonder… relearning fear…

And perhaps it had all led up to looking Bellatrix Black in the eye and not backing down.

Eight months ago, she couldn't have imagined this, being on the run from the Ministry, willingly locking herself up with a mad ex-Death Eater, all ties to the outside world summarily severed and dangling in the wind…

Then, all those months ago, she would probably be crying in a corner, if she were even still alive.

She'd had her cry, and now she'd put it behind her.

Now… it was almost… exhilarating.

Hermione staggered back towards the hideout tree at half past ten, struggling to keep hold of her plastic shopping bags. A few had split during Apparition. How did Muggles deal with these things on a regular basis? She would have to retrace her steps to the clearing and make sure she hadn't dropped anything. She sighed. It would be worth checking with Bellatrix about whether she could Apparate directly into a place protected by the Fidelius Charm.

She had explored the kitchen before she left, so she made a beeline for the shelving, dusting the bare wood as she stocked it with food. There was a cabinet over the stove whose chill charm remained surprisingly intact, the upper shelf kept at freezing, the lower at refrigeratory cold.

Just as she finished unpacking everything and moved to open the trash bags, an accusatory voice sounded behind her.

"Where have you been?"

Hermione didn't turn. She popped open the cardboard sealing and shook out the first garbage bag. "Don't worry; I wasn't seen. I went to my mum's favorite Muggle grocery in London; Apparated into the back alley. I used to play there as a child, but it's all fenced off, now, so there was no chance of getting seen by a Muggle or caught by the Ministry. I got enough supplies to last us at least two weeks."

She could feel Bellatrix getting closer. "With what money?" Bellatrix pressed.

"You think I didn't look around? Keeping a drawer of galleons below the drawer of knives wasn't exactly subtle."

"That's wizarding money, you—"
"I know the conversion spell. It's perfectly legal to exchange currency for Muggle money. We do have laws, you know. I lived in Diagon for half my life. I know a thing or two about going Muggle-side."

"You could have been—"

"—I wasn't though."

Hermione crossed back to the cabinet and started pulling out breakfast ingredients.

"I didn't know where you were!"

For the first time, Hermione stilled.

"If you ever run off and leave me stranded here like some—"

"I'm sorry." Hermione's genuine apology cut short Bellatrix's threat. "I wasn't thinking. I just wanted to make sure we had everything we might need before we really go to ground. I didn't even realize you'd be awake, let alone—" The strain in Bellatrix's voice made her hesitate, taking the interrogation with a grain of salt. Bellatrix had been worried. She hadn't meant her to be, but it was a good sign all the same. "—concerned."

She glanced up, meeting Bellatrix's narrowed eyes.

"I wasn't concerned. I was hungry. What's for breakfast?"

Just like that, the malice faded, replaced with a childish air of entitlement.

"I'm making… Wait." Hermione shook her head. She wasn't going to answer that. Not until she established something. She was, indeed, making food for two, but… "I'll cook. I'm not saying I won't. I'm fully willing to take care of the things we both need, like popping out to get supplies, or anything else that can't be done without magic, but I… I'm not going to do all of this for no return."

Bellatrix shrugged. "You woke up alive, didn't you?"

Hermione cringed. Now that she thought about it, she wasn't sure she had put protection spells back up after their last confrontation. She swallowed thickly, but refused to rise to the bait. "My life benefits us both."

"Then take what you want from the money drawer."

"That isn't what I meant. I'll be using that for… this stuff." She saved a hand at the groceries. "But it isn't about that. You don't just get to skulk around and get angry when I leave and break things. Your sisters paid me well to take care of your household. You've never had to lift a finger. I want something in return, and I haven't got any more use for money out here than you do. I'll make breakfast, but I won't do it for free."

"While we may be living in the woods, this isn't the dark ages. My apologies if I haven't brought my fatted calf to barter, you ungrateful—"

"A chat, then."

Bellatrix's eyes widened. "A what?"

This time, Hermione didn't flinch at Bellatrix's anger. "Well, I… I know almost nothing about you."

It was true. She'd been thinking about it while she shopped, looking at foods, realizing that while she
knew Bellatrix wasn't a picky eater, knew she always ate whatever Hermione sent upstairs, she didn't
know what the other witch liked, what she would choose for herself. That left Hermione staring at
the can of green beans in her hand, feeling as though she were shopping for a ghost. Bellatrix, out of
sight, hardly seemed human. She was the nightmare lingering over Hermione's shoulder, and unless
Hermione did something about it, she was going to spend the indefinite future with that very
nightmare breathing down her neck. She needed Bellatrix to feel like a person, or there was no way
she would see this through.

"You could tell me things," continued Hermione. "Your favorite foods. A chat, like I said, or... a
story." Because, more than that, Hermione didn't know who Bellatrix was. She knew what she had
done in newspaper heading blurbs and a few stilted words from each of the other members of the
Black family, but beyond that... "Your sisters both tried to tell me things, here and there, but... I'd
like to hear from you. It isn't like there's a whole lot to do here. We're both going to get bored far too
quickly, and I know you'd rather not listen to me, so... pay me in words."

"We had better not be here long enough to get bored, Granger."

Hermione shrugged, slicing into a peach to top the unleavened pancakes she'd been preparing
nervously as she spoke. "I haven't made any promises about how long it'll take to figure out your
magic. If you push me too fast, I could just as easily make things worse. Besides... I'm curious.
About your life. You must have stories."

"You couldn't handle my stories." Bellatrix's tone was flat, but there was a strange glint in her eyes.
"You'll run screaming for the hills."

Hermione heated the mildly dented cast-iron skillet she'd found beneath the stove with a wave of her
wand and poured in the mix. "You put a knife to my throat, yet here I am. Maybe I'm tougher than
you think."

Bellatrix snorted. "Not a chance, pet."

"Try me," she insisted, flipping the thin pancake with a flick of her wrist. It landed perfectly, not an
edge cracked. It was an old habit. She could use her wand to cook three at once and never even
touch the pan, but had learned her earliest cooking without magic, and the old habits were worth
nurturing, now. "You didn't hesitate to... share. Before."

Even the mention of that eerie night on the third floor, when Bellatrix had forced Hermione into her
memories, brought that gleam into Bellatrix's eyes, and it thoroughly unnerved the younger witch.

"Any story?"

*I'm going to regret this, aren't I?*

"Whatever I want to tell you?"

"S-sure. Shoot."

Bellatrix cracked a lopsided, taunting grin. "How'd you like to hear about my favorite curse?"

Hermione winced. "Hmm?"

"Oh, don't play dumb, pet. You know what I'm infamous for. That lovely word that landed me in
Azkaban in the first place."

"Well, yes. The Cruciatus Curse," Hermione admitted, trying not to glance too obviously towards
Bellatrix's wrists. The shirt she wore left them uncovered, short-sleeved and wide-necked, cinched close about the waist, while her usual outer robes hung draped over the back of a chair. Her wand arm was significantly darker than the other, so coated in lines of crisp, cruel black that the rare bits of skin between were stark contrast—a shimmering, pale mirage in a dark, burnt desert.

"Good, pet."

Hermione had never heard two words quite so patronizing.

"It was a lovely young couple I got last, before Azkaban. Longbottom. New parents, just brimming with life. I cracked them open and put them back together again so scrambled no one else could ever find all the pieces again."

Hermione moved in a daze, reflexively letting the pancakes flop one by one onto two plates, but she was running on autopilot. She listened with her full attention, fixated on the cold, cruel words.

"You know why my Crucio is so much better than anybody else's?" Bellatrix's grin taunted her as Hermione set the plates down on the low, heavy table between them. "So much more dangerous, more potent, more permanent?" She popped the last "p" like a gunshot. "Curses like that depend so much on what you fuel it with, on what you feel. You can't cast an Unforgivable without emotion. Can't do it. Call it primitive, but it's powerful. Anger burns, right on the skin, sharp and blistering. Fear… fear is heavier; it gets you right in the bones. Joy, though… now that's how you get madness." Bellatrix grinned. "And I do so love a good curse."

Hermione knew she had made fantastic pancakes, but the first bite tasted like ash.

"Barty and my dear, dull husband got to them first. When they weren't breaking… That's when it's my turn. Because after me… there isn't anything left."

Hermione pushed away her plate.

"By the way… Pumpkin."

"What?"

"My favorite food. Pumpkin. Pumpkin pudding, pumpkin curry, pumpkin pasta…" Bellatrix grinned, picking up her own plate. "There was a pumpkin pie in the oven that night. Frank Longbottom. He was in my year at school; simpering little boy… spent half of his time in the kitchens. I always said it; should've been a chef, not an Auror. He didn't even get a bite of his own last supper. It was the last thing I tasted before Azkaban. Not sure I've had anything that good since."

Hermione was too appalled to register the insult.

Bellatrix picked up the hot pancake between two fingers, ripping off a single bite with her teeth. "Hmm. No Longbottom pie, but worth the story, I suppose."

She turned and walked out of the room, taking her plate with her. Hermione was left behind to wonder if her professional integrity was really worth another story as horrible as that with every meal. What in Merlin's name had she been thinking?

Still worn thin from all the healing yesterday, Hermione tried to take a nap when she finished eating. She woke with a yelp, cringing at a fading vision of an empty-eyed couple frozen in their tux and gown, perched atop an autumn-orange wedding cake, looming over three layers of pie crust and pumpkin filling stacked on teetering pillars of black hatchmark fondant. The figurine was sinking,
Bellatrix was laughing, and Hermione woke in a cold, regretful sweat.

She walked back to the clearing to chase away the nightmare. Part of her had known, intellectually, that asking Bellatrix to talk to her wasn't going to be the start of a friendship. The best she'd really been hoping for was a distraction, something to keep both of their minds off of Hermione's looming promise and the stark reality of their situation. After what she'd seen in Bellatrix's mind, after watching her lose control and literally eat someone alive, Hermione thought she'd gotten the worst of it, but this… listening to Bellatrix talk about the things she'd done in the past entirely of her own volition… this was different. She sounded so pleased with herself, so calm and collected over having tortured two young parents past the point of madness.

It was… not surprising. Not at all. But, if Hermione admitted it to herself, she had wanted to be surprised. The words of the younger sisters kept warring in her head. She remembered that strange, quiet friendship with Narcissa, the number of times Bellatrix had gone out of her way to protect and shield her, and even Andromeda's fierce, selfish desire to see Bellatrix gone had been… so much less than it might have been, after all Bellatrix had done to her.

But… she knew all of that. She would never learn all there was to know about the past, about what had brought these three women to the lives they were leading now, but with Andromeda, with Narcissa… she knew what they wanted. Andromeda wanted normalcy; life, love, work… a new start that held no ties to the life she'd been leading before. The life that had been stolen from her. A life without Bellatrix. Narcissa wanted freedom; her own path, her son, safety… a life she couldn't live under the same roof as her sisters, no matter how much she cared for them. For Bellatrix.

Bellatrix.

What did Bellatrix see in her future? What kept her going? What made her so fearless, even in the face of a life locked up in her glorified attic, cloistered away from the world? What would she do, given the chance at what her sisters had fought so hard for; freedom, independence… Did she even want those things?

Hermione found a carton of cottage cheese in the grass, but it had cracked open and spilled in the mud, so she vanished it instead of bringing it back.

What would Bellatrix do if she had all of it? Not just this half-formed illusion of escape, but… real freedom. Magic and all.

The thoughts just kept pulling Hermione in circles. There was no point. If Bellatrix still had her magic, they wouldn't be here. They never could have left the manor. Either one of them might be dead. These were the same thoughts that had led her to ask for stories. One story in, she already regretted that. She didn't want to hold her magic over Bellatrix's head, but she didn't want to fall back into servitude, either. She thought… stories would be a fair trade, something Bellatrix probably didn't want to part with, something valuable through reluctance alone, but not something she couldn't afford to lose, either. Instead… Hermione had definitely gotten the short end of the bargain.

What else should she have expected from trying to make a deal with the devil?

Bellatrix seemed to find sadistic glee in making Hermione uncomfortable, in forcing her to acknowledge that she was helping one of the most infamous Death Eaters in the world, one who had no intention of repenting her past sins.

Hermione sat outside until the sun bled red at the horizon. The forest was stark in this light. Under the black, back-lit trees, she felt smaller than ever before.
Bellatrix emerged again when the scents of dinner filled the hideout.

Hermione felt a restless presence behind her that demanded her attention, but she resisted the urge to turn away from food preparations. "What do you know about it?" she asked instead. "Raw magic."

It was the primary topic of interest, of course, and Hermione imagined if anything could prevent another disturbing story, it would be a less than subtle hint that she was seeking a solution to their… situation.

"I won't touch the stuff," Bellatrix said. She seemed unaware of Hermione's ulterior motives, and for that, she was grateful.

"You've tried?"

Bellatrix snorted. "Course I've tried. You've met McGonagall, the crazy old bat. Do you honestly believe she let anyone with a speck of talent get through Hogwarts without testing them on her pet project?"

Hermione turned, intrigued in spite of herself. "I thought, aside from her, Andromeda was the only one licensed."

Bellatrix had taken up a seat atop the table, head tilted to the side. "She only bothered to try with Andy when I refused, of course. Haven't you heard?" She cocked her chin the other way and grinned. "I was the greatest disappointment Hogwarts ever saw." She laughed, wild and childlike. "The Mad Catter's been teaching there for as long as I've been alive. Thought I was the most promising witch to ever grace her classroom, and I abused her favor right down to my last detention. She always did believed I could do it, raw magic, but I knew better. Cissy, too. We refused to play along.

"Andy was the gullible one. She grasped at any idea that might set her apart. Played with dirty magic for years and never got a thing out of it. Street tricks." She sneered. "Shortcuts. You can stretch out a scrap of extra power by dragging yourself through the gutter, by debasing yourself with the magic of illiterate children, but you can do the same with practice, good breeding, and a spot of talent."

"Evidently not," Hermione muttered.

Bellatrix's head snapped her way. "Gloating does not become you."

"I wasn't... I didn't mean..." Hermione stammered. "I'm not," she finally insisted. "I'm not gloating. I only... well, clearly what I did isn't something that comes with practice. The headmistress worked at it for years, and, as far as anyone has said, she never did... the things I did. It seems different, that's all. Otherwise, you'd be running to her to fix it, wouldn't you?"

Bellatrix glowered but did not deny Hermione's words. She shifted uneasily, skirts rustling between her calves and the edge of the table. "You think she'd have helped me, after everything I've done?" She laughed, but it was a sound more tired than angry. "Not a chance. However, you aren't entirely mistaken. Not even McGonagall would have been so daft as to go fucking about in another witch's magic."

It was Hermione's turn to frown. "As opposed to what? What else should I have been doing with it? Once, maybe twice, I did something to Lucius. Then the headmistress—then you. If that was all
wrong, what's right?"

"You're supposed to mess around in your own bloody magic," Bellatrix snarled. "That's all Andy ever did. All our darling professor ever managed in her years at it, too. It was Andy's idiocy, to decide it might be used on someone else, used against me, but at least she never had the audacity to actually carry out such a harebrained scheme."

"She was so sure… She made it sound like nothing out of the ordinary—"

"A particular talent of hers."

Hermione paused, two empty plates in hand. "I don't understand," she admitted. "I never saw my own magic, not like yours or hers. The Headmistress was able to set herself to rights again in a matter of minutes, and Lucius… I have no idea what I did to him, but he recovered quickly enough. Andromeda—she said raw magic helped her be better at healing, or to better control her spells, but I don't see how. I…"

Bellatrix yawned in exaggerated boredom. "You think I want to hear about this?"

"I am trying to help, you know."

Bellatrix rolled her eyes, and Hermione was once again confronted with just how effectively Bellatrix had weaponized her own childishness. It was constantly unsettling, and annoying besides. "Sure, pet. Of course you are."

"I am!" Hermione huffed, trying not to sound as defensive as she felt. It was the truth, after all. She was trying to help… just not with the talk of magic. Her curiosity had gotten the better of her, and she couldn't quite dismiss the lingering worry that she might do something like this again, on accident, to someone who probably didn't deserve a magicless life nearly as much as Bellatrix Black.

"You think I care for your good intentions? You think I want your help? You honestly believe I want your muddy magic anywhere near me ever again?" The conversational tone went up in the flames of Bellatrix's sudden rage. "I warned you, I warned the both of you, what my sister wanted you to do to me was insanity. You might have taken my first threat more seriously, Mudblood. At least then you'd have saved one of us a slow, painful death."

In a whirl of black skirts, Bellatrix was on her feet. Hermione had never before seen someone convey that degree of fury just by hopping down from a piece of furniture. Before she could decide if she was impressed or alarmed, Bellatrix was gone.

Hermione sighed. She slumped against the counter, dumping half the untouched food onto her plate. Would things always be like this? Could so much as a single day go by without Bellatrix storming off in a huff or threatening to kill her? Could she even manage to provoke just one of those reactions at a time?

She was beginning to think Andy had been right about one thing—the very thing she'd never been willing to admit about her own convoluted plan to set Bellatrix free. As Narcissa had once pointed out, by Merlin, it would be incredibly satisfying to watch Bellatrix self-destruct.

A shame, really, that Hermione wasn't going to let her.

A number of days slipped past without a threat of violence by simple virtue of the fact that Bellatrix didn't emerge from her room. Hermione had no idea what was in there, but if it looked anything like
her own sparse quarters, she didn't imagine it was a particularly charmed way to live. Much like the rest of the hideaway, her room was dim and windowless. It boasted a single chair and a dresser full of plain, dark robes, tailored for a man significantly taller than her, but which she was able to enchant to suit her needs, if not with any particular artistry. When she'd found the eerie, metallic mask in the bottom drawer, she'd promptly buried it under the other clothes from her suitcase and hadn't opened it since. The bed was high and gave off a slightly musty smell Hermione had been unable to magic away, but it soon blended into the general ambiance of damp disuse that pervaded the tired, featureless living space.

Besides the clothes, chair, bed, and half-bath, the room was empty and unadorned. She found that the unoccupied bedroom was laid out in much the same way as her own. It shared a wall with Bellatrix's haunting grounds, though, and she had once heard the distinct slip-slosh of a bath through the walls, so there was at least one significant difference. Beyond that… Hermione had no idea what Bellatrix was up to.

*Probably drawing my face in the floor dust and stabbing it into oblivion.*

The first day Bellatrix stayed in hiding, Hermione didn't make her food. Having taken a stand against working for free, she wasn't ready to concede just yet.

Two days passed without a sign of her, though, and Hermione began to worry. As little as she appreciated being ignored and avoided, she didn't want the stubborn witch to starve. Just when she was about to give in and knock with a tray of food like the house-elves always had, she noticed the missing supplies. While Bellatrix hadn't touched her cooking ingredients, the cereal bars and bagged granola had disappeared, along with a good amount of the fresh fruit.

Hermione almost laughed. She imagined Bellatrix creeping out here in the middle of the night and squirreling away prepackaged goods to weather out her tantrum, but she was still a bit worried. Eating nothing but nuts and grains was fine for a rodent; less so for a human being.

Still, Bellatrix's thieving gave her an opportunity, and she intended to take full advantage of it. She did her best to calculate how long the missing food would last. *Six bars, half a pound of granola, three bananas, and two bramley apples...* She gave it five days, then one more for good measure. Finally, she made her move.

It took another nerve-wracking trip to the grocery, but by late afternoon, a bit of cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, and allspice had the room smelling like autumn, and the pumpkin just made it irresistible.

Sure enough, a shifty-eyed Bellatrix appeared half an hour after she'd finished baking. When she caught sight of Hermione in the corner, she visibly straightened, glancing nonchalantly around the room. The blatant attempt to pretend there was nothing strange about this situation amused her, but Hermione allowed it. She didn't need a confrontation. She hadn't done this looking to waste time accusing her of skulking. She was just looking—if she had to play Bellatrix's games after all—to win. She could do that without starting any more fights.

"Pumpkin loaf?" Hermione offered, holding out a plate.

Bellatrix's eyes narrowed. One eyebrow arched. "What do you want?"

Hermione set down the plate on the table. "That's up to you."

Bellatrix scowled. "You're the one who asked for stories."

It was Hermione's turn to raise an eyebrow. A good part of her had expected Bellatrix to disappear
back through the door the moment she got her hands on the cooking—if she had bothered to engage in the first place instead of waiting around to claim it in another midnight raid. The fact that she remembered and seemed grudgingly willing to keep up her end of their bargain was a pleasant surprise.

"Well, I hardly know what there is to tell do I?" She had no interest in sparking another gleeful recitation of torture, but if that's what she got, she would take it. She was the one who'd decided to make pumpkin bread, after all. It was a rather morbid invitation.

"Neither do I," Bellatrix snapped. She stared at the slice of gently steaming bread like it might become a live Weasley Brothers' Bombtastic Bomb at any moment. "You want to know, you ask."

Hermione sat down at the other side of the table. "Well. How about… childhood? You told me a bit about Hogwarts. I wouldn't mind—"

Bellatrix snorted. "What's there to tell? Go to school for a few months, pop home at the holidays… Not the most useful seven years of my life." Bellatrix finally took the other seat. She ripped into the bread with two eerily sharp fingernails and popped a bite into her mouth.

The hum of enjoyment she made was surprisingly gratifying.

"Really? I've heard such amazing things about the school."

Bellatrix shrugged. "It's all well and good if all you want is a job at the Ministry in five more years. But the teachers have no imagination. It's dull. Moralist. Believe me. As loathe as I am to say it, you were better off with my sister. They haven't even got a library as good as ours, anymore. Did in my day. The stuff in the restricted section would have made your toes curl."

Hermione had a feeling whatever path this "restricted section" could lead their conversation down was not one she would care to visit. "You were in Slytherin, right? Your whole family?"

"Of course."

The bread was half gone.

"I got sorted when I visited, you know. Gryffindor."

Bellatrix snorted. "I didn't know, nor did I care. One more reason to torment you, I suppose." She chuckled. "Alright, I'll admit it. Hogwarts wasn't entirely useless. The house rivalries were fun."

The chilling grin told Hermione all she needed to know about Bellatrix's particular relationship with fun.

"But you don't really care about Hogwarts, do you?"

Bellatrix reached across the table and snagged another slice from the cutting board. It sagged between her fingers—a limp, dead thing.

"You want to know about… what did you ask me? Ah yes. Childhood."

Hermione blinked in the pointed silence. She waited for Bellatrix to elaborate, but no further words were forthcoming. "I didn't mean… I don't… I… Well, yes," she admitted. There was nothing in particular to deny. "But you don't have to…"

"Tell you all about life as an itty bitty pure-blood? Feed your self-righteous fantasies about how hard
things were for me? I can chat about childhood, pet, but you aren't going to get what you want.”

Hermione bit her lip. She didn't like that she was so transparent. When she had only dealt with Bellatrix every now and then, it had been incredibly easy to dismiss her as just… mad. A disturbing, unpredictable presence floating around the edges of her awareness, occasionally interfering, but mostly… ignorable. Now, she kept having to confront how aware Bellatrix was, how eerily insightful, sharp. And, yes, Hermione was trying to come to terms with her. She could admit that much to herself. It was becoming a habit, really. Fixing things. She'd gotten strangely used to being helpful, and, in theory, she could do that here, too. But when the woman she tried to help was this unrepentant, this unapologetically aligned with evil, it was hard to want to. She had seen moments of vulnerability, but they were few and far between: when Bellatrix had pulled her into her memories, when she'd woken with a curse on her lips and lit another tally into her flesh. Not a hint of that since.

"This isn't about what I want," Hermione said, voice slow, measured. "I only thought… I saw how… with your father, you—"

Bellatrix stiffened. "Oh, Cygnus was the perfect father, of course. Quick with a slap, a switch, a belt." She laughed, but it was a strained sound. "That's the only way to raise a child who hates you enough to follow in your footsteps, after all. Pure-blood, ruthless, physically brutal, unforgiving. He was an ideal foot soldier. An idiot. My mother was the smart one. She knew how to use my father to get what she wanted from us. He was the hammer. She swung."

"What, and you were the nails?" Hermione couldn't keep the disbelief from her voice. She didn't try too hard. Disbelief would likely go over better than the hint of pity lurking behind it. "You're defending them?"

Bellatrix shook her head. "Wrong metaphor, pet. Think anvil. I was the sword."

"Won't you ever stop calling me that?"

"No."

Hermione's mouth opened, closed, then opened again, but no sound came out. She didn't know how else to respond in the face of Bellatrix's gleeful denial.

"No. And… yes. The sword. I was always destined to sit beside the Dark Lord. He was the new regime. I was the traditional madness. That was always the balance he struck. They needed his strength, his charisma, his vision, his… him." Fingers waved aimlessly. "But they needed everything I stood for. Purity. Convention. Cygnus and Druella raised me to be his prize. In trying to break me, however—that's how they crafted his lieutenant. Now, they're dead, and I outlived their wildest dreams. I think story time's over, pet."

The sudden dismissal took Hermione a minute to wrap her mind around, but sure enough, the second slice of bread had vanished between words, and Bellatrix's stare was eerily intent.

"Now, I presume you've made progress. I presume you haven't lured me out here just because you've been enjoying our little games."

Hermione tried to catch up. "Excuse me?"

"Don't you dare tell me you still don't know how to fix this."

Hermione felt all blood rush from her face. "I… oh. I mean, I… Well, not yet, no, but I—"

Bellatrix began to stand, hands pressed against the table, rising as slow, steady, and eerily graceful as
the tide. It was a shift Hermione had witnessed before: the quick, jerky, near-manic motions that colored her usual presence transformed in an instant to the fierce, collected, poised fury of a predator.

"Have you even tried?"

"Yes!" Hermione squeaked. "I… McGonagall said… she mentioned, ah, meditation! So I've been…" She scrambled to pull together an explanation, an excuse, but in her single-minded drive to get Bellatrix out of her room, she had completely forgotten about her own supposed reason for being here at all.

Quick as a heartbeat, Bellatrix loomed over her chair. Her hand shot out and knotted itself in Hermione's curls, yanking back her chin and twisting brutally to turn her face upwards. Hermione yelped, gritting her teeth against the sharp pain in her scalp.

Glaring down at her, Bellatrix hissed, "Now you listen here, Mudblood—"

"I thought we were past this," Hermione spat, but the sharp needles of fear pierced through her angry words.

"One more sound, Granger, and I decide your head is worth more to me detached from your neck."

"You aren't going to do that," Hermione insisted, trying not to whimper as the grip tightened. "You're going to let go, and we're going to work on it, alright? I can't do it alone, and I certainly can't do it if you're going to kill me to make me figure it out more quickly."

A tense stillness settled between them. Hermione dug her nails into the palms of her hands. With a noise of complete disgust, Bellatrix let go, and in a few footsteps, she disappeared behind her door once again.

So much for ending the death threats and furious exits.

Hermione dropped her head on her arms, trying to stifle tears. She didn't want to cry—didn't even know why she would be crying. Anger? Fear? Pain?

Relief?

To her utter shock, Bellatrix emerged again for dinner.

Hermione hurried to prepare a second round of food, staring uncomfortably around the space, not daring to look her way. Bellatrix spoke without prompting, offering a detached retelling of a raid on a Muggle city during the second war. Without her usual flare—without eye contact—Hermione could almost tune it out. She tried to let the harsh realities of warfare brush past her ears as nothing more than the wild tint of Bellatrix's highborn lilt, a voice reminiscent of the rest of her family, but less restrained, less… polished. Still, death and destruction crept in around the edges of her wilful fog, and Hermione's grip on pans and knives was shaky.

They left the table in mutual silence.

It became a pattern, a dance of sorts. Meals were exchanged for the words it took to fill the silence they would otherwise have been eating in. Mornings, Hermione hid in her rooms, pretending to meditate. She tried it out in the open the first day, desperate to prove her insincere sincerity, but Bellatrix was incredibly helpful digging her own grave. While Hermione knew next to nothing about meditation, it was apparent Bellatrix knew even less. She paced about loudly and incessantly, circling the younger witch, making frustrated noises, so Hermione felt perfectly justified in
demanding privacy for at least half of her "attempts." Afternoons, she made a show of it, a lot of
closed eyes, a lot of dramatic breathing, an occasional frustrated flick of her wand. Bellatrix seemed
disgusted, impatient, but her threats faded to no more than passing habit, and she never accused
Hermione of faking it.

In between bouts of deception, Hermione fixed up the place. She didn't have much else to do. She
bought books when she went for food, but the selection at the Muggle grocery left much to be
desired. Instead, she patched the holes in the walls, prompting the long-dead wood to grow and
cover the exposed dirt. She reupholstered the lounge with a spare blanket from the third bedroom and
and a gutted pillow, cleansed every inch of the kitchen, master bath, flooring, bedding, and mattresses,
and even poked around in the roots a bit, dislodging spare dirt and experimenting with spells that
would keep the soil where it belonged, but not start a fire amid the winding, phosphorescent hazards
above their heads. She kept wondering who had created this senseless place. Had the roots occurred
naturally, making this an ideal place to build the… house, if it could be called that, or had someone
built the bloody place, looked up, and thought, Golly, what if I made my ceiling glow? In this forest,
there was no telling.

She slowly but surely invested in Muggle appliances. The tree wasn't wired for them; too much
magic would have ruined the electrical work in a matter of days, but her Mum had always been
willing to mix-and-match. Muggle tech was cheap; add in the right spark of magic to get things
running, and the amount of money saved in time alone could be impressive.

Some of it might have been illegal, but Hermione hadn't asked back then, and she had bigger things
on her plate these days.

Namely, that Bellatrix could actually use them.

A toaster, matches, buttons for a stovetop usually lit by magic, a blender: It was the best Hermione
could think of to replace the daily drudgeries of life usually lived by wand and by spell.

Still, there were things she couldn't replace. She hadn't the slightest idea how Muggles did their
laundry, and she'd never been more grateful for a water system, whatever kept it running out here in
the middle of the woods.

If she dwelled too long on just how hard a life Bellatrix would have, magicless and alone, it sapped
her of all motivation. She tried to focus on the essentials. Food. That was step one, and Bellatrix was
going to learn not to starve whether she liked it or not.

When not engaged in her underhanded educational tactics, Hermione fell into stranger and stranger
habits to assuage boredom. She took to longer and longer walks, always to the left, where a
convenient felled tree provided both a good point of reference and a nice place to sit. She kept wand
always in hand, but found herself surprised by the eerie desertion of the woods around her. Now and
then, an occasional flash of motion would catch her eye, but these always disappeared before she
could identify them. At night, she could hear all sorts of sounds, mysterious but distinctly alive. Her
best guess was that the denizens who dwelled beneath these trees were more alarmed by her
presence than she was by theirs. Either they had never seen humans before, or these creatures had
seen all too well the threat of a wizard and a wand.

Tea left an odd taste in her mouth these days—the taste of Black Manor, its occupants, its dangers.
Coffee, for all its bitter charm, was safe. She continued drinking tea for propriety's sake, but 8:00
a.m. mornings began finding her sitting outside in the steadily warming spring, drinking in dew and
her dark brew with equal quiet joy. Coffee wasn't as easy as tea. Even crafted with magic, it seemed
to have a strange desire to emerge burnt and biting, but there was a peculiar enjoyment in a bitterness
that could wake her even before the caffeine hit her bloodstream, albeit perhaps a masochistic one,
like the bite of spice of the numbing acid of citrus.

The human pallet was a strange thing.

Bellatrix's was stranger than most. Hermione fished out other tastes between stories, finding a childishly enthusiastic appreciation of potatoes and all that could be made with them, as well as a weakness for sugary pastries, though not candy. The most surprising discovery she made was the dark witch's general distaste for meat. It wasn't something she'd have expected from a woman she'd come to perceive as... exceptionally predatory, carnivorous, but she idly wondered if there wasn't something to be said for being disinclined towards flesh after having tasted the... human variety... once before. It was no great hardship to cut back; it had always been a rare purchase for her. When she lived alone, or even just with her mother, meat—good meat—wasn't something she could afford. She had subsisted almost entirely on rice and turryleaf beans during her time with the Ministry (there were two entire turryleaf trees in one of the lifts down near the Department of Mysteries, and no one else seemed to be harvesting them). While she had the money here for a more expensive variety of foods, falling out of the habit of meat was easy enough. She wouldn't have had a clue how to cook it without magic, anyway. How could Muggles possibly know if the inside was finished?

Falling into the habit of Bellatrix's stories was harder. Some days, her words were perfunctory, as simple as handing over a pocketful of spare change for her meal, and those tales tended to be... less terrifying. Sometimes even mildly amusing. Other days left Hermione feeling like she'd been held at wandpoint, violently robbed of the food she'd made. The darker stories felt far more like threats than payment, but Hermione had wanted to know, and even when nightmares woke her, cold and shivering and alone in the darkness after the more gruesome retellings, she couldn't seem to suppress a morbid curiosity. The life this woman had lived.

When the opportunity arose, she asked questions.

She started tame. She asked about the ceiling over a midweek lunch. Bellatrix answered with a shrug.

"You'd have to ask Snape. He designed the place."

"Snape? Isn't he—"

"—dead? Yes, thank Merlin. Slimy traitor. Halfblood scum. If there's anyone I couldn't have put up with being treated as a war hero, it'd be Snivellus."

"He was Headmaster of Hogwarts, no? How do you know he didn't reveal this place to anyone?"

Bellatrix rolled her eyes. "Well he couldn't, could he? He picked the spot, probably muttered over it and watered the tree with some glowing potion, but he wasn't the one who cast the spell. The Dark Lord does not allow anyone else to serve as his Secret Keeper."

"I thought you said there were three. Three people who knew about this place."

"I did. Doesn't mean three of us could talk. Snape couldn't have said a word till the Dark Lord died, and he took the garbage with him when he was defeated. Snape died first. That left the secret to me."

"So..." There was a more dangerous question on the tip of Hermione's tongue. It seemed a perfect opportunity to ask, but she was incredibly nervous to say it aloud. "You don't think he'll rise again? You're not one of the believers?"

Bellatrix snorted. "Of course not. I brought you here, didn't I? If the soul of the greatest wizard to
walk the earth lived on, even a fragment of it, you'd still be standing out there in the cold." She bared her teeth. "Better yet. My Lord would have killed or caged you before you had a chance in hell of laying so much as a finger on my magic."

Hermione sighed, ignoring the harsh words. She had developed near immunity to the backhanded threats that so often lingered at the end of Bellatrix's stories.

She wished she could become similarly immune to her own curiosity.

One particularly drizzly morning, cold from drinking her coffee in the rain, Hermione finally asked an endlessly consuming question.

"Why did you do what you did? To Lucius. There were so many ways you could have stopped him, even—even killed him. But you…"

"Set myself on fire?"

"Well, yes. You could have died!"

"There are worse things than death, pet."

Hermione stilled. A drop of rainwater from her hair dripped down the back of her neck, snaking a path between her shoulder blades. She shivered. "Are there?" she whispered. "Are there really?"

Bellatrix wrinkled her nose. "You sound like him. You know nothing of this world. You could never understand."

"Make me, then," said Hermione, just the sort of quiet challenge she had learned the dark witch found nearly irresistible.

Bellatrix's stare seared right through her. "You've seen what the Ministry is capable of. Do you honestly believe they're the sort that cringes away from death? Oh, the Ministry kills. Not publicly, of course. It does so behind closed doors and through silent mercenaries, because death serves no purpose for them. Instead, they've perfected the art of punishment. Things that make the skin crawl, things that make you turn away and think twice about breaking their rules, but things that make them seen the ever-gracious right hand of the law, things that can be forgiven, undone. The Dementors are enough for most. They needed something more for me." The half-smile she flashed was fleeting, haunted. "I was too crazed for the Dementors. Too far gone. There was nothing they could do to me I hadn't already done to myself. So, this time around, they put me in a prettier cage. But they ripped things out of me. They wrapped me up in the pain of my own favorite tortures, and they thought that would be enough." There was a fire behind Bellatrix's eyes, passion rising in her voice. "So I used it. Give me pain, I will use it to destroy you. Build a cage, and I will crush you against its bars. They thought binding my magic would break me."

She laughed, then, head flung back, teeth flashing white and perilous between the curves of her feral, blood-bruise lips. Hermione had never really noticed, before, how dark her mouth was against her pale skin, how much more dangerous its softness seemed than the sharp arc of her cheekbones or the cruel glint in her eyes.

Those lips crafted her final words. "I will send myself up in flames, first. The Ministry does not get the privilege of breaking me. Only I shall ever have that particular honor."

Hermione did not enjoy her dreams that night. She woke even more tired than she'd been at bedtime,
with no memory of specific nightmares, but filled with an all-consuming sense of dread.

"You were married, too," she prompted some days later. "You had a handfasting. I… I can't imagine it. You. Like Narcissa."

Hermione found the name tasted strange on her lips.

"Oh, nothing like Narcissa." Bellatrix chuckled. She had been in a particularly good mood all morning, and she stood beside the younger witch as she cooked, handing over an egg, another, and the milk, all before Hermione had a chance to grab them.

Having seen an opportunity, Hermione had decided to push her luck.

"If my dear Rodolphus had tried to do to me what Lucius did to Cissy…" She dismissed the sentiment with a quick exhale of breath and half a smile.

"I thought…"

Bellatrix pierced Hermione with a narrow-eyed stare, but humored the leading words. "Oh, he tried. That sadistic slug thought he understood pain." The tiny smile returned. "I proved him wrong. He was a Lestrange; we've always been half at war with them, but I was a bitter peace offering indeed. Of course he tried to manipulate me, hurt me. He's a man."

Hermione started at the vehemence in that one word.

"Learned his lesson, didn't he?"

Hermione waited for Bellatrix to answer her own question. When she didn't, Hermione pressed, "What did you do?"

Bellatrix hummed, reaching across Hermione to steal a bite from the pan as she went to dump the eggs onto a plate. "Back at the start of it all… He wasn't the brightest, my husband. Took him far too long to figure out the bond. I, of course, wanted nothing to do with him. Just to get me close, he had to scramble around in my head, the poor bastard. He could hardly stand it, but his family just wouldn't let up. I was sleeping my way around London and he was chasing his own arse in circles trying to keep up with me, but he just kept at it. Raised a hand to me once, just once, and I filled him up with every pain I'd ever felt and every pain I'd ever caused—the pain of every pitiful soul who ever had the misfortune of meeting the end of my wand. Even back then, that was an impressive list."

Bellatrix's voice remained cheerful, eyes bright, but Hermione watched her plate trembling slightly as she set it on the table. The tendons in her wrist were tense with a strain that didn't show on her face or in her words.

"He thought he could hurt me." She laughed. "One step too close, and he was sobbing like an infant. That was the last straw, the last time he tried to use the connection between us. He never knew, never came close to knowing what it was to truly inflict pain. It's an art, you see, and I'm a collector." The last word was almost a purr. "A connoisseur of rare and overwhelming agonies, at your service." She took a tiny bow, but she did so from the shoulders, never lowering her chin, never breaking eye contact.

Hermione looked away. "What does that even mean?"

"Oh, don't play coy, pet. I know Cissy told you about me."
"That doesn't mean I understood," Hermione admitted.

Bellatrix's grin sharpened, shark-like. "But I'm an open book! Haven't you realized?"

Hermione looked up just long enough to be sure the other witch saw her blank stare.

"Ahh. Can't say I didn't expect it. Cissy took you exploring in her own frozen wasteland of a mind, but my walls are an entirely different sort. I suppose I thought your curiosity would have won out by now. Not even a cursory glance?" She adopted a dramatic pout and tapped her temple with a single forefinger. "Too scared?"

Hermione's brows drew together. "What, look in your head? Only when you put me there! I'm not a Leglimens. Why would you even think that?"

"Really?" The fascination etched onto Bellatrix's face as she leaned in, elbows on the table, was a bit alarming. "Here I thought you could do everything. Andy's Magical Mudblood, talent extraordinaire."

Hermione sighed. That particular insinuation was getting old. "Evidently not." She didn't have any particular desire to argue the point, not when Bellatrix still seemed to be in the mood to share.

"Probably for the best. I'm not like Cissy. I thought she would have shown you her tricks, but… she would have had to let you in, then, and that's simply not her style. Hell, she never even let herself in. Me? I don't let people in. I drag them in. Kicking. Screaming. And I keep them."

Hermione kept quiet. She was trying to remember what Narcissa had told her. She knew what it had been for the younger sister, closing herself to emotion to escape the marriage bond, locking half of who she was outside of herself, and locking the world out in the process. Bellatrix, though… "She did try to explain what you did. Narcissa. She said—"

"—What?" Bellatrix was still smiling, that eerie, unaffected grin belied by the tension in the arch of her spine as she leaned over the table. "Did she tell you I drove myself mad?"

Hermione stammered out something, but it certainly wasn't words.

"Well, she's not wrong."

Hermione couldn't hide how taken aback she was. Bellatrix cackled, pushing back up off the table. "Crazy's just another weapon, pet. I'm still me, under it all. The madness isn't really mine, anyway. It's just… what happens, when you keep too many people in your head. I wrapped them all up inside of me, everyone I tortured, all the little pieces of themselves that break off when they scream, all the pain they couldn't handle, all the joy and regret, lust, love… Everything they pushed aside to make room for the agony I forced them to feel. You've never been on that end of my anger."

She paced backwards. She braced her palms on the counter-top and hopped up, sitting hunched over beneath the overhang of the cabinet. Finally, she crossed her ankles. "You wouldn't understand it, little Mudblood. There's a reason even the Death Eaters feared my name. You can torture someone forever. You can give them more and more and more and more until they forget their own name. As long as you're willing to take on what they can't."

In a flash, the mirth was gone, and Bellatrix's heavy-lidded eyes were searing directly into Hermione's soul.

"Be glad you went after my magic, not my mind. You couldn't take it, pet."
Hermione took her time getting ready for bed. She knew sleep would bring dreams, and after today's conversation, she surely would not be enjoy them.

Still, there was a part of her mind that kept thinking—put aside the nightmares, put aside the fear she could push away in the daylight but had no control over as she slept—this whole experiment felt… positive, actually. She wasn't taking orders any longer. She wasn't being paid to have a purpose; she had made one of her own. And if she won honest words from a witch most knew only as a screaming visage on a wanted flier in the process, that was something to be proud of, was it not?

*What a strange sort of power.*

The thought startled her. *Power. That wasn't what she wanted, was it? That was what these people wanted, the Death Eaters, the pure-bloods. Not her. She wasn't anything like them. She wasn't going to be… like that… just because she had someone who had to rely on her… was she? This was different! She was helping. She was making sure Bellatrix could stand on her own two feet, she…*

*I sound just like Andy.*

Now *that* was a sobering thought. Hermione had no intention of being like Andy. She could never do that to someone, what Andromeda had done to her, keeping her hopes up, dangling something she couldn't have any other way in front of her when she had no intention of anything other than achieving her own ends. She couldn't possibly. She couldn't live like that, with the looming knowledge that, any day now, her ulterior motives would come to an end, and the only thing she really had planned was… getting away.

Leaving.

*Merlin.*

Hermione slumped down on her bed. How had she never looked at herself like this before? How had she grown so blissfully unaware? How had she managed to get this far into this… this *ridiculous* lie, all without realizing just how horribly hypocritical she had become?

She couldn't keep doing this. She couldn't keep lying. That wasn't fair to anyone.

The truth, on the other hand…

Hermione blanched at the thought, curling up in her nest of covers.

The truth would be brutal, there were no two ways about it. But she would have to tell it. She would have to tell Bellatrix everything, admit there was no way she was getting her magic back, and she would have to deal with the consequences. She had been willing to take this too far—Hermione would never be able to look at herself again if she let it go on.

A shivery, restless half hour passed before she succumbed to sleep.

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She woke in a cold sweat, throat parched and raw. It was the fourth nightmare this week. When she opened her eyes, she jumped, but prided herself on not yelping out loud. Bellatrix sat in the chair beside her bed, watching her with icy, amused eyes.

"You've been screaming for half an hour. Told you you couldn't take my stories."

"Go to hell," Hermione muttered, not nearly awake enough for civility.
"Oh, hush. I've been living there for months." She chuckled. "Sweet dreams, pet."

Hermione mustered enough energy—or, perhaps, enough insanity—to fling a pillow after Bellatrix's retreating form, but it fell short, and the dark witch's shadow didn't even glance back towards the muffled thump as she sauntered from the room.

"Months?" Hermione asked the next morning. She handed Bellatrix two slices of bread. "Not years?"

Dipping the bread into the batter Hermione had made, Bellatrix looked confused. As she dropped the slices into the skillet Hermione held, the younger witch clarified. "Last night. You said you'd been in hell for months, and… I mean… sure. But what about—you know—Azkaban? You've had it pretty rough for years."

Bellatrix frowned. She never reacted well to insinuations that her life had been anything less than ideal, that her hardships were anything more than an opportunity to triumph, but the expression on her face now was different, something Hermione wasn't sure she'd ever seen before. It was far more contemplative than blustery, and her words carried the same tone. "Azkaban was… kind of nice, actually."

Hermione stilled, the frying pan dangling limply from the end of her wrist.

"The day they threw me in there… I heard quiet for the first time since I was a child. People don't carry on banging around the cells in that place. They don't rattle their chains. They just… sit. All but the new recruits, and of course I was delivered alone. Everything was so, so quiet. I hadn't heard that sort of stillness in a very long time, and when the Dementors came… Yes, it's cold. All anybody ever talks about is the cold. Draining, yes, but a… a different sort of quiet. That was the only time any of them ever still bothered to scream, when they saw them coming, but for every scream in the cells around me, that all-consuming cold leached three smaller agonies from my mind."

Bellatrix's voice was soft, a deadly, distant crooning that set the smaller hairs on the back of Hermione's neck standing on end. "It was like… forgetting. They fed on the things I'd wrapped up in my head, and… I was lighter without them. In the moment, you can't even miss it, any of what they've stolen. And that wasn't hell. Hell is… pain, and fire, and regret. The Dementors are… nothing." She frowned, and her words emerged more quickly. "That's not to say I enjoyed it, being nothing, but at least with them—nothing lost, nothing gained… Nothing to care about. Unfortunately, the Ministry learned their lesson. They saw how unaffected I was once I got out."

Hermione blinked. Words slipped from her mouth as though in a daze. "You were a disaster when you got out. I saw your picture in the paper, I—"

Bellatrix waved a dismissive hand. "Cosmetics. Pfah. As you can see—" She flashed a quick grin and traced a single fingernail across the line of her cheekbone. "—nothing a spot of magic and a bit of real food couldn't fix. No, the parts that mattered were far too buried for even the Dementors to touch. I invited them in. They gorged themselves on the surface and left me… just me… behind. But the Ministry didn't give up on me. No, they figured out how to give me a nice taste of hell. You've seen it all. She tugged at her sleeve. "Pain, fire, regret… Lost causes. Unfinished business. That's hell, pet, and I've gotten damn good at it."

Hermione finally found herself released from the spell of Bellatrix's words. The French toast had become a uniform, congealed blob in the bottom of the pan, and she scraped it into the trash in exasperation.
"Yes. Evidently. Leave any of you in hell long enough, and you'll become queen," she grumbled.

"Any of us?"

Working on autopilot to salvage breakfast, Hermione hadn't thought particularly hard about her choice of words. She shrugged. "Yes. You. You people. Your family. You, Narcissa, Andromeda—you've all been through hell. I don't deny that and… well, yes. As you said. You've gotten eerily good at it."

Bellatrix frowned. "My sisters haven't lived what I have."

Hermione flicked her wand over the pan again and again, but the burnt remains in the bottom didn't want to come clean. She tried to ignore Bellatrix's words.

Bellatrix didn't allow it. "Oh, Andy never liked it: my parents, me. But I kept her from the worst of it. Could you imagine her running off without my knowledge? Without me there to take the blame, take the husband, the responsibility?"

Hermione stilled, half bent over the sink, afraid to turn and face the witch behind her and accidentally end these words. It was the closest she'd heard to something… human, something that paralleled the stories the other two sisters had told, and the closest she'd heard to Bellatrix admitting there were things in her past she hadn't borne with grace.

"Andy had it easy, the spoilt brat. Never a word, all the years she was gone. After… nothing I did could really dent her; she's too much the egoist. Probably off at Hogwarts full time by now, preying on whatever hapless witch she can dig her pretty claws in, perfectly content with yet another new life. Besides. She's always far too busy using someone to actually care about them. Not enough that they could hurt her."

Hermione was so still she stopped hearing her own breath. It was like the worst, guiltiest things she had thought about the middle sister in the darkest moment of her betrayal had been given a voice. It all felt too fresh, too close. She didn't want to think these things again, had no reason to, but Bellatrix seemed to have no qualms about dragging them to the front of her mind.

"Cissy had… oh, I don't know. She had demons, I suppose. But she had… more what I had in Azkaban. Nothing. She was good at that. No one can hurt you if you can't feel. Well, that isn't quite fair, I suppose. The years when she lost her battle with herself couldn't have been fun, but that's—"

Hermione spun around, dishwater splattering across the floor as she pierced Bellatrix with her fiercest glare. "If you say that's her fault, I'll—"

The genuine surprise etched across Bellatrix's face stopped her mid-sentence. "I was going to say that's a different story. Merlin, Mudblood. Do you think I don't know what rape is?"

"I—What?" For hopefully the last time in one strange conversation, Hermione found herself taken aback.

"Well, what would you call it? A magical bond that lets someone violate every bit of your being the second you let down your guard?"

Hermione had never quite thought of it in those terms. She… hadn't wanted to think about it, the kind of violation that happened when someone could manipulate you at the very core of what made you human. Indeed, that was rape, over and over again, every minute of every day, a bit of yourself taken again and again, like it didn't belong to you, like you had no right to your own person. Rape. And Bellatrix was the one to name it for what it was.
Bellatrix, who had just given her quite possibly the most raw, honest words she'd ever heard from the other witch, who had probably revealed much more than she intended in that chilling moment when she insisted Azkaban wasn't as bad as what she was living now… Bellatrix, who had hurt quite possibly hundreds of people, but who could still look at what had been done to her sister, and name it as the abuse it was.

"I have to get it back."

It wasn't until Bellatrix looked up sharply that Hermione realized she'd said the words out loud.

"What?" Bellatrix asked. "Get what back?"

Hermione shook her head, gripping the handle of the still-empty pan in an iron-tight fist. "Your magic," she whispered, but she might as well have said it in her mind, so quiet were her words. Here she was, not twelve hours since deciding she would confess to never wanting Bellatrix to see a trace of her formidable power ever again, now considering… the opposite. Because, *Merlin*. What right did she have to decide? It was one thing to give Bellatrix back survival, but… Lucius had given Narcissa survival. Survival and a life of, of violation, of incompleteness, of… Pain, fire, regret. Lost causes. *Unfinished business*. Oh, Merlin. She couldn't do that to Bellatrix. She was doing that to Bellatrix. This was a witch, not a Muggle. This was someone who would live out the rest of her days knowing something was missing, knowing there was a gaping hole, a wasteland of ash, somewhere inside of her, but never able to patch it, fill it, plant new seeds. Maybe, for all of her egoism, for all of her manipulation… maybe Andy had been right about one thing all along.

Maybe it was time to let Bellatrix choose. Freely. Magic, danger, and all. Maybe it was time to let Bellatrix choose for herself.

"Your magic," she said, louder. "I—I'd like to work with you. Today, if that's alright. Just… talk through a few things. You… are a brilliant witch. And I'm getting nowhere on my own. Help me?"

Bellatrix straightened. A grin stretched across her lips. "Hmmm. No more silent meditation?" She chuckled. "Thought you'd never ask, pet."
Hermione regretted it immediately. She regretted it the moment the words left her mouth, and she had regretted it every moment since, but no matter how hard she tried, once she'd talked herself out of it, she just couldn't talk herself back in again.

If she could muddle out how to do it, Bellatrix would be getting her magic back.

Of course, as more days ticked by, she had to admit she was getting nowhere. When she'd said she hadn't the slightest idea how she had done it in the first place, she had meant exactly that. All things considered, Bellatrix was being patient beyond all her wildest dreams, but short of asking the other witch to start attacking her till something snapped loose, Hermione was running out of ideas. Not that she'd had many to begin with. She gave meditation a more serious try, spent hours sitting across from Bellatrix, concentrating as hard as she could, desperately trying to put herself back in those fields she'd seen at the core of Bellatrix's magic…

And got not so much as a glimpse of a speck of dirt.

Instead, she suffered through a lot of headaches, a lot of boredom, and an increasingly antsy guinea pig in the form of Bellatrix Black.

Hermione was antsy, too. Now that she had committed herself to this insanity, she just wanted to be done with it already. There was no more use in showing Bellatrix how to get on without magic, no more use in all the time she was wasting, in the ghastly stories and resulting nightmares. But no matter how many attempts she made, nothing happened.

By the time the late spring rains were beginning to threaten a muggy summer, patience, all around, had worn thin.

"Maybe it wasn't me at all," Hermione finally snapped one afternoon as she misjudged an aimless, exasperated wand motion and set the counter on fire. She and Bellatrix were seated across from each other in the kitchen chairs, the table momentarily banished out of the way of Hermione's halfhearted spellwork. "Maybe it was you all along. Maybe you burned up your own magic right along with your arms, doing what you did to Lucius."

As Hermione snuffed out the tiny flame, Bellatrix rolled her eyes. "You're reaching, pet."

"Well if it was me, I sure can't pull it off again!"

"Pull harder."

"And you're not helping!"

Elbows on knees, chin in hand, Bellatrix arched an eyebrow at Hermione's outrage.

"Do you want your lousy magic back or not?"

The moment the words left her mouth, Hermione wanted to reel them back in behind her lips and swallow them whole, but Bellatrix's good-natured mood vanished in a second. She stood, towering over her, and Hermione couldn't speak.

"You're not helping!" Bellatrix mimicked in a thin, sing-song imitation of Hermione's voice. "I'm not helping? Me? You're not trying! Do you think I've been impressed with your miserable charade?
With the endless nothing you've given me?" Bellatrix's face grew eerily expressionless. "When you asked me for help, I almost believed you'd finally come 'round. I thought, surely, after all this time, you were ready to tell the truth."


"Of course I knew. You thought you could come to me the same night I nearly killed you and believe you'd had a change of heart? Hah! I knew you'd done no such thing. But I let you have it. I allowed as much time and as many stories as you asked for because as you bloody well know—"

Bellatrix braced a hand at the back of Hermione's chair, looming, blocking out the blue light above. "—I'm not leaving until I get what I want. If that meant playing your little savior game, I was willing to play."

Hermione felt angry heat bubbling in the pit of her stomach, eating its way through her fear. "You were trying to manipulate me into giving it back."

Bellatrix laughed. "While you tried to manipulate me into letting you disappear without it! To strand me here in this infernal half-life while you ran off into the sunset with my magic! You do not get to play innocent any longer, pet, and I am through with playing pretend."

"I only wanted to help you!" retorted Hermione, raising her wand, tapping it against Bellatrix's stomach to remind the other witch that she wouldn't be intimidated. "And I wasn't pretending. Not... Not now. I couldn't do that to you. But you—"

"I did everything you asked of me."

"You— No— You—" Hermione shook her head but stumbled over her denial. That wasn't a lie. Bellatrix had, indeed, catered to all she'd demanded these past few weeks, not knowing what Hermione was thinking, not knowing when she'd made the decision to help. In the grand scheme of things, a death threat here or there was little more than a friendly greeting from this particular witch. "Fine. Fine! We'll just... keep trying, alright?" She took a deep breath. "No more secrets; we'll solve this, have done with it, and go our separate ways."

Bellatrix shook her head. An errant curl slipped down over one shoulder and brushed the side of Hermione's face. "Hmm. Easy for you to say; you don't have a thing to lose." She pushed aside Hermione's wand with two fingers.

Hermione's gaze flicked down and back up again, dizzy with nerves over whether it was more important to keep her eyes on Bellatrix's hands or face. "I—"

"What do you need?" she crooned. "What must I do for you to give this one little thing to me."

Hermione had never heard this particular voice from Bellatrix. It was soft, smooth, designed to coax its listener into a false sense of safety, acquiescence.

"It isn't about willing, Bellatrix. I just don't know how."

"Do I have to be dying, is that it?" she asked with sudden levity.

"What?"

Bellatrix finally took a step back, pacing away from Hermione's seat. "You said it before. You've only done it when—"

"When I was afraid! When people pushed me!" Hermione cut her off, turning her head to keep the
other witch in view. "You don't understand, that's how…" She wrapped an arm around her stomach, feeling the residual sickness that lingered inside of her whenever she remembered her last brush with that strange power. "That's how I messed everything up, before. Every time I've done it, something's gone terribly wrong, I—"

"Blah blah blah, Granger turned McG into a cat, blah blah, I know! " Bellatrix came full circle, spinning to stand in front of Hermione on her final words. "You've told me a thousand times, you insipid girl! You get pushed and you lose control. Well, so be it! What other option do we have?"

She set off again, pacing past where Hermione's head could comfortably turn. By the time she stood and faced her again, Bellatrix was leaning against the far wall, knife in hand.

*Where does she keep getting these?*

"What do I have to do, hmm?"

"Put that down." Hermione struggled to keep her voice steady. Her hand gripped her wand, shaking far worse than her words.

"Do I put this to my own throat, is that it? I've already tried yours. You barely flinched. How much do you want to chance that whatever spell you cast will be faster than I could push it in? Or that your magic won't do the job for me?"

Hermione stood, frozen, as Bellatrix pressed the gleaming silver blade against the pulse in the side of her neck. "We don't need to do this again, Bellatrix—"

"—That the best you got, pet? To talk me down with a name I never gave you permission to say? Well, well. We've tried your way. We tried slow and steady and patient and useless."

The knife jerked with the angry word.

Hermione flinched.

"You can't do it! You've got no control! Don't you see? It's dirty magic, a soiled, filthy thing that seeps out when you're pitiful and scared and just can't help yourself," she sneered. "I told I wouldn't touch it. At least I have control of myself, and if that's all I've got, it's more than you, Mudblood. You're less than the nothing you have to your meaningless name."

A thin line of crimson bloomed on Bellatrix's neck, widening by the second. Hermione held her wand with baited breath, half waiting, half expecting the magic to come bursting out of her again, half expecting Bellatrix to prove herself right, just as she had each and every time Hermione had failed, but… this was different. That had never been what happened, had it? It was never her magic at all, never her own strength or power—it was always someone else's. Lucius, the headmistress, Bellatrix… She'd grabbed onto their magics one by one and now... Now there was none of that, no foreign power she could pull into herself and push back out into someone else. Her strength was their strength, their magic turned back on them.

Here, there was no magic. There was only blood.

"Stop!" Hermione finally yelled, dropping her wand, tripping over her feet, scrambling towards the other witch. The moment her wand clattered to the floor, Bellatrix's hand fell away from her throat, and Hermione was able to pull the knife from her grasp. "I can't do it! Oh, God, I just can't."

She crumpled against the wall, sliding to the floor with the bloodied knife in hand. "It's gone. It's really g-gone. I failed everyone. You, not just you, I— I never did it. I never did what Andy did. What they all thought I could do. I can't even use my own magic! I am useless!" She hiccupped back
a sob. "All I did… I only do it when… when someone else starts it, when I take someone else's magic and ruin it! I— I'm sorry, I thought I could, I thought—"

Tears threatened to steal her voice. There was no pretending anymore. "I can't, Bellatrix, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!" She reached out a hand with her plea, stretching towards Bellatrix's nearest wrist to offer a reflexive physical admittance of her apology, her guilt, even her supplication.

As the other witch started to rip away from the contact, they both froze.

She saw something, just for a moment, that wasn't the kitchen. It was a flash of barren fields, drifting ash.

*It's here!*

Frantic, she reached out, grasping at nothing, at the wind, the flecks of gray, lifeless dust. She scrambled to find a handhold on whatever it was she had broken in this place, but the air she touched turned cold, so cold. Her hands pulled at sudden strands of icy wind. Clouds overhead appeared in another instant, heavy and pregnant with snow.

Hermione ripped herself away, terrified she had only managed to make things worse.

"I felt that." Bellatrix stared down at her.

Hermione shook, shivering with a cold that did not at all match the temperature of the room.

"I felt that!" Bellatrix snarled again. She ripped her wand from its usual place in her hair, curls tumbling down about her shoulders, and screeched an unintelligible curse.

Nothing happened.

"I felt you! Go back! Fix this!"

Hermione shook her head, cringing away, making herself as small as she could against the wall.

"No, no, I can't, don't you get it, I—"

"—It's still there! Don't you see?" Bellatrix fell to her knees beside her, wand falling forgotten as she reached out to grasp hold of Hermione's chin, jerking her head up to meet eager, furious eyes. "If you're right, if what you said is true, then we know it's still in there! You saw it! I know you did! Fix it!"

"I almost made it worse!" Hermione cried out. "I tried, I swear! I saw… something, but I didn't know what I was doing and I reached out and… and everything went cold." She felt another shiver chase its way up her spine. "I saw it… I saw it but I couldn't fix it," she pressed, trying to calm her voice. "All I could do was more damage, and I don't understand why, but you don't want me to chance that!" Hermione bit her bottom lip, trying to turn away, but Bellatrix's grip was unrelenting. "It's too unpredictable. You were right. I—I can't control it."

Never before had Hermione watched new hope die in someone's eyes. She stared helplessly as it was crushed by the talons of Bellatrix's rage, a spark strangled and starved by her words, and she felt its death throes squeeze her heart. "I'm sorry," she squeaked again.

Bellatrix's silence pressed in, deafening.

Hermione watched in detached wonder as the hand not gripping her chin slowly lowered towards her. She felt a tug. Her fingers didn't respond like they should. They felt stiff, cold, and for a
moment, she imagined she still held a shard of frozen wind from the depths of Bellatrix's magic. Slowly, her fist uncurled.

When the dark witch's hand rose again, it held the knife she had forgotten.

Hermione stared, not ready for more of this, not ready to see whose life the crude weapon would threaten next. She raked her fingers across the floorboards until they encountered the slender length of wood she sought. Breath slow, stare even, she wrapped her hand around the wand.

She lunged forward, unbalancing Bellatrix's careless crouch as she struggled to stand on half-asleep legs. The tip of the knife scraped against the floor as Bellatrix tried to steady herself and Hermione flinched at the chilling sound of metal scouring wood. The flinch became a shudder, and the shudder woke fear.

Hermione fled.

The door clattered behind her as she ran out into an eerie woodland dusk. The air strangled her breath, uncomfortably warm and damp against her cold skin and in her shivering lungs. Trees that had grown so close and comfortable for a midday wander now posed as looming, limp-armed strangers taunting her in the gathering darkness, grabbing at her clothes and hair with sharp, playful fingers as she ran.

And ran.

And ran.

Nothing tripped her, nothing stopped her. She barreled deeper into the Forbidden Forest propelled by denial and waiting for the force that would bring her to a sudden, probably painful rest. Instead, her pace began to falter. Knees brushed as they passed each other with increasingly unsteady strides. Her lungs burned. Her eyes blurred. She slowed, staggered through sharp-leaved, low-hanging branches, and tipped over against the nearest trunk, crumpling into the underbrush as damp leaf rot prickled against her ankles through slumping socks.

With a detached sort of wonder, she realized the new softness to the dark outline of the endless trees before her was caused by the haze of tears. She didn't feel like she should be crying again; she wanted every bit of her breath for breathing. Instead, her chest shuddered, torn between struggling, beleaguered lungs and fluttering, exhausted emotions.

More tightly entangled each time she tries to leave.

Hermione blinked, looking quickly left, right. Those words had come from somewhere. They must have. They echoed in her head like sound, but the evening was quiet and empty. She tucked her knees up.

Good. She's disappearing.

"Who's there!" Hermione called. "Where are you?" She lifted her wand, then flinched. It wasn't hers at all. It curved away from her hand, clawing its way into air not yet as dark as its harsh black wood. In her blind rush, she'd grabbed Bellatrix's wand instead of her own.

Not even herself, really. Why, you could see right through her. She's just a little glass person disappearing in the woods, talking to no one with silent lips and pointing at no one with glass fingers and clutching that little bit of forest that doesn't even belong to her. Day is just as vanishing as glass: Soon, both will fade.
Hermione's head turned this way and that as she slowly uncurled from her crouch. "I'm not disappearing! I'm right here! Who are you? Show yourself!" She pressed closer to the tree at her back and summoned a feeble illumination charm to the tip of the less familiar wand with a muttered "Lumos!"

Ah, but you are. A little disappearing girl running away into nothing, scared and alone in the big, dark woods.

"I'm not afraid," Hermione said, voice more firm with each moment that passed without anything jumping out at her. "I'm not afraid of you— and I'm not afraid of leaving!"

Mmmm, perhaps. But disappearing reeks of failure, and that chills you, little girl. Withering away to a transparent little nothing shouting empty glass words at yourself that shatter in the dark while the ones you care for stare right through you, forgetting your face and your name and your courage until you forget yourself too.

The light at the end of Bellatrix's wand flickered. No wind disturbed the air, but Hermione shivered nonetheless. The last hint of daylight bled away behind her, shadows stretching longer and darker before her with each passing breath until she wasn't sure she could tell them apart from their memory. A faint red shimmer in the corner of her eye taunted a lingering ray of sun, but when she turned her head, the night looked just as black behind her.

By then, you'll just wish you could forget yourself faster.

Something flashed to her right, further than she'd already turned. This time, the red glint was obviously more brittle than the light of the sun. It vanished before Hermione could reposition herself among the roots at her feet. As she struggled to turn, she realized the trunk at her back had caught in her clothes.

Not fast enough.

Tugging frantically at the fabric around her waist, Hermione got herself all twisted up in her robes as she tried to find the culprit branch or bit of bark that had snared her. When she ripped herself free, she yelped. There, just a shadow in the grim, flat light from her wand, a dark, wet mouth spat out a wad of cloth with a sound like sandpaper on a hardwood floor. A curtain of dank vines slumped down on either side of a cruel knob of bark that twitched and sniffed like the snout of a hungry werewolf. The rotting foliage, a desecrated mockery of human hair, shielded that glint of red Hermione had seen, something not quite eyes, but an impossibly distorted reflection of her wand-tip light in shifting, dripping, bleeding lumps of sap that glittered like an oozing jewel.

Alas, the little glass girl never makes it out of the dark, forgetting wood.

The mouth remained fixed and unmoving in a gaping grin as words whispered somewhere between the air and Hermione's ears. She scrambled backwards in the dirt, stumbling half upright before a root snagged in her bootlaces and sent her sprawling again. The tree, the creature, whatever sentience lurked behind those slumped features and lank, leafy hair… it shook itself awake in a wave of dirt and pebbles, roots stretching around Hermione as she kicked free of her left shoe and tried to scramble away on hands and knees. All pretense of inanimation had passed. One root snared her ankle as another speared its way into her already ripped robes. It wove itself through the hem and up the nearest seam, tearing great gashes in its wake.

She watched in frozen horror as it crept towards her face. It curled for a moment in the hollow of her throat as though taking her pulse, and Hermione flinched as an image of a dark witch's pale hands pressing a blade against that very bit of her ever-fragile human skin overtook her. Her eyes closed
against the disorientation and fear.

In a matter of seconds, the winding wood circled her throat, and with a cry, Hermione jerked herself back into the present. She whipped her wand between two more creeping roots, struggled to turn herself in the tree's strangling embrace. As the last of her feeble illumination charm died to accommodate the magic she demanded from its unfamiliar weight and curve, she Disapparated desperately towards a thought of half-familiar safety.

Seconds later, her lungs gasped in the welcome return of air. She stood outside a pair of wrought iron gates flanked by surprisingly majestic winged-pigs rampant, and she felt a flash of bemusement that her one visit to this place had been memory enough to send her here. Then, she resettled her weight on her unshod left ankle, and pain eclipsed the surprise. She crumpled with a yelp, bracing herself as she stretched her leg out in front of her and took in the wet, dark blood oozing from a spiral of missing flesh. She swallowed back bile; she'd splinched herself where the root had taken hold.

Well, the whirl of exposed crimson inside her ankle might have been worse, she thought dizzily. She'd flung herself here on a quarter turn at best, with a wand that didn't belong to her and a vision of safety that—she winced admitting it to herself—seemed all caught up in the last person she'd been in front of these gates with. Somehow, despite everything, there was a part of her that hadn't left behind that scared little girl on the floor of the ministry lift, some part of her that still thought of Andromeda Black as a safe haven from the most frightening moments of her life, and that part of her had thought, She's at Hogwarts.

She sighed, turning her frustrated thoughts towards the energy needed for healing instead.

Hermione's strength drained long before she succeeded. Bellatrix's wand seemed to fight her every step of the way, rejecting the will to heal with every inch of its dark, angry core. By the time she won an end to the blood loss, she felt giddy and drained. She had a queasy feeling she had healed herself with leftover adrenaline alone, and without that chemical instinct to fight or flee still chasing through her veins, she didn't have the energy to do anything more than hunch over on the nearest step, head between her knees, numb and empty.

"There are a great number of people looking for you, Ms. Granger."

Hermione jumped.

"Oh, don't hurry off just yet. I'm not here to hand you over to the Ministry."

The Headmistress of Hogwarts stood at her back, a windswept shadow of pale skin, dark hair, and emerald robes standing quietly on the other side of the gate.

"I thought you might appreciate the company. Someone to talk to. Other than Ms. Black, that is."

Despite McGonagall's stunning acknowledgment of the company Hermione had been keeping, she had hardly the energy left to think, let alone flee. "You… know?"

"Of Bellatrix? More or less. Of the hideout? Most certainly. While the last Headmaster never could tell us its location, Severus Snape was on our side, in the end. He left memories. Not many, and many… abridged, over the years, but things he feared losing. I couldn't find the place if I went wandering about the woods in person, but Hogwarts' wards are intimately tied to the forest." With a quick wave of her hand, the gate swung open. "Severus had his ways of watching that place; I inherited them."

"Why haven't you done anything?" Hermione asked as the headmistress stepped closer. She gestured
weakly towards the distant tree-line. "There's a Death Eater not twenty miles from you, and you—"

"I've been monitoring your situation, yes. But I've seen no reason to fear for the safety of my
students, nor anyone else, for that matter."

"How can you know—"

"Through no fault of your own, you wouldn't know what to look for. Bellatrix, on the other hand,
would certainly have noticed the magic it takes to safeguard a space removed from the world by that
particular charm, but it would seem she's been… otherwise occupied."

Hermione fell silent.

"I know she has lost her magic, Ms. Granger."

"What, have you been watching me?" she finally blurted out. "Spying on me while I've been living
with the most dangerous woman alive and near losing my mind?"

The headmistress shook her head. "I see nothing, hear nothing, so if I've left you alone when I
should have interfered, I apologize. What spells Severus extended into that place allow me to sense
who trespasses, just as I knew you were sitting by this gate. May I?" she asked, gesturing to the
rough-hewn stone step upon which Hermione had taken her involuntary seat. She didn't wait for
Hermione's permission, settling beside her with a slow, intentional sort of grace.

"Hogwarts knows you, your magic," she continued, the burr of her accent soft and soothing, though
Hermione still bristled at what she'd just learned. "It knows all its students, even those who arrived
later than might have been expected. This school, beyond its walls, halls, and towers, is an entity
which exists almost purely as magic. Because of my connection to that magic, I know my students
are present, safe. I know when I have visitors, expected or otherwise." She smiled down at
Hermione: Even seated, her chin rose a few inches above the younger witch's hairline. "I know
when students venture into the Forbidden Forest. It is the responsibility of the Head of Hogwarts to
decide when to use what she knows. It has long been tradition to… or rather, tradition not to interfere
in a student's freedom, only to stand as a last measure of safety. There are things to be learned by
breaking rules and braving demons in dark woods by night, but we are, first and foremost, an
institution of higher learning, so I do my best to return children to parents… largely unscathed come
the end of term."

Hermione's lips twitched up, reluctantly mirroring the other witch's smile with a shaky one of her
own. She had heard some truly fantastical tales from other Diagon children, stories no parent would
comfortably consider measures of safety, but she found herself somehow unsurprised that this
woman had kept careful magical eye on Hogwarts' young, rarely interfering, but never unaware.

It seemed McGonagall had been waiting for Hermione's defensive posture to fade; her words took a
quick turn. "Hogwarts does not recognize Bellatrix. Her magical signature has vanished into
nonbeing, so she is a nonentity to its wards. Those spells woven into that Fidelius, however,
recognize its Secret-Keeper even without her traditional trappings of magic, as it is a spell designed
so even Muggles may bear its burden. Where the two magics meet, warding and secrecy charms
together, I sense you, a single witch, and someone else, someone not quite a Muggle. I sense your
safety, though not so hers. Should I have needed confirmation for my suspicions as to her identity—"
She tapped one long, thin finger against the wand clutched in Hermione's hand. "—this would be it."

Hermione fidgeted with the dark wood, turning it nervously in her lap.

"Beyond that—" McGonagall spread her palms. "—I know only what comes in the paper, much like
anyone else."

"And yet you didn't notice that some evil tree out there nearly just killed me."

"I beg your pardon?"

Hermione was somewhat appeased to see genuine confusion etched across the headmistress's usually austere features. "I was in the forest... It had this face, this horrible face, with these oozing red eyes... I've read a lot of books in the past year," Hermione hedged. "And I've never heard of any tree that reads your mind, taunts you with creepy half-riddles, then eats your clothes and tries to kill you."

Despite how absurd Hermione realized her words must sound, McGonagall seemed more alarmed than disbelieving. "A tree, you said? Can you describe it?"


Her cynicism slipped past the headmistress unnoticed. "You're lucky to have gotten away then, Ms. Granger," she offered. "If your 'evil tree' is what I'm inclined to believe it is, that is." Her brow furrowed. "It has been so long since anyone wandered the far side of the forest, I've often feared things are being forgotten that ought not to be. Secrets both within the castle and without. The darker legends of our founders."

"In the journals of Godric Gryffindor, he wrote of his travels to the wilds of the Americas. It was said he attracted a dark creature there, something that bound itself to him and followed him all the long journey back to our institution. It tormented him for a time before he could make sense of the madness that seemed to haunt his increasingly sleepless nights. It taunted that he lacked the bravery he so prized in the very house he led, filling his mind with fears and failures. Near gone with delusion, he lured the creature into the Forbidden Forest and bound it to one of the oldest holly trees in the furthest hills, far beyond the wanderings of his students, but where he could watch over it, study it, and ensure its safe keeping away from those it sought to consume."

McGonagall's hands wandered she spun the tale, a nervous, yet elegant gesture, finally settling in each other's grasp, clasped in front of her waist. "It has gone by many names in many times and many places. To the Scots, it has always been a bogle; at Beauxbatons, le croque-mitaine. To Gryffindor, it was simply 'Old Red Eyes.'" She shifted, rolling her weight to her left, as though suddenly realizing the stone beneath them didn't make the most comfortable seat. "Rowena Ravenclaw studied it in Godric's captivity and came to believe it some distant ancestor of the boggart, a creature that plays a far more articulate game of cat-and-mouse before cannibalizing its now-lunatic prey. It was believed to have been destroyed after Godric's death. Yet roving centaurs have claimed sightings many times, and not all who have gone to those distant trees have returned to the Hillsland herd. It is something very foreign to the forest. I've never see it, through the wards or otherwise. I dare say you're lucky to be alive."

Hermione stared down at her ankle. It was clearly decorated with a whirl of ruddy, irritated skin where she'd performed her exhausted healing. "Happy to know you'd save me from Bellatrix, but if an evil bogeyman-tree murdered me, that's just the way I'd go."

"I would hope to keep you from either demise, Ms. Granger. You know you are always welcome here."

Hermione frowned again, startled to hear the invitation after all that had occurred since the headmistress last offered her a job in the halls behind those gates. "Are you still trying to hire me?"
She chuckled softly. "Ah, but of course. However, please know you are welcome at Hogwarts in whatever capacity you need. Your safety should never be conditional upon a contract, nor upon my curiosity."

Stillness settled over them. For the first time, Hermione heard the sounds of the night, early season crickets trilling their evening symphony with no regard for the two tired women in their midst. It was beautiful here, she realized. The rustle of forest to her right, the rippling, argentate reflection of a quarter moon in the lake to her left... That word, safety, felt more tempting than ever.

"And her?" whispered Hermione. "What happens to her if I leave?"

"Are you planning to attend her for the rest of your life?"

Hermione's frown deepened. She'd forgotten, somehow, that while McGonagall knew she was holed up in the woods with a magicless madwoman, there was no way for the headmisress to have read her mind. Her intentions remained hers alone.

"No," she admitted softly. "I just... I wanted to..."

She kicked her heels back against the stone, wincing as she jarred her injured ankle.

"I don't think she deserves to go back to Azkaban!" she burst out. "And I don't think I should have... I don't think I have any right..." She huffed in frustration. "I'm the reason she has no magic," she confessed. "I'm the one who took it. Me. Not someone who she'd wronged, not someone whose parents she murdered, not the Ministry she tried to destroy. I never meant to take that from her! Have I lost it?" she finally asked. She looked up, searching the headmistress's eyes for an answer. "Am I an idiot If I want to help her?"

Even in the darkness, what she saw looked suspiciously like... sympathy.

"Not at all, Ms. Granger. It means, despite a world that doesn't reward you for it, you've managed to keep seeing the best in people." McGonagall smiled sadly. "I once saw great things in her, too."

Once again, the night swallowed their stillness in its own. An owl called overhead, and the crickets grew as quiet as the witches among them. When the insect song resumed, Hermione realized she was crying.

A gentle, calming hand came to rest between her shoulders. Hermione gasped back a sob. "I don't want to see anything in her! I don't want to care."

"That's quite alright, Hermione."

She flinched at the sound of her own first name.


"But I can't just leave, d-don't you see? It's not okay!" She wiped furiously at her eyes, but the tears continued. "I'm responsible for this, me and my thrice-cursed magic!"

Through her tears, the story spilled out. Lucius's attack, Bellatrix's horrifying response, Hermione's frantic attempt to save her— Once she started, she couldn't stop. She admitted her mum's betrayal, stammered out fragments of Bellatrix's stories, choked on her growing horror at the particular pain she'd added to this terrible woman's dark, terrible life. As she confessed her mad scheme to teach Bellatrix how to survive as a Muggle, she struggled to regain her composure. She took three deep breaths, hesitating, trying to decide whether to confess her change in plans. This wasn't the woman
she'd fled from danger looking for; this was an almost-stranger she had little reason to trust, but the headmistress had listened thus far, and the Ministry hadn't descended on them just yet. "After that, I... I couldn't..."

McGonagall saw right through her. "You changed your mind."

Hermione sniffed and nodded miserably. "I tried. I failed. Doesn't matter anymore. I can't fix her even if I want to."

"Her, or her magic?" McGonagall asked softly.


A sad half-smile ghosted across the headmistress's lips. Then, her gaze turned stern. "I hesitate to even say this, because I can't say I'm comfortable with the outcome should you succeed, but it is possible, Ms. Granger. Magic is mutable, but, like matter and energy, can be neither fully created nor fully destroyed."

Hermione hunched her shoulders. The turn towards magical theory had her instantly defensive. "I know it's not gone. I... I saw it today, her magic. But I just can't-- I always make it worse! No matter what I do, what I try, every time I touch raw magic, someone gets hurt, and my life goes further and further to hell."

"Have you considered—" McGonagall offered cautiously, "—that your trouble may have nothing to do with the magic, and everything to do with—"

"Me?" Hermione cut in, reproachful. "Of course I have! I can't do anything right with this stuff, can I? Can't use it on my own magic, can't control it, can't seem to do one single bit of good with—"

"You've misconstrued my intentions, Ms. Granger. I don't imagine this reflects poorly on your skill or control; rather, have you considered your state of mind?"

Hermione opened her mouth to answer, then closed it again.

A chill stole its way through her whole body.

She began to shiver, not with cold or fear this time, but with a glimmering start of something that felt terrifyingly like... understanding.

"I—I think I have to go," she said.

The headmistress inclined her head. "Very well. However—" She grasped Hermione's wrist as she made to stand. "—please, tread carefully."

Hermione let out a breathless cough of laughter. *I have no idea what I'm doing,* she thought. *And I'll probably still tread all over it like a giant in a pixie nest, but...* "I'll try," she said aloud, and spun on the spot into darkness.

When Hermione landed just outside the hideout, her burst of scattered euphoria faded at the memory of what she'd left behind. She hesitated at the door, gathering her thoughts.

Bellatrix was standing by the kitchen counter when Hermione entered. A faint skritching echoed in the air, the rhythmic scrape of knife-point against wood. A shiver of déj à vu slid down her spine. When the door clicked shut behind her, the scratching paused, but picked up again with no
acknowledgment of Hermione's presence.

Pleasantries, she sensed, would not be welcome.

"You weren't scaring me, this time," Hermione whispered. "When I touched you, before, when I saw your magic again today, I must have gotten there on my own."

Bellatrix snorted, but otherwise continued to ignore her.

"This was different," Hermione insisted. "And I think I know why."

"Different? Hardly," Bellatrix drawled. "You were losing it, pet. Just like always."

Hermione refused to rise to the bait. "No," she said. She stepped up beside the other witch. Bellatrix's hair still hung loose around her shoulders, shielding the knife from Hermione's gaze, but she could now see that her missing wand rested beneath Bellatrix's other palm on the counter-top. She carefully set Bellatrix's beside her own. "I was apologizing to you."

Bellatrix sniffed. "What different does it make."

"It makes for a different state of mind."

Hermione saw Bellatrix's eyes widen.

"No," she breathed. The knife clattered sideways and slid into the sink, forgotten.

"You… you were sorry." Bellatrix filled the word with disdain, but didn't pause to press her aversion to the concept of apologies. "You actually felt bad," she continued, voice ringing with an odd sort of disbelief. "For me, or maybe guilty, but you…"

"And before," Hermione whispered, picking up the trailing train of thought. "I was terrified, or angry, or…"


Slowly, Hermione nodded, pleased that Bellatrix's words paralleled the thoughts McGonagall's conversation had sparked, but nervous at the anger etched on Bellatrix's face. "I almost can't believe we never considered it before, but I—I think we might finally be on to something."

Her mind was still churning, but she tried to put ideas in some semblance of order. "The first time I may have used raw magic, with Lucius, I— I was angry, afraid. I saw his magic, and there wasn't a… a spell in my mind, or anything at all, really, I just… threw everything I had at him, and he broke. And then, when I was working with the headmistress, when she dragged up my memories, I — I felt so violated: I was afraid of what she would see. And when I saw her magic I… All I could do was muddle things, scramble them all together. Then, with you, when you were on fire and I was worried, terrified, and angry, all at once —" Hermione wrapped her arms around her stomach. "— I just wanted it to stop. I reached in and just… I destroyed everything."

"Emotions," Bellatrix repeated, spitting the word like a curse. "What a pea-brained thing to make magic from."

"If it's true…" Hermione shrugged nervously. "If it's been my own state of mind that made everything go so wrong, then… Maybe there is a way to fix things. If fear and anger and… and
nerves make raw magic destructive and volatile, and apologies—"Or guilt, or pity, she admitted to herself, but refused to say it aloud. "—just make things distant and cold: too little, too late, I… I must still need that… that push, but if I need to feel something to use it at all, then maybe all it'll take is… something different, something positive, to fix things."

Leaving both wands on the counter, Hermione stepped away and crossed to the sink. Bellatrix’s eyes followed her all the way. She quickly poured herself a glass of water as she tried to shake off the aftershocks of the past few hours.

"It makes sense, really," she continued. "Narcissa said as much, once, about old magic harnessing the power of emotions. I don't know why I never saw it before. I've been a mess, every time I did something with this magic, because people just kept… provoking me, like that was the answer." She turned back towards the other witch, raising the glass to her lips. "And the intention was right. I needed the… the intensity… yes, that's it. I can't do it without… something to make me reach out, to leave myself behind and go somewhere safer and purer, but just pushing me… I've only ever gotten there through these dark feelings, negative ones, and I must carry that with me. Positive intensity, on the other hand… That might just do the trick."

Bellatrix nodded her head as Hermione finished. It was a slow, contemplative motion. In the end, her eyes narrowed. "You need a shag."

Hermione spilled water all down the front of her robes. "What?" she gasped, pawing ineffectively at the wet stain on her chest.

"Sex," Bellatrix insisted. Casually, as though she had never spoken at all, Bellatrix handed over Hermione's wand.

Hermione took it but didn't move to wave her robes dry. She hesitated, frozen, waiting for an explanation.

Bellatrix arched an eyebrow. "Positive intensity. With me. You're the one who said it: You need sex. And don't play coy with me. You were having plenty enough of it back home."

Hermione spluttered nonsense sounds for a good half minute before she managed a reasonably firm "No!" She hurriedly gulped the last of the water that hadn't landed on her clothes down her suddenly dry throat and set aside the glass. "God, no! Positive intensity doesn't mean… You can't possibly think…" She couldn't even make herself repeat the word. "That's hardly the only way to get good emotions!"

Bellatrix shrugged. "Is to me, pet."

Hermione exhaled loudly through her nose. "You've absolutely got to stop calling me that!" Bellatrix's words had ruffled her, and that horrid nickname wasn't helping. Neither was the new intensity in Bellatrix's eyes, the half smirk on her lips that seemed to say she knew exactly how flustered she'd made Hermione, and that she had no intention of taking it back.

"Whatever you say," she murmured. "It's not going to change the answer."

"Sex," hissed Hermione, "is not the answer. You… you're repulsed by me! Do you even like girls?" These weren't the questions she intended to ask, but she couldn't cut herself off. Her hands seemed determined to strangle the life out of the air between them, clutching at nothing in a panicked attempt to make her words hit home. "Have you really been so… so damaged that you can't imagine any other way to… to feel joy, or—or happiness, or anything besides, oh, I don't know… loathing?"
Bellatrix flinched. Hermione saw it, a reflexive recoil of every muscle in her body, but she recovered just as quickly. "I believe the word you're looking for is pragmatic, pet. Damaged?" She paced slowly forward, narrowing the gap between them until there was little more than a hands breadth left. "I'm practically flawless." She punctuated the words with a suddenly sultry, teasing grin, eyes sharp under half-lids. The back of one hand brushed down the curve of her throat and settled over her heart, drawing Hermione's eyes to the ever-present display of pale skin cresting the dark neckline of even her simplest black robes. Her grin curled up in a quick laugh. "And practical is just the game! It's only practical, after all. Effective, efficient… Why, I bet I could have my magic back before I even had your clothes off."

Bellatrix pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, releasing it as she added, "And repulsed is a mighty strong word, don't you think?"

She reached out and snagged a wayward curl of Hermione's hair, tucking it slowly behind her ear. By the time Hermione lifted a hand to stop her, she had already pulled away.

"I think you'll find my distaste for your blood status is not nearly as strong as my distaste for living another month without magic."

Hermione shook her head. She started to slide past Bellatrix along the edge of the sink. A hint of the dark witch's earlier anger had slipped into her last sentence, and Hermione wanted to be somewhere else, anywhere else, that didn't involve an eerily predatory Bellatrix propositioning her against the kitchen counter.

"And no, Granger," she murmured, catching Hermione's wrist before she could get too far. "I don't like girls." As Hermione watched, frozen, Bellatrix ran her eyes down the length of her body, slowly but surely removing every bit of clothing with her gaze as she went. Hermione felt the stare like a physical thing, warm and dangerous in its intensity. "I quite enjoy women, though." She chuckled, raising her eyes to Hermione's once more. "As you well know."

The words sparked to mind an image Hermione had done her best to erase from memory, an image seen through Bellatrix's eyes, an intimate moment with a naked woman who, at some indefinite point in her past, had lain beneath her. She flinched again. How could she have forgotten?

"Runs in the family," Bellatrix added with a final smirk.

That was the last straw. Hermione jerked free of Bellatrix's hand. "You're appalling," she gasped. "Not two hours ago you were talking about killing me, and you somehow think sex is on the table?"

Bellatrix offered an innocent shrug. "Might want to start on a bed, first."

Hermione threw up her hands with a sound of pure exasperation. "You are insane. You have gone absolutely out of your mind, and not the way you always are. No! The answer is no—I am not having sex with you! It wouldn't work, anyway! I have precisely zero interest in you, no attraction to you whatsoever! We need positive intensity. Not… whatever that misguided attempt would be. We've just got to… We'll have to figure something else out."

"And what, pray tell, might that be?" asked Bellatrix. She sounded… almost genuinely curious. Almost.

"Well I don't know, do I?" Hermione insisted, glancing over her shoulder towards the nearest door. She wanted desperately to escape this entire situation. "Friendship?"

A moment of complete stillness held, grew—then Bellatrix shattered it with a peal of cackling
laughter. It went on for far longer than was comfortable, quickly becoming quite possibly the most dismissive minute Hermione had ever been forced to live through.

Still laughing, Bellatrix grabbed an entire box of cereal bars off the top shelf and left the room without another word.

Hermione found herself alone beneath the kitchen's blue root-glow. Too late, anger caught up with her. "I almost died to come up with this, I'll have you know!" she yelled, but Bellatrix's door was well and thoroughly closed.

Her stomach growled. *Empty stomach, empty kitchen, probably almost midnight.* She ticked off her miseries in her head. *No dinner, no closure, no shoe, and yelling at no one.* She sighed aloud. *And to think I could have just stayed at Hogwarts.*
Chapter 31

Hermione woke ill-at-ease, twitchy with half-remembered dreams, none of them pleasant. She shrugged herself out of bed and into jeans; they needed groceries, and she’d been putting it off. Every time she left their bit of the woods, she felt more and more nervous in the outside world. She kept waiting for something to give, for something to change this boring, uneasy peace they’d been stuck in. Ask her two days ago and she’d have said she was ready to be done the lot of it for good. But now that boring had been usurped by Bellatrix saying something even more unexpected than usual, Hermione found herself clinging to normality all over again.

You need a shag.

Bellatrix’s voice danced circles in her skull where it had lodged like a terrible song.

Positive intensity. With me. You need sex.

Hermione had never wished more desperately that she could just punch the voice in her head and have done with it.

As she padded across the chilly morning floor, feet bare, she stared longingly back at her covers. Instead, she grabbed her cloak. She wrapped it about her shoulders, tucked all the way up to her chin as a substitute for the soft warmth she was leaving behind, and yawned her way towards the kitchen.

Once in the doorway, she rubbed her eyes, still itching with sleep, and brushed away the truly horrific slump of frizzing hair which had decided it wanted to live in front of her face today instead of on the back of her head where it belonged. Blearily, she blinked up at Bellatrix. "You’re never up before me."

She was too grumpy to be startled, but not too sleepy to offer the dark silhouette by the counter an accusatory glare. She blinked a few more times to bring her into focus, then frowned.

She looked… good. Hermione would be hard pressed to say what, exactly, was different today—perhaps it was her hair; loose, shiny curls hanging low and heavy instead of thrown haphazardly up and pinned by her wand, or perhaps her smile; warm and welcoming, terrifyingly so, like a house in the woods with all its lights on, inviting her to come closer, to peer inside, to press her nose to the glass, and to perish.

Or perhaps it was none of that. Perhaps it was only the words she’d said yesterday, painting her in their image.

"Not allowed to fancy a cup, am I?"

It was then that Hermione spotted the teacup beside her, steaming. She glanced at the kettle and her frown deepened. A second cup waited beside it in clear invitation. Her skin felt tight, ill-fitting. "You’re completely transparent, you know." Her voice was sharp. Still, she stuck her arm out from between the folds of her cloak and grabbed the cup, hoping for a warm cure to her morning fog.

She blew across it once, then sipped, sighed, and closed her eyes. She couldn't keep from painting a picture in her mind, a memory of how Bellatrix had appeared when they'd first met, all hollowed cheeks and haunted eyes, the stark angles of captivity and starvation that lingered even long months after her years in Azkaban. Now, pinched and tired had been filled by time and her wild, near-violent
strength, yet edges lingered, like she'd pieced herself back together with all her bones set wrong, too proud to let anyone heal her, too stubborn to accept help with the pain. But these weren't the remnants of physical wounds. When she spoke, there was a distance that never seemed to lessen, and there were fires in her eyes that never seemed to burn out, never let her rest.

If there was one thing Hermione wished for the both of them, it was a better night's sleep.

She took another sip and finally resigned herself to facing the day. When her eyes blinked open again, she realized how long it had been since she'd actually looked at her, the unwilling guest in their shared situations. As busy as she'd been at scheming and lying and playing brave, she'd been afraid to meet Bellatrix's eyes for more than a passing glance. Looking now, through the faint haze of cornflower and bergamot steam rising from their two teacups, felt uncomfortably intimate. She felt as though looking long enough might reveal what was off-kilter, what lingered in Bellatrix's perpetual unrest. Does anyone who learns survive?

Hermione looked away. This whole morning felt like death.

How was she going to spend an entire day like this, let alone the indefinite future, now that Bellatrix had set everything on its head?

"Any opinion on breakfast?" she asked at last, struggling to lighten the tone of her own wandering thoughts.

"Oh, I can think of a thing or two." Bellatrix was grinning.

Hermione winced. "If the next word out of your mouth is something other than food, Bellatrix, I swear—"

"You haven't got to give it the full three syllables every time, you know," she cut in. "Honestly, not even mother dearest could be bothered keeping up with the mouthful of a name she gave me."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Please don't tell me you've gone from 'If you say my name I'll kill you' to 'Call me Bella' because you think—"

"Shhhhh."

She spluttered indignantly, but Bellatrix stepped closer, putting a finger to Hermione's lips. Her hand was warm, her touch gentle. "I'm only being friendly."

The finger slipped sideways, curling feather-light along the line of her jaw, and Hermione flinched.

"If you keep reacting to everything I say like it's dripping with innuendo—" She drew the back of her nail down Hermione's throat, parting the folds of her cloak and slowing almost unnoticeably where her pulse beat closest to the surface, though Hermione could have sworn it was beating directly in her ears. "—we'll never get anywhere else, will we?"

The wandering touch slid to a rest on the safer skin of her collarbone as she smirked down at Hermione with those dark, mocking lips. "What would you like to do today, pet?"

Hermione swallowed hard as a warm wave of something she refused to name washed through her. *Merlin, she can flirt*, she huffed internally, ducking her head. She pulled back from Bellatrix—daring smirk, taunting words, teasing fingertip and all.

She'd had more than enough of mercurial women with questionable motives and misplaced morality turning their charm on her.
"What I would like is to drink my tea, make some food, and then talk." Even that sounded dangerous.

If she hadn't been so invested in the newly rediscovered concept of eye-contact, she might have missed the shadow that flashed across Bellatrix's face. Gone as quickly as it had come, nothing of the momentary darkness lingered in her voice when spoke. "So be it."

With that, silence fell, and Hermione was left to cook in its wake. She had all the time in the world to wish she hadn't been quite so decisive when she declared talking the last item on the menu—a noiseless, ghostlike Bellatrix was as eerie as it got. It didn't matter that the nerve-wracking witch taken a seat, picking calmly at the tabletop with the tip of a knife as she waited; Hermione still felt watched, stalked, the entire time she stood by the stove.

The weight of the room got to her before she finished. "Why do you want your magic back?" she blurted out, a reflexive invocation of so many earlier questions in this same room.

The scratching behind her stopped.

She struggled to catch up to her own hasty words. "I don't mean... Well, of course you want your magic back. But... What are you going to do first, you know? What are you most looking forward to, once you have it?"

"Optimistic today, are we, pet?"

Hermione hadn't heard her rise, but that sadistic-sweet voice was closer than she'd expected. Needing plates (and the measure of safety that came from keeping Bellatrix in her crosshairs), she turned back towards her.

Bellatrix shifted her weight from one foot to the other, then leaned against the table she'd just vacated, shrugging her curls back over one shoulder with an indrawn breath. "Fire."

Hermione frowned and paused mid-step. "Fire?" Something was different, had been getting more and more different as the days in this otherwise unchanging place ticked by. She pivoted slowly on the spot, bringing Bellatrix back into the center of her vision. Until now, she couldn't place it. She breathed in and crossed her arms. "Fire," she echoed again, more quietly than before.

Bellatrix saw her frown and straightened. "Are you just going to repeat me, or have you got something to say, pet."

It clicked. "You've been startling me all week. Not that you aren't always awfully good at sneaking up on people, but I think... I think it's because you smell different."

Bellatrix blinked, then laughed.

Hermione's frown deepened into a scowl. "It's true." She took another breath. The sharp, fresh scent she had come to associate with the witch behind her, juniper and ash, had faded. "You don't smell like fire anymore." Without that particular biting scent, Bellatrix smelled very natural, earthen and unassuming in an earthen and unassuming home, and it had set Hermione on edge more than once without quite knowing why. It was the same feeling she'd had whenever Bellatrix startled her in the manor kitchen, one of the rare places warmed by frequent open fires. Everywhere else, she carried the cold shadow of dying embers into halls and rooms that smelled like old cloth and older stone, a warning presence impossible to miss.

"Huh."
The soft sound of contemplation made Hermione smile, taking some small pleasure in discovering something Bellatrix hadn't considered before.

"Well, it's just as I said," Bellatrix huffed. "I want fire back. You never leave one lit, I never get to play."

Hermione knew "play" was meant not only literally, but murderously, too. To the dark witch, fire was equal parts weapon and toy. She remembered coming home to a shell of a building, a floating third floor, and an acre of ash. She remembered their first disastrous meeting: a hunched figure, fingers tracing burning lines in the air with the fire she'd stolen from the fireplace in her otherwise unlit room. And she remembered with the unflinching clarity of the present the look and smell of blackening flesh, two arms wreathed in uncontrollable flame.

She shuddered.

Bellatrix seemed to read her thoughts. "Oh, not that fire." She rubbed up and down the length of her forearm, a twitchy, nervous gesture Hermione hadn't seen before. "Have you never even played with sparks? Are you a witch or aren't you?"

No, Hermione hadn't, and her silence was telling.

Bellatrix leaned forward, smirking. Her lips plucked words one by one like petals from a helpless flower. "You've never held captive the heat of the sun and turned it against your enemies? Never spun your body into a living flame, never torn your way through the walls and rooms and knickknacks of some poor soul's precious home, consuming his livelihood with the boundless hunger searing through your veins?"

Hermione was well past being appalled these days. When her only reply was a quiet shake of her head, Bellatrix sniffed.

"Of course you haven't." She sighed. "Ah, you've missed out, pet. Look."

Bellatrix held out her hands, palms open, fingers splayed for Hermione's inspection.

She leaned closer, intrigued at the odd offering. The tips of Bellatrix's fingers were… off-color, tinted a strange sort of silvery-white. She reached out and grasped Bellatrix's thumb between her own thumb and forefinger, tracing the captured tip with the first two fingers on her other hand. A smooth, yielding callus met her questing touch.

Bellatrix had very pretty hands.

She also had no fingerprints.

"This is why we don't play in fire with our bare hands, hmm? Even with magic, it's like trying to hold a star; your spell might lock her jaws, but her nippy little claws will sneak around the edges and snag you anyway."

A distant, wistful look flitted across her face, gone in a flash, but it crept back slowly, until Hermione had to look away from the eerie longing she saw there.

"It's the kind of freedom that consumes you."

By the time she glanced back, Bellatrix had looked away.

Hermione hesitated, unsure what to make of this moment. In the end, she stretched out a hand and
rested it gently on the nearest shoulder. "I'm sorry you lost that." The dark form, strangely twisted about her center of gravity, flinched, and Hermione's fingers trailed off down the line of one shoulder-blade and away into the air between them. They'd shared more contact in the past twenty-four hours than in the past weeks combined. She sighed, letting her arm settle back at her waist. "We'll sort this out."

Bellatrix spun towards her, fingers curled like the tense bodies of two dead spiders, ready to spring with a final motion of triggered reflex into open fury. Sure enough, her hands splayed accusingly between them a second later. "We have figured this out! It's all... right... here." She slid one angry fingernail along the line of Hermione's cheekbone, still pink with the flustered blush that rose during her earlier flirtation. "You're being—"

She stepped closer.

Hermione stepped back.

"—unnecessarily difficult."

Hermione shook her head, back and forth, then back again. "Can't we please talk about something else? I know you think we— I'm not saying I have a quick solution, but I really am trying to help you! I know you don't really want to—" She forced out the words. "—sleep with me, and as long as you're wasting time trying to make me uncomfortable, you're only going to make this take longer." She kept her voice admirably steady, though it seemed she'd already lost her newfound ability to look Bellatrix directly in the eye.

Long, firm fingers grasped her chin, a now-familiar motion of dominance that made Hermione grit her teeth and try to shrug away. "I said cut it out."

Nails tightened threateningly. "And if I don't?"

Bellatrix leaned closer, filling Hermione's field of vision. She found it impossible to turn away from the fire dancing in Bellatrix's eyes, a trick of the blue light and the furious intensity of her gaze. She swallowed thickly. "Let go of me."

Instead, dark lips parted, and Hermione caught a flash of startlingly white teeth behind them as Bellatrix leaned in to her, breasts and stomach and thighs cleaving to Hermione's frame. "Why should I?"

For a dazed moment, Hermione quite completely forgot what they were talking about. She almost forgot how to breath. Something clawed at the back of her throat, a little like fear, a little like hunger or thirst, but then again nothing like that at all. Even without the ability to hold sparks in her hands, Bellatrix Black gave new, terrifying meaning to the phrase playing with fire. Hermione's blush alone threatened to melt its way right through her face.

"Because if you don't step back right now, I..." She took a deep breath. "I will pull out my wand, and so help me I will leave you here for good."

This close, Hermione could see Bellatrix struggle with her ultimatum, resistance churning into ugly rage before settling into an unreadable mask. Her next words were flippant, dismissive, accompanied by the childish pout she wore like armor. "Only playing, pet."

The hand on her jaw loosened, leaving her with a quick tap on her lower lip and a sliver of laughter cast over her already turned shoulders.

"I'll be taking this—" She snagged a plate Hermione had never gotten to and passed by the pan,
stealing half of breakfast. "—and we'll chat later."

As she vacated the kitchen, Hermione wanted to argue, to remind her that they were just as unlikely to get anywhere if she went back to hiding in her room all day, but she couldn't bring herself say it. To Bellatrix, it would just be another invitation. Instead, she slumped back against the counter, all air leaving her lungs in a rush of sudden exhaustion.

Not for the first time, Hermione felt like prey. But not in the usual sense. Bellatrix had always seemed a natural predator, teeth and claws and all that, but she was also a sexual one. Not for the first time, Hermione knew she'd just been hunted by the latter.

And, even without magic, even with no compulsion, no irresistible seed planted in her mind, she had barely escaped.

For three days, that might have been the end. At first, any time Bellatrix got within three feet of her, Hermione bombarded her with half-formed questions, erecting a wall of words until she could retreat to a safer distance. When Bellatrix made no further mention of her proposition and no further overtures, however, things settled back to the way they'd been before. Hermione cooked, now with more magic, and Bellatrix… Well, Bellatrix did whatever it was she did for most of the day. On the rare occasions Hermione saw her, however… Bellatrix talked.

Which was the first sign that things had changed.

Bellatrix was talking, not whatever it was she'd been about during her gleefully tormentive stories before. That had been terrorizing, more like. Now, her words invited Hermione to listen without fear, slipping casual reference to lighter moments at Hogwarts into her tales, sparing an unexpected kind word for Narcissa here and there, even admitting to a day's school shopping in Diagon where she'd wandered away from her family, gotten lost in the Muggle side of London, and kept asking passers-by how to enchant the magic boxes in the telly display of a department store window. (Hermione had been so distracted by the image of a tiny Bellatrix furiously bemused by the concept of television that she almost forgot how to laugh.) She snared them in a strange sort of ongoing narrative, conversing between meals and in odd passing moments, a greeting here, a phrase there, scattered between hours apart so haphazardly Hermione might well have missed the change completely.

Once she noticed, however, she couldn't just ignore it. Not when she was over-analyzing, again and again, night after night, what the other witch was saying.

Waiting for the other shoe to drop.

As much as she denied it—and the necessity of active denial grew every day—there was something about Bellatrix that captivated her, called to her in some deeply instinctual way. None of this felt any less conniving and deceptive than the threats and rage that had come before, and she still made Hermione want to rip her own hair out at least twice a day, but once in a while, she caught a glimpse of something rare and human, and it stirred a reflexive desire to care, to protect, to witness as no other had taken the time to do before. Oh, Hermione knew Bellatrix would strangle her for even thinking it, but that didn't stop her. The first time she'd seen Bellatrix's scars, the tracks on her arm, the fire that created them, she hadn't been afraid. In the midst of danger, she'd reached out, wanting to calm, to steady, to connect. To heal. In all that had come after, despite Hermione's best efforts to quash her kinder instincts, something of that moment remained.

It was a draw she hesitated to think too long on. Even with Narcissa, a woman she feared she might well have come to silently love with all the heart she had to give, there were things she couldn't touch, things she couldn't offer. Bellatrix's incredible magnetism was more like a black hole:
Hermione feared that the pull she felt was the ability of an all-consuming darkness to drain everything she had left to give, to drag the whole of her across her horizon and devour her with a hunger nothing could fill, all in single-minded pursuit of her magic.

But for three days, Bellatrix had left her in her own orbit.

When those three days passed without another mention of Bellatrix’s first suggested fix, Hermione began to wonder if maybe, just maybe, this was the other witch’s attempt at giving Hermione’s counter-proposal a try.

On the fourth day, Bellatrix’s eyes held a different gleam.

"Let’s go for a walk," she said after breakfast.

Hermione shelved the last of their just-cleaned dishes with a wave of her wand. "Why?" she asked suspiciously.

"You’re the one who wanted buddy-buddy get-to-know-you time. Besides, I’m feeling restless." She pivoted towards the door, leaving no further room for discussion. "Come along, won’t you."

Hermione lingered by the sink for a good five minutes, protesting Bellatrix’s presumptive command, but was forced to admit she hardly had big plans. Curiosity won. Reluctantly, but not all that reluctantly at all, she followed.

When she pushed through the door, Hermione found a pleasant enough day, springy and overcast.

Bellatrix didn’t mention the delay. "Where’ve you already been?"

Hermione frowned. She waved vaguely to their left. "About twenty meters that way. There’s a nice log. I sit on it, I drink coffee, wander around in a circle for a while, look at all the trees that look exactly the same, then I come in." She paused. "And that way," she added, pointing directly ahead. "But just far enough to know I’ve no interest in going back."

Bellatrix grinned. "That way it is, then."

It took Hermione a moment to catch on. "Oh, absolutely not. Would you stop walking!" She scurried up beside her, determined to redirect them. "Last time I went this way…"

"Hmm?" Bellatrix prompted absently, kicking up leaf-litter with the shiny toe of one black boot. There was a sudden spring in her step, and Hermione took long strides to keep up.

"I ran into something, okay? And honestly I’d rather not pay it another visit."

With that, she gained Bellatrix’s full attention. "Ooooh, what spooked you, pet? Stumble into a cave of blood-sucking bugbears?" She circled Hermione cheerfully. All her hair was piled atop her head, pulling her features into sharper relief. "Slip in the muck by a needle-nokken lake? Run afoul of all those big—" Her voice dropped low. "—hungry—" Her last word rasped eerily close to Hermione's ear. "—spiders?"

Without warning, fingers crept up Hermione's spine and she yelped, jumping away.

"Stop it," she huffed, rubbing at her arms to kill the feeling of hundreds of tiny legs that seemed to be crawling all over her. She wasn’t particularly scared of spiders, but she wasn’t all that fond of them either.
This was a different sort of playful than Hermione was used to. She forced out an anxious "Very funny" to chase off the teasing and shake off a chill while Bellatrix laughed and whirled gleefully away between the trees. "And no, no spiders!" she called after her. "None of the above. Just a very ...peculiar... tree."

She felt dizzy just watching as Bellatrix spun to face her again, skirts swirling like a melancholy cloud. "Near here?"

Hermione shrugged. She didn't much care for how the other witch, ever eager to torment, had perked up at that announcement, prowling closer.

"Red eyes?" hissed Bellatrix.

Hermione stiffened. "How did you—"

"I know these woods better than you do," she sang with taunting mirth.

To Hermione's frustration, Bellatrix resumed her half-skipping jaunt between the trees with renewed purpose. Hermione's only consolation was the unlikeliness they would stumble upon the very same place she'd found in her blind nighttime rush. She huffed along, dragging her toes in exaggerated misery, but Bellatrix foraged ahead undeterred.

After a few minutes' walk, Bellatrix pushed aside a tangle of brittle lower branches with a sweep of her arm.

"Voila!"

"That's it!" Hermione gasped. "I suppose I can add 'runs in a straight line while sobbing' to my ever-growing list of marketable talents. It was a regretful thought. She couldn't believe they had walked right up to the place without her recognizing a single thing along the way.

The tree complimented its neighbors, nestled into the shadow of two taller, broader oaks which stood leafless this early in the season. But the thing from her memory cast a meaner shadow, all low, hulking clusters of branches dark with heavy, waxen leaves, each tipped with seven deadly points. By daylight, Hermione could identify it as the holly the headmistress had described. My wand-wood. The odd connection unsettled her.

While she stood frozen, Bellatrix seized the moment and blazed ahead.

"Wait!" cried Hermione. "Don't get to close!"

Bellatrix ignored her.

Shuffling from foot to foot until she could convince herself to go further, she finally put one in front of the other, scuffling after the other witch until she reached a line of slender roots peeking through dirt, moss, and lichen like worms after a heavy rain. "Don't touch those!" she insisted. "You can't even use a wand!"

Bellatrix touched the roots. Soil stirred lazily at the disturbance, and Hermione made to yell again, but Bellatrix paid no heed to the restlessness at her feet, trodding squarely on any and all movement that got in her way with unquestioning confidence. When she was so close to the trunk that Hermione nearly lost sight of her among the branches, a flicker of silver flashed in the dim, cloud-filtered sunlight, and Bellatrix drove a knife directly into one red-jewel eye.

With a strange sound like air hissing out of a punctured bicycle tire buried in the sand, the roots slumped back down to the forest floor.
Hermione stared, incredulous. "Is it—"

"Dead!" Bellatrix sounded, if anything, in even higher spirits. "Dead as it gets." She let out a grunt of exertion accompanied by the all-too-familiar sound of metal scraping against hardwood, and something plunked down into the leaves.

Hermione toed at the nearest root. "It that all?" She had no interest in stepping even the slightest bit closer. "It's really dead?"

When she looked up, she yelped. Bellatrix stood just inches from her, and Hermione swore to herself this would be the very last time she'd let anything startle her today: She'd had enough of jumping out of her skin to last a century. "Could you make sound, please?"

Instead, Bellatrix extended a closed fist, smirking as silently as she'd walked. A few stray emerald leaves had caught in her hair like waxen stars. "Souvenir."

Hermione found something faceted and yielding pressed into her hand. She stared numbly at a lump of sap too perfectly ruby-red to be anything other than one of the creature's not-quite-eyes.

"These buggers pop up everywhere. Some stupid pet of Godforsaken Gryffindor infected half the forest before they chopped it down. Holly trees— Decent protection, so someone must've thought it was a good idea to stick an invasive spirit in one." She kicked the nearest root and it crumbled into thick, lumpy dust. "Seems the first tree did its best. After all, it's only other hollies that get like this sometimes. If they didn't provide some kind of protection, we'd probably have a whole forest of Red Eyes Junior here."

Hermione swallowed down a strange lump in her throat as Bellatrix wrapped warm fingers around the back of her hand, carefully pressing them closed about the "souvenir."

"That, on the other hand, is a most useful and extraordinarily rare potions ingredient." Her thumb brushed pointedly across Hermione's knuckles. "I'll entrust you its safekeeping."

Despite an overwhelming desire to fling it into the forest, Hermione pulled free and gingerly pocketed the gruesome gift. "How in Merlin's name do you know all that? I talked to…" She trailed off, unsure how Bellatrix would react to her admission she'd paid a visit to Hogwarts during all this. "Well, I heard there was only one tree-creature, and nobody knew where it was."

Bellatrix cackled. "You thought this was the biggest, meanest evil in the forest? Bitty, baby holly like that?" She pouted mockingly. "Poor, scared little thing."

Hermione did her best not to whine. "It seemed much bigger before!"

"Did it now."

Hermione glowered. "Yes. It did."

"Care to see a really big tree?"

"N-not particularly," she stammered. "In fact, no. Not at all."

"Well, that simply won't do. Come along!" Her voice lilited, airy with the day's unusual cheer, but clear and crisp with command.

Still grumbling and dragging her feet but unwilling to be left alone, Hermione followed along behind her. She kept ten steps back from Bellatrix's determined, destructive stride so as not to get bombarded
by bits of flying debris kicked up in her waltz through the trees. It was only when Bellatrix stopped
some minutes later that Hermione realized her question had been dodged, and by then, the scenery
was too distracting to press the matter.

Hermione gaped.

Bellatrix had led them to what, at a glance, might well have been the end of the forest. She struggled
to make sense of the space. Trees clustered on all sides of the clearing, but between them stretched
the greenest mass of grass and fern Hermione had ever seen in these dark, earth-brown woods. Every
speck of growth shimmered with dew; the afternoon sun had yet to chase away the morning mist, but
even the eerie stranglehold of pale vapor couldn't conceal a stunning shallow pool in its center, clear
and still, where off-color gold lurked beneath the water.

Upon closer inspection, long strings of moss coated the basin's rocky bottom, waving and billowing
like clumps of thick, flaxen hair. Their movement was dizzying, but when Hermione dipped two
cautious fingertips below the surface at the shallows by their feet, the nearest strand fluttered, soft and
cold and pleasant, against her skin.

On the farthest bank of the water, a massive, side-tipped holly grew along the ground, stark in its
darkness against this glittering, mist-blessed spot.

Hermione let her whole hand dangle in the water and turned her face slowly towards the one who
had brought her here. "This is lovely."

Bellatrix rolled her eyes. "Don't sound so shocked."

For the first time that day, Hermione felt like smiling. "You'll forgive me for thinking this was
another tree-stabbing adventure." She paused, pulling her fingers nervously from the pond. "Is that
one going to try anything?" She nodded towards the far bank.

"No," said Bellatrix. "It's exactly what I said it was: a big tree. The thing in it is long dead. Not sure
how the tree survived it, but also... I don't care."

Hermione found herself squinting as Bellatrix kicked a rock into the shallows. As though someone
had taken a wand to them, the clouds cleared without warning. Sunlight broke through the treetops
and gnawed at the mist, sending half-rainbows dancing across the surface of the water. She half
expected Bellatrix to jump back into the shadows, so rarely had she seen her in full light. Bellatrix, of
course, did no such thing, and Hermione found herself startled by how sunlight changed her features,
softening the shadows under her eyes and lending a warm glow to near-translucency of her pale skin.

Oh, not this again, she thought miserably. Sure, Bellatrix had always been hauntingly beautiful,
everyone knew that, but she never used to notice things like this about her. She didn't know quite
when her brain had decided Bellatrix was worth staring at, and she was sure she'd never actually
agreed to it, but Hermione rarely won in a fight against her own mind.

In the past, her thoughts rarely went beyond how similar Bellatrix looked to Andromeda, and she'd
half expected the sun to bring out that resemblance. Instead, it seemed to separate them further.
Bellatrix's curls gleamed even darker in full light, offering no hint of having ever been previously
acquainted with their daytime star. Where Andromeda—and Narcissa, since Hermione never could
stop herself from dwelling on the lot of them like the miserable fool she was—carried herself with an
easy sort of sophistication, Bellatrix's form bristled with fierce elegance, strong lines inappropriate for
the delicate woman of high society the Black family name purported her to be. Her physical strength
was on prominent display in daylight, something Hermione usually only noticed when it was being
used to fling someone against a wall.
But beyond skin and hair and sinew and bone, Bellatrix in full sun looked… older. She wore her indeterminate age with grace, a settled confidence in her own skin not quite possessed by either younger sister, and the fine lines just beginning to gather at the corners of her eyes leant a dignity so often belied by her childish affectations.

She sneezed.

Hermione stared, met Bellatrix's eyes, then looked away, embarrassed both at the turn her thoughts had taken, and at how shocking she'd found that perfectly human reaction to sudden bright light.

In that time alone, the mist had fled.

Hermione let out a sigh at the feeling of the sun warming her arms. The temperature had gone from nippy spring morning to balmy summer day in a matter of minutes, but her thoughts had dragged her mood somewhere shadowed and confusing. Luckily, the beauty of the day was winning.

"Merlin, that's good," she said, turning her face up and squinting into the light. "Would it ruin the secrecy charm if I blew a hole in the kitchen and made a window? Oh, I've missed the sun."

Bellatrix sniffed. "Do what you like."

Hermione glanced towards her and smiled. "Or, I could just live out here from now on, soaking it in."

"Hmph," Bellatrix snorted, crossing her arms. "Do as you wish."

Hermione gave a faint laugh and weighed the words. Seeing Bellatrix had no intention of immediately continuing on with their peculiar walk, Hermione wriggled free of her outer robe and spread it on the dew-damp grass beside the pond. "I certainly do wish." She flopped backwards on top of it, glad for the Muggle shirt and denim underneath. What with the general mood of the last three days, she still hadn't made it to the grocery store, and putting on Muggle clothes every morning like she was going to do it hadn't actually made it happen.

What had happened, however, was a dramatic increase in temperature since the clouds had abandoned them. Hermione sat up, rolled up her pants, and plopped back down again. She wasn't quite sure, but thought she heard Bellatrix let out a quick huff of laughter.

As she laid in the sun, Hermione considered the morning, the week—everything that had happened since her revelation about raw magic. Was this a good enough moment, blissfully warm in a beautiful place on a day when Bellatrix hadn't done anything half as terrible as usual—had even done something genuinely nice, bringing her here—to give it another try? She rolled her wand between two fingers, slowly wrapping it up against her palm. She didn't feel any particularly strong emotions, but what could it hurt? She imagined herself like the pond, still and at peace and empty of everything but glowing, golden light, and for a moment, she thought she felt something, a little tremor inside of herself, an itch between her lungs. But when she tried to turn her light towards Bellatrix, she felt nothing.

She sighed, letting go of her wand. It had been too much to hope for, anyway.

"While you're burning your ankles..." Bellatrix's voice made her jump. "I'll be right back."

Part of Hermione supposed she should give more thought to those words, should be nervous about Bellatrix wandering off alone, or about being left behind, but she wasn't Bellatrix's keeper, and she didn't want to move. Instead, she heeded the relevant advice and cast a quick anti-sunburn charm, threw her arm over her eyes, and, for the first time in weeks, drifted off into a thoroughly contented
She woke when the shadow of a tree stole enough sunlight to leave her chilly again. She sat up and sighed. In order to chase the sun, she'd have to try sleeping in the pond. Tempting, but impractical. Instead, she looked around for Bellatrix.

Once she'd walked half the perimeter of the clearing, she found her with more leaves in her hair and her knife out, picking another red lump out of the trunk of the giant holly. Hermione fingered the one in her pocket, feeling the smooth facets give slightly at her touch. "What do you want these for?"

Bellatrix grimaced as she popped her prize free. It dropped into a pocket of her skirts with a muffled clunk—how many others did she have in there? This tree was riddled with them, clusters of hard ruby sap speckling the sideways length of it like glimmering chickenpox. Here, they looked nothing like eyes.

"The future." It was a curt reply.

"But what do they do?"

"Depends what you put them in."

She knew if she admitted her frustration, it would only make Bellatrix happier to leave her in the dark. "Fine, don't tell me," she said instead. When Bellatrix started picking at the next lump, however, her impatience won. "Will you at least explain how you know so much about this? This place, these trees..."

Bellatrix paused. She seemed to weigh her answer, head tipped to the side, eyes narrowed. "Given the opportunity to attend such idiotic classes as Defense Against the Dark Arts and Muggle Studies or instead unearth the secrets of the dark, forbidden woods, I often chose the latter."

It was a more satisfactory answer than its predecessors, but Hermione was still less than content. Before she could muster another question, Bellatrix stole her job.

"Don't you ever tire of incessantly interrogating people?"

Hermione blinked, mouth half-open.

"First of all," Hermione spluttered, "I never call you 'Bella.' Second, I sound nothing like that! And third... What do you mean, what about me?"

"Isn't it your turn by now? When do you confess all, hmm? Enlighten me about your dreary life, your selfless Muggle parents, your sad, deprived childhood..." Bellatrix trailed off, pouting mockingly.

Suddenly self-conscious, Hermione bit her lip. "You don't care about my childhood."

Bellatrix snorted. "Of course not. You don't care about mine, either, yet that has never stopped you from asking."

"I do, though." She paused. "It's all rather... morbidly fascinating."
Bellatrix quieted at the admittance. She picked at the nearest lump again, then sighed, letting the knife fall to her side. "Tell me something about you, then. What do you do?" She asked as though she couldn't imagine Hermione doing anything at all. "What do you like, besides bothering me about my ever-so-tragic past?"

Hermione's gaze slid downward. She didn't much fancy talking about herself; it seemed little more than another invitation of mockery. Still, there was something in Bellatrix's voice that gave her pause. If, by some miracle, there was an inkling of genuine interest in Bellatrix's evasive questions, Hermione was reluctant to let the chance for conversation pass. Slowly, she settled cross-legged on the nearest patch of moss, beyond caring what the earth's lingering moisture would do to her clothes.

"What do I like? Learning, mostly. Which might help explain my interrogation habits."

Bellatrix's eyebrow twitched upwards.

"What I do seems like a silly question." She picked blades of grass that poked through the moss, cleaning its softness of invading edges one by one. "I'm here, you're here, we're stuck doing mostly nothing. I keep us fed and fail at magic. Before that, I did about the same: cook, clean, take care of the people who matter to me."

This time, Bellatrix's nose wrinkled. "You're like a sad, well-intentioned cliché."

"I'm a person," Hermione retorted. "I work, I eat, I sleep. My life is, well... it's a lot of doing what it takes to get by—I daresay you've done a fair bit of that, too. In fact, I know you have. I make what I can of it by caring about people, and say what you will, but I know you care about your sisters. And I bet, if you were in my shoes, you'd have made the same choices I did to take care of my family." She hesitated. "I might have made some of yours, too."

Bellatrix had an inscrutable look on her face, all furrowed brows, focused eyes, lips open half an inch, like they were waiting for someone else to put words in them.

"I like magic theory," Hermione pressed on. "I like making up new spells, and I like reading. I hate spending too much time alone and I hate being exhausted. I don't hate cooking and cleaning, they're a necessary part of life, but... well, I hope I'll get to do something bigger someday." She ran a hand over the moss, finding no more grass to pluck. "I have a goal or two. For the future, you know. I'd like to change some things in this world. I don't want kids who grow up like I did to miss out on an education, and I don't want anyone else trapped and abused because of pure-blood marriage rituals. And... I want to make life better for house-elves, for anyone else people like you have been mistreating and taking advantage of."

Hermione paused. That seemed like enough.

"Well then," said Bellatrix.

"You asked."


Hermione wanted to protest, feeling, for the first time in many years, very young. It wasn't a feeling she cared for.

Bellatrix, however, wasn't finished. "And we are about to get very wet."
Hermione blinked at her in confusion.

She glanced up and rubbed her arm. "It's about to storm."

Hermione followed her gaze. Sure enough, the wind was picking up, though the sun still shone from the west. She watched Bellatrix stab at her bit of sap one last time, finally knocking it free with a frown and dropping it in her pocket.

"Shall we?" She waved an arm out before her, inviting Hermione to lead them back around the pond.

In the distance, they heard the first pulse of thunder.

Hermione started to obey the gesture, then paused. Bellatrix looked twitchy. "Something the matter?"

"No." It was a soft denial. "It's nothing. Just... something unexpected."

"That doesn't sound like nothing."

"It's nothing," Bellatrix snapped.

Hermione decided to let it go. She started walking, and a silent Bellatrix fell into step beside her. Hermione watched as she rubbed at her sleeve again, fingers wrapping around her forearm and twisting like she could pull her skin off with friction alone.

Once they were back under the trees, Bellatrix finally murmured, "Never thought I would still feel a storm coming without magic."

"Oh." Hermione wasn't sure how to respond. "Muggles can feel it too. Electricity in the air, a change in the wind, aches in old wounds, and all that."

"I know that."

Somewhere behind them, Hermione heard the swishing, pounding sound of rain pummeling the forest. Bellatrix's eyes were distant.

"It was just... For a second..." This time, she pushed her robe up to her elbow. Nails scoured directly into her arm, scraping harsh and deep across skin and scars alike. "This storm... this storm pricks just like magic."

Hermione felt something twist in her gut. She reached out and covered Bellatrix's hand. "You'll make yourself bleed."

Bellatrix blinked down at her arm as though seeing it for the first time. She shook off Hermione's touch and yanked down her sleeve.

Hermione felt the crushing urge to apologize again. The moments were rare when Hermione glimpsed the deepest hollow in Bellatrix's eyes, but she always knew the worst of it was her creation, the place where magic should be. No one was meant to have that much nothingness inside of them.

For the rest of the walk, Bellatrix drifted as silent as a spirit, seeking out the one path among miles of wilderness that would lead them... Hermione hesitated to think of it as home, but it was all they had. The shadow of rain followed in their wake, dusk settling heavy, the color of ash. In the distance, the sky hung so low the clouds seemed to turn the mountains into volcanic scissures, lumps of arcus gray blooming from each peak like bursts of charcoal and smoke. Thunder rattled, electricity building...
among the trees.

The air ripened as they passed beneath a leafy canopy in full spring bloom, quickly overtaken by the fresh scent of damp moss as they closed in on their destination.

"For all your pretty words about minding family so you don't feel like dying all the time," Bellatrix unexpectedly drawled, "I didn't think you were on the best of terms with yours."

Hermione scrambled to make sense of the sudden decision to speak again. When she realized Bellatrix had resumed their earlier conversation, she winced. She tried not to think about it too much, the bitter last partings she'd had with her mum, the only family she had left. "No," she admitted. "I'm not."

To her surprise, Bellatrix smiled. "It was still a pretty speech, pet."

Hermione huffed, grateful to have regained some semblance of the day's earlier levity, but less than thrilled at the return of her least favorite nickname. "You know, I think that was the most hours you've ever gone without calling me that."

Bellatrix's smile flashed teeth. "You protest so sweetly; how could I call you anything less?"

Hermione glowered. As she made to step over a downed tree in their path, Bellatrix unexpectedly clasped the back of her arm, bracing her with firm and careful fingers. Flustered by the oddly courtly gesture, she indignantly pulled away, almost toppling herself off the log in the process.

The rain broke over them.

With a yelp, Hermione scrambled for balance. She knew their clearing was just a few meters away, so she sprinted through the downpour towards shelter.

Bellatrix, laughing beneath a crack of lightning, followed more slowly behind, face upturned towards the rain.

Back inside and halfway dry again, Hermione surveyed the root structure in the kitchen. She took a deep breath and raised her wand.

First, she summoned four wooden slats off the wall, letting them hover by her head as she worked. Next, she vanished dirt, just a handful at a time, carving through the earth towards the blustery dusk outside. Once she had a hole as large as her torso, she resized the boards from the wall and waved them into the hollow, reset to hold back the dirt. She murmured another summoning charm, this time calling far beyond the hideout, casting for the silty soil from the pond they'd left behind. Grains drifted in as though carried to her by the storm. It wasn't as pure as sand, but it would do just fine for a delicate transfiguration. She grasped for the right shade of red in her mind, settling somewhere not so different from the shade of the sap in her pocket. Shimmering light and a haze of silt whirled through the air, spinning themselves together into flat transparency. Finally, she pressed the freshly-crafted glass, one pane, then a second, into the hole she'd made. A quick sealing charm, a quick banishment of the rain that had snuck inside, and she had done it.

They had a window.

"You're quite good, you know."

Hermione jumped. She hadn't realized her audience.
"Thank you?"

"You have talent, for a Mudblood. I give you that." Bellatrix stepped up beside Hermione and rested her hand on the glass, fog filming around her fingers as raindrops spattered against the outer pane. Hermione imagined her fist breaking through it, blinking against the violent vision. "Andy taught you well."

The quiet sincerity in her words made the hair rise on the back of Hermione's neck as though in warning.

"If you did master it—raw magic—you'd be formidable."

Hermione frowned. She never imagined Bellatrix would agree with Andromeda—not about that, the very thing that had gotten them in this mess. She stared down at her wand, suddenly tired again. "Honestly, Bellatrix, I've got no interest in being formidable."

Curls still dripping from the rain, Bellatrix inclined her head. "And in that, we part our ways."
Chapter 32

Hermione failed to find the clearing on her own. She went looking before breakfast the next morning—Bellatrix liked keeping near-nocturnal hours after all, and, pending two surprises in as many days, probably wouldn't wake until noon. But half an hour of wandering found her nothing more than some yellow-spotted flowers growing upside down from a tree branch and many, many more trees. Everything seemed different after the rain, fresh and dark with the scent of new growth and wet decay. She managed to retrace her path back to the place of her first run-in with a holly, but couldn't even remember what direction they'd set out in from here. Apparating was an option, she supposed, but as clearly as the sunlit lake had been seared in her memory, Hermione couldn't shake the lingering worry of her last spontaneous visit to Hogwarts, the still-tender and beginning-to-scar skin of her ankle twinging with irrational fear.

Rationality also couldn't stop her from wondering if it hadn't been Bellatrix's sheer presence that had somehow kept that second looming holly from waking up and eating her alive.

Best not to chance it.

Grumpy and unwilling to get any more lost in her pursuit of sunlight, Hermione headed back. She could only hope if she cooked something that smelled tasty enough, she could wake the sleeping dragon with no poking involved, and coax her back outside.

Two hours later, she'd at least had success on the first front. Bellatrix was up and poking at her food, but she seemed unusually quiet, shifty-eyed and withdrawn.

Hermione decided to tread cautiously. "Another walk today?"

"Hmm… No."

Hermione blinked. "Any reason why not?" Rejection wasn't unexpected, but there was usually more fire behind it, or at least an insult or two.

"Because I don't feel like it, pet." Her fork dropped with dull clatter. She tipped her chair back on two legs and crossed her arms, no longer eating at all.

Hermione frowned. "Is something the matter?"

She kept the question light. Bellatrix's temper was always an unpredictable force, and it entered a league of its own in the morning. After yesterday's surprising cheerfulness, rage wouldn't surprise her, but this casual disinterest? She didn't trust it a bit.

Sure enough, when Bellatrix met her eyes, Hermione found the cold anger that was missing from her voice.

She tried not to flinch.

"Anything I can do to help?" she amended. "I know, you're probably going to say, 'fix this,'" she added quickly. "But you must know by now I am trying. And I thought yesterday went…" Great? Hardly. Less terribly than usual? Merlin, that's a low bar. "…really well," she finished lamely.

Bellatrix continued to glower.
"I just thought it might help to go again, that's all."

"Why?" Bellatrix's voice dripped scorn. "Did it make you feel warm and fuzzy about me?"

Hermione pouted, then shook it off. Being around Bellatrix was making her increasingly self-conscious about her own more childish mannerisms. Then again, she wasn't the one halfway through her life. She still had some excuse of youth. "You don't have to be so flippant about it, you know. You're allowed to do something thoughtful once in a while without turning right back into the wicked witch."

To Hermione's surprise, Bellatrix's lips twitched, though she quickly smothered the motion.

"But I am a wicked witch."

Hermione took a deep breath, summoning patience. She'd walked into that one, and for all Hermione knew, Bellatrix might not even have recognized the Muggle reference for what it was, but that didn't make it any better. What an inspiringly terrible line.

"What else can I do?" she pressed, hoping the crack in Bellatrix's thorough grump might let her wheedle her way back out into the clearing.

"Try this my way."

Hermione flinched. "I—"

Bellatrix didn't let her get started. "I can't give you what you want," she snapped. "I don't care about your feelings, I won't play at romance, and listening to you lecture me like a sociopathic child about the importance of friendship is never going to get me out of here."

"That isn't—" Hermione spluttered, but Bellatrix wasn't done.

"Do you know what day it is?"

Hermione felt her shoulders beginning to creep forward, her chin shrinking down and in. "Erm… Thursday?"

"It is the fifteenth of June." As Bellatrix spoke, her words grew softer and softer, but harsher and higher in pitch with each passing second. "It has been two full months since you stole my magic, since my magnum opus, since the murder of Cissy's two-timing toad of a husband, and for every last one of these sixty-one days, I have been serving out your punishment."

It wasn't until Hermione felt nails digging into her elbow that she realized she'd wrapped her arm around herself protectively, cowed in the face of Bellatrix's escalating rage. I've gone and jinxed it, haven't I?

"And I would have born it gladly, whatever it took to repay the debt of spilling pure blood, kin of my kin, first son of an ancient line, but this?" Bellatrix laughed through gritted teeth and snapped her tongue. "Ah, pet. This is too much." For a second, her voice was light, airy, taunting, but her eyes narrowed, and she spat her next words like bitter seeds. "It is not the place of a Mudblood to mete out my penance and mock my pride."

Hermione took a step back, but—ah yes—there was the counter at her back. It never moved, but it always did seem closer than Hermione remembered. When Bellatrix bled anger and spat out the twisted ideology of her youth, the world shrunk in around her, unable to compete with the cruel surety of a Death Eater on the warpath to purify its imperfections.
"The place of a Mudblood—" she continued, making no move to rise, her gaze on Hermione half challenge, half scorn. "—is on her knees."

Hermione straightened under that cruel, hooded stare, squaring her jaw. This was a side of Bellatrix she’d seen before, but she’d seen others, too, and she would not be intimidated. "You wouldn't be alive if it weren't for this Mudblood."

"I wouldn't be here!"

"You know, maybe you wouldn't!" Hermione threw up her hands. "Or maybe you would, or maybe you'd be dead!" She strode forward, away from the counter, away from her fear, stepping closer to the cold fury before her. "I suppose you might still be living as a... a happy recluse in your terror cave of burnt furniture and nightmares. Or maybe Andromeda might have found some other pretty little Mudblood to take your place while she set you free, or after she did away with you for good! Who knows how that disaster would have gone without me! Or—or maybe you'd have planned some wild escape, ripped the Manor to bits with more enchanted vines and what then? Ended up here? Hiding from the Ministry and—and the whole wizarding world? Bored, trapped, alone—tracked and hunted like an animal with the trace on you—Still, for all intents and purposes, completely powerless because... because there's nowhere safe for you!"

Hermione realized then that she was breathing rather like she'd run a marathon, chest heaving, well too far into Bellatrix's personal space for comfort. She turned away again, retreating to the sink, staring out the window and wishing, at least a little bit, that she'd just gotten lost out there this morning instead of coming back in for another fight.

Bellatrix, however, was eerily silent.

"I made you what you are, girl."

The words were quiet, near unintelligible, and Hermione could discern no emotion in them. "No, no I don't think you did."

She found her own voice was equally unexpressive. What might Bellatrix's empty words be hiding, she wondered, if hers could successfully conceal this mess of confusion, exhaustion, annoyance—annoyance which, for the moment, was directed mostly at herself, for probably ruining her perfectly good tirade by failing to disguise the concern behind it, the admittance that Bellatrix's safety really had become a matter of some apprehension to her.

Behind her, Hermione heard the faint scuff of two chair legs of settling back on the floor.

"You skulked into my house with your wide eyes and your nose between your knees – You might as well have been dirt. Nothing. Less than nothing. My sisters were happy to keep you that way."

She knew Bellatrix had stood because that still-quiet, mock-cheerful voice was coming closer, but she didn't hear so much as a single footprint or rustle of cloth.

"I saved you."

Hermione stiffened at the feeling of warm breath on the back of her neck.

"Who was it that scared you into waking up, hmm? Who taught you real fear? Was it not I who was so generous as to tell you what Andy dearest had planned for you? Didn't I pull your broken body from Lucius's clutches once, twice, three times... but no, not the charm! All that, and you could have run for the hills and stayed there. Happy and home with your dear, darling mum."
As consumed as she was trying not to react to the feeling of Bellatrix's lips nearly brushing her ear with every word…

"Yet you kept. Coming. Back."

…Hermione didn't realize Bellatrix had stolen her wand from her waistband until it was too late. She yelped, lunging after her, but Bellatrix had already spun away, setting the table easily between them as she tapped her lower lip with the tip of Hermione's wand, grinning.

"Give me that!"

"Hmm. No. Shan't." Bellatrix laughed through her nose, airy and mocking, then something seemed to break, to crack open, something that'd been held closed for too long, and her lips peeled back as she devolved into cackling glee. Hermione could only stare, heart racing.

When she regained her composure, her smile was thin-lipped and cruel. "I think I'd best keep this for a little while. Lest someone get any more forgetful about fear."

Hermione swallowed thickly. "You mean the fear of the both of us starving to death because I can't go fetch groceries?"

"Ooh, does sound rather unpleasant, doesn't it?"

"This isn't funny, Bellatrix." Hermione could hear the edge of panic in her voice. It was slowly dawning on her just what it might mean, to be on equal terms with the witch across from her. "Let me have it back."

Instead, Bellatrix wandered backwards out of the room, humming cheerfully to herself, and vanished in the eternal darkness behind her door. After a second or two of lock-kneed immobility, Hermione made to follow, but Bellatrix emerged before she could get there, empty-handed.

Hermione opened her mouth twice before she managed words. "You know I don't want to invade your privacy any more than you want me to, but if I have to go digging through your bedsheets to find that wand, believe me when I say I'll do it."

"Oh, I believe you, pet, but you won't find it." Bellatrix circled the table again, returning to the space in front of Hermione at a slow, even prowl. "Not without magic, not in this place."

Rationally, Hermione was forced to admit Bellatrix was probably right. Why wouldn't she know some dastardly hidey-hole to squirrel away secrets and another witch's wand?

"I still have magic," she tried instead. "I'll just… I'll sort out a wandless spell. I'm not… I'm—"

"Not like me, you mean?"

Hermione winced.

"Perhaps," Bellatrix acknowledged with another gaunt smile. "But from what little I know about unbound magic—" Bellatrix wrinkled her nose. "—you'll like as not wind up dead if you try."

The threat dredged up old memories, near-forgotten early lessons with Andromeda, vague warnings of surprise that Hermione hadn't wound up dead already, working the kind of magic that can eat a witch alive from the inside out. Hermione was fairly confident she'd also said wandless magic was something different altogether, but was she confident enough for that kind of risk? Without a wand,
was she even more vulnerable to the violent potential of her own disaster-prone power?

"I don't believe you." Hermione crossed her arms, but her voice wavered.

Bellatrix shrugged. "Suit yourself."

They stared at each other in silence, Hermione flustered and nervous, Bellatrix smiling and calm.

When Hermione made no immediate move to cast a spell, Bellatrix's smile widened. "Aw pet, look. It mustn't always be this game." She stepped closer, words slipping into the low, smooth register Hermione was beginning to associate uncomfortably with Bellatrix's taunting attempts at seduction. "I taught you fear, and you see how easily a lesson goes." She leaned in. "Think just how easily I could teach you to want me."

Hermione stood very still, breathing slowly and evenly through her nose despite the panicked pace of her heart and the itch in her fingertips, longing to reach for her wand. There was still something dull in Bellatrix's eyes, something empty about her words, something that had been there ever since Hermione first saw her this morning and tried to coax her outdoors, something that had cracked and let out a shadow of madness Hermione had almost forgotten, after so many weeks of careful, articulate calm.

And this wasn't the first she'd seen it: strangely pointed despondence beneath her anger, tired desperation beneath her tricks, nervous twitches fraying at her edges. Yesterday, in the sun, had been a wild exception to Bellatrix's mood this past week—two, maybe. Even three. What had she said, sixty-one days? The cold pronouncement of just how much time had passed in this eerie, uneasy purgatory was crashing over Hermione all at once, and a wave of guilt that it just... hadn't bothered her, not the way it had Bellatrix, followed. The passage of time here was weighing heavily on her. Hermione could see it, visibly, in her dissociation from her own anger, the distance in her eyes as she propositioned Hermione against the counter with rote words that rang with the dead weight of concealing desperation, even as her proximity did strange things to Hermione's already overtaxed heartbeat.

When Hermione finally spoke, ignoring the pointed tilt to Bellatrix's chin, the hooded taunt of her stare, she spoke as calmly and levelly as she could manage. "Bellatrix, you tried to kill me."

Bellatrix blinked, and Hermione could have sworn she was watching herself come into focus in those dark eyes for the first time all morning.

"You do understand that, don't you? As far as I can tell, you haven't stopped trying! I need you to understand that's why this will never work! Not your way, not my way, either, not so long as you're still holding that noose around my neck!"

The end of her phrase rose, not quite pleading, not quite angry, and if Hermione wasn't so certain it was impossible, she might have thought she saw Bellatrix flinch.

"You can say it as often as you like, try to get under my skin, but I'm not about to hop into bed with you just because you think that will fix everything! You won't even admit half of what's wrong! And now, you've stolen my wand? If you could show, oh, Merlin forbid, a bit of remorse?" Hermione pulled her lips between her teeth and sucked in a breath through her nose. "I may no longer want to hex you every time you touch me, but I do have a little bit of self-respect, alright? I have never, ever slept with someone I didn't... Someone I didn't care for," she huffed. "Someone I didn't want."

A great stillness settled over the kitchen. Hermione didn't so much as blink.
Neither did Bellatrix.

Finally, when the silence was approaching unbearable and Hermione thought she might actually be hearing the buzz of magic in the blue roots above their heads, Bellatrix rolled her shoulders back.

And pouted.

"Oh, I'm so terribly sorry I put you through such an ordeal. However shall I beseech your forgiveness, your royal muddiness?"

Disgusted, Hermione turned away. "Why do I even try to talk to you."

"Because you like it when I talk back."

There was a teasing lightness in the words, and when Hermione reluctantly cast a glance her way, Bellatrix's lips were quirked up, eyes upturned innocently, as though imploring her to find the mockery endearing instead of a punishable offense. Before Hermione could muster another retort, the absurd expression scrunched inwards on itself, nose wrinkling, eyes squinting against the teeth-baring grin Bellatrix was suddenly laughing through. "God, pet. I can read you like an open book."

Hermione flinched as Bellatrix tapped her on the nose and spun away, traipsing right out the front door. Hermione sagged against the corner, wondering why she even bothered trying to make sense of the whiplash confrontations her days were always getting lost in, the completely incomprehensible places they ended—if it could even be called an end. She eyed the door to Bellatrix's chambers, wondering if it would be worth at least a look, one rummage around the walls and drawers and…

With a sigh of resignation at the thought of actually searching through the bedsheets, under the mattress, and through whatever other inevitable nightmares she would find in there, Hermione stormed after her instead. She felt naked without her wand, unamused and off-kilter.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Bellatrix was leaning against the roots just beside the door. She held a finger-thick curl of her hair in her hands and had braided it about halfway down, but let go the minute Hermione appeared, clearly nothing more than an intentional display of her impatience. "We're taking a walk, no?"

Hermione stared at her. It was as though a curtain had come down, settling over the detached anger and half-buried mania from before and rising again to reveal a different costume for a different act. Bellatrix stood straighter, jaw squared, chin high, looking down her nose at Hermione with a very familiar sort of aristocratic scorn, but spoiled somewhat by the devious little grin on her lips. Frustrated, bemused, and wandless, Hermione straightened her spine, gritted her teeth, and gestured for Bellatrix to lead the way.

If anything, the day only got stranger from there. Hermione was beginning to think a walk in the woods would always mean tumbling down a rabbit hole, everything turned on its head. She was surly, withdrawn, and not at all inclined towards any sort of enjoyment without her wand, but no matter how many times she muttered angrily under her breath, dragged her feet, or glared at the other witch, Bellatrix was acting like the cheeriest, most accommodating tour guide to the Forbidden Forest. She gestured vaguely at any number of identical trees, pointing out subtle difference in the bark pattern and leaf veins, noting what sort of dark and deadly tinctures could be brewed with a particular toadstool, from which side of the trunk moss needed to be gathered for an effective lust potion. Hermione must have shaken Bellatrix's hand off her elbow at least twelve times, but before too long, she'd been unwillingly drawn in to the oddly academic display of Bellatrix's sharp mind.
and quick tongue, and had forgotten it.

She tried, with dubious success, to memorize the path to the clearing, but it seemed to take half again as long to arrive this time, and she could have sworn they'd gone in full circles at least twice on the way. But arrive they did, and the sun was shining, and Bellatrix was being… thoroughly cordial.

_Curiouser and curioser._ Or maybe not curious at all.

Once Hermione's shoes were off and her feet were dangling in the water, she felt better, though she didn't want to admit it. She always made it too easy—too easy to take advantage of her good will, too easy to get back in her good graces, too easy to forgive and forget. Bellatrix had her wand, and she wasn't getting off easy this time.

She sat cross-legged beside her, an elbow braced against one thigh, chin in her hands. There was a hint of that wild laughter around her still, curls spilling in all directions, one end of her robes spilling into the water, chest half-spilling out of her loosely-laced corset.

"I am sorry I tried to kill you."

Hermione's eyes widened.

"I probably wouldn't do it now, you know."

The word "probably" echoed in Hermione's head, but she was too thunderstruck by the eerie sincerity of Bellatrix's words to address it.

"Even if I did have my magic. I rarely go around killing for sport, not even Mudbloods." She shrugged, sending her curls cascading over one shoulder, absorbing the sunlight and reflecting back a phantom gleam of red so deep it was almost purple, more like charcoal than oil. "I had a task I was good at for a cause I believed in, and if torture is fun? All the better." She picked up a round stone in one hand, tossing it into the pond. "But it's over."

Hermione could hear the remains of an old anger in Bellatrix's last words, maybe regret, but she could also hear resignation. She hadn't heard that before, when Bellatrix mentioned her days as a Death Eater, her undying loyalty to the Dark Lord. Oh, sure, she'd admitted his death, but Hermione had never much gotten the impression that had changed Bellatrix's mission, her drive to live in a pure world of his vision and her creation. Now, she was a little less sure.

She was weighing her words, wondering whether to offer sympathy when all she really felt was relief, when Bellatrix leaned in and spoke again. "And I can think of so many better things to do with you alive."

Hermione huffed, scooting another few inches away. "You've ruined it."

Bellatrix pouted. "What, I didn't earn even one little tease?"

"No."

"You were listening, weren't you?"

Hermione could hear frustration creeping into her voice. An image of a younger Bellatrix suddenly popped into her mind, someone very used to getting her way quickly when it came to expensive things and the demise of enemies, but not nearly as used to having her thoughts listened to, her words treated with value. "I heard your apology, yes."
Bellatrix exhaled impatiently. She slid closer in the grass, more quickly than Hermione was expecting, until she had an arm on either side of Hermione's legs, forcing her to lean back on her elbows, trapping her where she was. "Must I grovel?" she murmured, voice low, dangerously soft, but still clinging to the edge of near-sweet sincerity she'd had wrapped around her all afternoon.

Hermione swallowed. "Please don't." She cringed at the squeaky whisper that emerged and shook her head rootingly inside herself for the defensive anger she still felt at the loss of her wand, the presumption in Bellatrix's actions every time she acquiesced to another of Hermione's attempts at finding shared respect only because she thought it would pry open her knickers. "I'm just never going to be able to trust this!"

Better, she thought, if harsh. She sounded more like herself again.

"I—Thank you, for apologizing to me. Whether you meant it or not, I know that wasn't… I know you aren't one to… Well, it means something, to me. But it's not just about how I feel, alright?" She grasped for something, a different approach, something that wouldn't still feel like giving Bellatrix a list of potions ingredients to gather that would add up to sex. "I don't want to sleep with someone who doesn't want me, either!"

Bellatrix head tilted, perched half-over Hermione's body like a large, confused cat. A lion whose prey had given up appealing to her better nature, and was trying instead to convince her she wasn't prey at all.

To Hermione's surprise, Bellatrix smiled. It wasn't a teasing smile, or a taunting smile, or even a particularly seductive one. Just a bemused, warm little up-turn of her lips as she stared down at Hermione like something she'd never seen before. Hermione found her breath caught in her throat, as though Bellatrix's shadow had invaded her lungs, and she could have sworn she tasted ash on her tongue.

Before she could so much as exhale, Bellatrix lifted her hand and ran a single finger down the curve of Hermione's jaw, lingering just beneath her chin, and her smile changed. "Ah, pet. But I do."

Hermione's lungs emptied with an audible whoosh.

Bellatrix's finger wandered lower, down the length of her throat, then vanished as she stood.

"Why, it would be just like old times." Feather-light, Hermione felt fingers brush her left shoulder, then her right. Bellatrix's black boots crossed over her outstretched legs again, a slither of cold creeping across her ankles where her robes had trailed in the water, and Hermione realized with a shiver that she was being circled. "Andy and I used to play games, you know—" She felt a lock of her hair lifted from behind, heard an indrawn breath, and felt the strands falls slowly back against her neck. "Our schoolgirl exploits were notorious, in certain circles. Friendly competition, of course. Thieving a lover here, a lover there…” Bellatrix had come full circle again and paused, straddling Hermione's legs. She crouched down until she was just above Hermione's eye-level, forcing her to look up at her or look away. "Seeing who could seduce the least-seducible, corrupt the most pure." A hand rose towards her face again, and Hermione leaned back, but not fast enough to dodge the thumb that ran across her lower lip, rough and quick. "And you're not very pure, are you, pet? But I'm not sure you're corrupted yet, either."

Distracted by the hand closest to her eyes, Hermione didn't notice what the other was doing until it was pressing against her wrist, pinning it to the grass.

"Was Andy your first, hmm? First kiss, first awkward fumble, first big heartbreak?" The mockery was back, but it sat low in Bellatrix's voice, now, nearly as dark as her eerie-black eyes.
No, Hermione wanted to say. Not any of those things. There was a first kiss with a well-intentioned idiot under some mistletoe in another life. There was a first time, yes, but it was neither awkward nor fumbling, and she couldn't have asked for anything better. And there was another heartbreak, later, that made Andromeda's feel very, very small by comparison. But that was too many words, too many thoughts scattered between points of distraction—eyes she couldn't look away from, the hand grounding her, her feet still dangling limp, fish-pale, in the golden-soft water.

And Bellatrix, too close, skinning her with her words, touching her in pieces like a thing on display, weighing her appearance and her wide-eyed distraction like a prized beast she might like to purchase at auction, and Hermione felt just as incapable of speech as the creature for sale.

"But poor Andy never was as good as me. We had the same possessive streak, she and I, but she was careless, playing with too many pretty girls' hearts at once, more attached to winning than what she'd won."

Hermione had started tugging against the restraining grip, wanting to draw back, realizing that was the first step to regaining her tongue, but Bellatrix's other hand came down hard, trapping her second wrist as easily as the first. Hermione felt her heart pick up in answer, and she could taste something like fear on the back of her tongue, but she felt something entirely unlike fear in the pit of her stomach at the sight of Bellatrix over her, one knee on either side of her thighs, not quite touching, dark robes brushing her calves where she'd rolled up denim, dark curls eclipsing the sun, leaving only a red-gold halo, a wild benediction of light, that made it hard to look at her, made her blink too quickly, made her gaze skitter every-which-way. And yes, it had to be the sun that pulled straying eyes towards smile-thin lips, towards the rise of pale skin beneath, still glowing with near-translucent beauty despite the backlight, despite the competition of the sun. And it must be that same sun that had her thinking what a good thing it was Bellatrix had grabbed her wrists and not her hands, so she couldn't feel her sweating palms.

"Unlike my sister…" Bellatrix murmured, fingers tightening just enough to pull Hermione's attention back to her words. "...When I decide something belongs to me, I take very, very good care of it."

"I do not—" Hermione managed, just barely, the start of a rebuttal, but Bellatrix cut her off.

"Oh, you do. Don't be silly. You have no say in that, not now. Somewhere inside of you is the magic that stole mine from me—That, pet? Is mine. Your wand is mine… Your magic is mine… And until I have mine back? Your freedom is mine. You, Mudblood?" Her cheek brushed Hermione's as her lips made their way towards her ear, breath warm and dangerous against her skin. "Mine."

Hermione was frozen, trapped in a net of words that, for the first time today, Hermione couldn't help but… believe, at least a little bit. This was… not at all what she'd meant, not remotely what she was asking for when she said Bellatrix didn't want her, but this was… the most Bellatrix counterargument she could imagine. It stuck like a burr, digging its little hooks of half-mad honesty into her skin where she couldn't easily pull them free. But possessiveness and want were not one in the same, and Bellatrix's voice breathing "Mudblood" into her ear only made that feel all the more clear.

She squeezed her eyes closed and summoned words. "I've seen you wipe your hands after you touched me."

Bellatrix drew back just far enough that, when she cracked her eyes open, Hermione could see her still grinning, just enough that Hermione couldn't avoid the pointed desire in her stare. "I like how that made your pretty little cheeks red with rage."
Hermione's breath picked up, quick and short through her nose. "That's enough," she muttered. "Get off me."

She had a second to take in a glimpse of contrition on Bellatrix's face before she took advantage of the distraction and yanked her hands free. To her surprise, Bellatrix rocked backwards without protest, and Hermione scrambled upright, grabbing her shoes out of the grass, ignoring the slug-slick feeling of putting them on her still-wet feet.

She couldn't look at her. She felt cross and warm and embarrassed, thin-skinned and vulnerable and unsure which feelings would win if she stayed in this clearing, letting Bellatrix toy with her, trading in easy, pretty words designed to cover up old injuries in the trappings of new desires, and Hermione wasn't buying it—wasn't listening, couldn't afford to listen, couldn't afford to convince herself what she was hearing was any kind of truth. Not so long as Bellatrix was treating her anger as nothing more than another part of a game Hermione had never agreed to play.

Focusing on that anger, wrapping it close around the rest, around the tightness in her chest and the warmth in the pit of her stomach and the static-spark feeling of her pulse beating fast and thick through the wrists Bellatrix had just been holding, Hermione stormed out of the clearing and didn't look back.

"It must be here somewhere!"

Hermione's ear was pressed to the floorboards, her hand flopping around under Bellatrix's bed like a fish on land, blindly groping in the darkness for her wand. There were almost no roots in here, nothing to see by beyond the dim glow coming through the door, and Hermione had only found the bed at all by crashing into it so hard her knee was still smarting.

How Bellatrix could live like a thing in a cave was beyond her.

It wasn't like she hadn't offered, back at the start of all this, to cast some illumination charms or buy her a perfectly respectable set of candles…

"But no, I'm Bellatrix Bat-Shit Black!"

…the infuriating witch would rather mope around in subterranean darkness than accept her help.

In the time it had taken Hermione to find her way back here, she had worked herself up something of an impressive rage.

And now she was talking to herself.

Crawling out from under the other side of the bed and trying not to think about how many spiders were now wandering around in her hair, Hermione flopped onto her back and flung out her arms, ready to give up. She'd been searching for a good few hours, half expecting Bellatrix to come storming in any moment now to yell and throw something and give her a good excuse to quit. But Bellatrix was nowhere to be seen, and Hermione wasn't much of a quitter when left to her own devices. Groaning, still grumbling half-formed insults under her breath, she stood up, determined to feel her way around the walls again, this time at the level of her waist instead of her shoulders.

Halfway through, her blind fumblings yielded… cloth.

It was leathery, draped over something long and narrow that came up as high as her hips. She gave it a tug and it stuck, then pulled free, sliding slowly down to pool on the floor.
And the room was bathed in greenish-white light.

Hermione found herself staring at a modest array of beakers, vials, and flasks in carefully wired stands arranged over three shallow glass shelves. Many were steaming or bubbling faintly, and most gave off a gentle glow, pink or blue or—the largest, a round, squat bit of glassware—seafoam green. Beside the shelf, equally narrow and a little shorter, was a dark wooden cupboard. A glance inside revealed rows and drawers of potions ingredients labeled in a cramped, unfamiliar hand: Aconite, Asphodel (powdered), Bat Wing, Bat Spleen, Belladonna, Bicorn Horn (powdered), Boomslang Skin... At the very end of the top shelf, Boxweed had been scribbled out, and a handful of Bellatrix’s holly-eyes sat there instead.

Suspiciously, Hermione tried to identify the first few liquids, wafting them towards her nose. She thought the pale blue might be a near-complete Volubilis Potion, but she’d had very limited experience with potions outside of her readings in the Black library, and she was far too concerned by the deadlier ingredients in the cabinet to taste it and see.

So this was what Bellatrix had been up to, all the hours shut in behind her door? Hermione had never considered it, whether someone without magic could brew a proper potion, but, with the right ingredients, the right supplies... Apparently so. Why not? But the real question was, of course, why?

Knowing she was as likely to get answers to that out of Bellatrix as she was out of the thin air currently at her disposal, Hermione decided to take advantage of the light and have another look around for her wand.

What she saw instead derailed her completely.

The bed had been almost entirely stripped; blankets and pillows gone, crumpled sheets abandoned half on the floor. Beside the bed was an old, wooden chair, and on it sat two deflated pillows, one wedged between the armrests like a cushion, the other slumped against the dowels. Beside its legs, a haphazard stack of paperbacks—she hadn't even noticed them missing, an assortment of a dozen-odd uninspired muggle novels she'd bought at the grocery store—and pooled between books and legs, a single quilt.

Hermione was thrown into memory: Bellatrix, closed eyes twitching with nightmares, as stiff in sleep as a corpse, not on her bed, not even then, in the manor, her own home, but in a wide, thinly-cushioned armchair beside the warm ash of a not-long-dead fire, one she’d lit before going to sleep.

Some demons just don't die easy.

Hermione turned back to the potions, wrapping her arms around herself as though for warmth, but there was no chill in the air. It took her a minute to realize she was fighting back tears. She was so tired. Tired of being on guard, tired of seeing everything through the lens of a potential attack, tired of being suspicious and homeless and isolated in the middle of a forest and so afraid of what Bellatrix was asking her for that her first thought upon seeing a rack of potions was that she must be up to something nefarious, must be plotting some trick, playing some game, ready to toy with her further; not that she might just want... light.

We're quite a pair, aren't we?

Bellatrix was impossible when it came to accepting help. She suffered in silence better than anyone Hermione had ever met. She'd sooner pile on small agonies than ask for what she wanted, hardly seemed to know what to do with it when it was offered willingly. Back in that dark, third-floor prison, back before all this... every hand Hermione tentatively extended had been met by a wand-point and a curse.
Now, her attempts were met by taunts and cruel flirtations.

Unwillingly, Hermione's thoughts drifted back to the clearing, the whip-sharp turn from a bemused smile at the idea that Hermione cared whether she was attracted to her or not, to the *I'll prove it* posturing that had Hermione half-pinned to the dirt before she knew what was happening.

And maybe Bellatrix believed it, everything she said about sex, because it really was the only way she could imagine how to have positive intimacy. Or maybe she was afraid of positive intimacy, and sex was the only tool she knew besides magic to hide behind.

*And where does that leave me?*

Still trying to pry Bellatrix open like a stubborn oyster? Why? It wasn't as though Hermione thought she'd find a pearl inside. Bellatrix wore old injuries like thick layers of carbon and calcium, protection against the cold sea and warm hands alike, but she'd broken her nails straining at it enough these past two months to see the inside was more of the same—scars, wounds, self-inflicted insanity—just more raw. There was so much *pain* Hermione was almost glad not to see it, to put it aside and let Bellatrix make her angry instead.

Before, if she'd stopped fighting back, Bellatrix may well have killed her or, pending that, chased her away for good. One less Mudblood in her world. But whatever the reason behind it, whether genuine belief that this was the fix or stubborn refusal to imagine the alternative, Bellatrix had changed the terms of surrender. Or had she? If Hermione stopped picking and prying and pushing her away, Bellatrix would... what? Whisk her off to this unmade bed and...

She couldn't even imagine it. *Me. With... her.*

She'd *seen* Bellatrix with a lover, seen it in her own mind... But everything Bellatrix had done since her ridiculous pronouncement that Hermione needed to get laid hadn't felt like... that. It was like a series of challenges, taunts, not altogether different from the ones she'd hurled at her while she had her strung up from her ceiling, or held at knife-point by the kitchen fire, or...

Somehow, though, those moments were beginning to feel very, very far away.

Carefully, Hermione draped the blanket back over the glowing shelves and left the room. Bellatrix was right, anyway. She'd never find it, even with enough light to see. Bellatrix would return her wand when she'd earned or they needed it and not a moment before.

Through the kitchen window, the sun was setting, but there was still no sign of her companion. What was keeping her?

Hermione made soup despite the warm night, wanting the comforting smell of fresh-ground rosemary and the feeling of the warm bowl in her hands more than anything else, and brought it outside to eat on their earthen front stoop. As she stared out into the woods, listening for any hint of footsteps, the sounds of the forest caught her instead. The haunting loneliness that crept in during the day when the woods were silent, still, and distant lessened at dusk. Things stirred that weren't afraid of human presence, crying out to each other between the trees.

It was a strange kind of company. The sun was gone, but lights lurked up above her, small enough it was hard to tell if she saw a glimpse of distant stars or tiny glowing insects going about their business, but it was hauntingly pretty either way. The summer warmth was fading, and the wind quickly made a mess of her hair, but Hermione thought it looked like... part of the moment, reaching out like it wanted to join the glow. She was cold, now. Just a bit. The occasional shiver stole across her shoulders, not uncomfortable enough to retreat inside. Pristine in some kind of peaceful suffering.
"Hmm. Lovely out here."

Bellatrix had appeared behind her without a sound.

*It is, Hermione thought. In a you kind of way.*

"There's soup inside," she said softly.

Warmth stepped closer, pressing in against her back like a phantom touch. Instinctively, Hermione chased the promised cure to her shivers, leaning closer.

Bellatrix closed the final inch.

Hermione found herself leaning backwards, head against Bellatrix's thighs, her shoulders just below Bellatrix's knees. A sigh escaped, her straying hair tickling her lips, as the particular mundane magic of human contact chased away the darkest edge of the night—and the day—with its anchoring calm. Soup couldn't do that.

She didn't feel angry, anymore.

Hermione felt a hand in her hair, so light her wind-mussed curls didn't snag, but close enough that her scalp tingled with proximate electricity.

"You don't hate me," said Bellatrix. "You still think you ought to, but we both know it's passed."

Hermione hummed tiredly. "I don't know I ever hated you."

Bellatrix's hand returned to the top of her head, stroking absently. "No, I suppose not. Besides your death wish, you probably have some… moral determination to only hate people whose evil you've personally known… or some other nonsense. But you hated yourself, I'd wager. The first time you realized you wanted me."

Hermione stiffened.

Bellatrix's second hand joined its mirror, stroking tiny circles into Hermione's scalp as she spoke. "That I'd hurt you, defiled your ancestry, mocked your deepest held feelings and beliefs, and you still felt tight—" A finger flicked across her skin from one shoulder to the other, the barest whisper of touch. "—across the shoulders every time I called you *pet.*" The flippant nickname slipped past her ear with a different resonance, a haunting depth of care and sincerity wrapped tenderly around the word's usual sharp edge, like she really was talking about her most cherished companion, if not quite her human equal. "That I could unsettle you with a word, a touch, and you could never quite be sure whether you wanted to crawl out of your skin or into mine."

With those words, Hermione's worries caught up with her, too little, too late. She wanted to flee like a moth in a web, anchored to the dirt and roots beneath her by hair-thin wires wrapped through the eyes of tiny needles buried in her flesh everywhere Bellatrix had touched her. Unsettled was a dangerous word, one that threatened to trick her, to rewrite her memories in its image of a past self that might have found Bellatrix not frightening and unbalancing, but *unsettling,* disarming, a seductive chaos ever waiting—*weaving*—to devour the wings of her morality, but not to devour her whole.

"I don't—"

"No, you don't hate yourself for that any longer. And even denial is fading, hmm?"
She felt the warmth at her back desert her, then found bootheels on either side of her bare feet, one dark-robed leg planted on either side of Hermione's tight-kneed own. Long, pale fingers took the soup bowl from her unprotesting hands and bowed low to drop it in the dirt.

"You're curious what might happen if you fought a little less hard."

Bellatrix uncurled slowly until they were eye to eye. She grinned, pressing their foreheads together and breathing in deeply, falling back just as quickly, allowing the night to stretch between them. She moved like the perfect human simulation of chaos, never where Hermione expected her to be next, but always seeming just right once she got there, as though she could bend reality with her bare hands so she always fit neatly, cruelly, at its heart.

"And were I a more patient sort, I'd wait, you know. I would wait until curious became weakness, until I could sweep in and satisfy." The s's slipped between her lips like strategy, like a plan she'd played out before. "But, quite frankly, my dear..." she drawled, and Hermione didn't know if it was an imitation of someone, or a mockery of herself, "...patience is not my strong suit."

Without further ado, Bellatrix pressed close again and kissed her, a pointed takeover of every sense, one hand curled deep in Hermione's hair, a whirl of rosemary and juniper in the air and the sound of her last breath dying in her throat and warmth, soft, wet, and determined—kissing her like it mattered, like she mattered, like this kiss would have to be the first worth remembering just in case it—or any one that followed—would be the last.

Wide-eyed, Hermione pressed a hand against Bellatrix's chest, a motion of rejection, denial, but instead, it fluttered against her neckline, grasping hold of the first crease of fabric it found...

Pulling it closer.

She melted.
Chapter 33

If Hermione's brain were working properly, she might have felt unqualified for this kiss. Everything she was doing felt more necessary than intentional—clutching her robes in a white-knuckled fist so she wouldn't keel over, leaning in so she wouldn't go backwards, her other hand floundering in the dirt like it could ground her in something other than...

Bellatrix.

The name pierced through the haze like a white-hot needle, and the noise she heard sneaking up the back of her throat in response wasn't intentional either, a little bit like a moan, a little bit like desperation.

And it made Bellatrix smile against her lips. Because she knew, of course she knew, exactly what she was doing. It was one kiss, or maybe it was two, impossible to tell, really—lips, teeth, nails at the nape of her neck all dissolving in a blur of heat spreading through her blood until her head was spinning too much to think properly, much less count something as nebulous and distracting as kisses. But her lips were awake, and her skin was awake, and everything inside her, too—all scrambled like crossed wires, sparking her half out of her body, breathing sharp and helplessly fast through her nose because her mouth didn't seem to belong to her anymore and she was thoroughly unprepared, unqualified for all of it—unready to admit it was happening long enough to make it stop.

But something shrieked in the forest, and Hermione's hand found the strength to push.

The wordless, annoyed sound of complaint and confusion Bellatrix let out in response made Hermione want to pull her back in.

Oh no you don't.

Thank Merlin her brain had started working again because without it... well. It took her another few seconds to coax her fingers to release their death-grip on Bellatrix's collar, another few seconds to open her eyes.

So much for self-control.

Bellatrix tried to press in again, muttering, "Pet..." under her breath, an exasperated endearment, but Hermione lifted her weight off her other hand and put both out in front of her.

"Bellatrix, wait. Stop. Please." The words were half-pant, but the meaning was clear.

The eerie, inhuman sound Hermione had only ever heard from this particular witch rattled around in her chest, a burgeoning growl. When she spoke, her words were low and rasping. "I've done everything you asked today."

Hermione pulled her knees in and looked down, dusting her palms against them, unwilling, unable to meet Bellatrix's dark, demanding stare. Her hands were shaking. She stuffed them in her pockets and struggled to her feet. "All I learned today is... is that you can put on a good show." Her voice broke, an untrustworthy squeak.

She turned away before Bellatrix could call her bluff, skewer her dishonesty, shred what limited defenses she'd scrambled to put up again. Leaving bowl, spoon, and dignity in the dirt, she dashed back inside, slumping against the door the minute it shut behind her, fighting an awful war between her racing heart and her stinging eyes. She was not going to cry over this. What would she even be
crying about? Was she angry? At Bellatrix—at herself? Was she upset? Why? Because she'd been
kissed—oh, god, she could still feel the sweet, hot burn of teeth across her bottom lip—or because
she'd run away before it could be anything more than a kiss?

Pressure against the door at her back made her startle upright with a squeak. She almost laughed.
She'd just… left her there, outside on the stoop, like she'd just stay and give Hermione time to… to…

Well, if it was time she wanted, she'd have to make it to her bedroom, because in a war over opening
the door at her back, Bellatrix would win.

She made the dash across the floor like the devil herself was nipping at her heels.

By the next morning, just not thinking about anything seemed like the best strategy Hermione could
imagine. Get up. Don't think. Get dressed. No thinking. Get a start on breakfast. Easy, could do this in
my sleep. She even made it through the eating part, blissfully alone and undisturbed in the kitchen,
not looking out the window, not seeing the distinct scuffmarks in the dirt where her hand had been
clutching at nothing; no, none of that.

But the subject of her non-existent thoughts rarely stayed invisible for long.

She was washing the dishes when Bellatrix snuck up behind her and slipped morning-chilly fingers
under the hem of her shirt, sliding along the curve of her hips.

"Morning, pet."

"Bellatrix—" she started, and as the fingers slid higher with an innocent "Hmm?" she turned it into
"Bellatrix, no."

And, to her astonishment, with only a little grumbling, Bellatrix withdrew.

Not fifteen minutes later, however, while returning breakfast ingredients to the shelves and trying to
sort out just how many days without her wand it would be before the food really ran out, she felt
fingernails dragging against her upper back, pushing her hair out of the way so warm lips could trace
teasingly up the bend of her neck, teeth scraping over every bump of her spine between shoulder and
hairline.

She dropped the flour.

"Bellatrix, no!"

Her exasperation and the explosion of white were met with nothing more than a laugh—and no offer
of assistance in cleaning up the mess.

It was like training a disobedient puppy.

Can't teach an old dog new tricks.

She was left to her own devices for most of the afternoon, and dinner passed without incident, but by
quarter to ten, just when Hermione had let down her guard a little at the prospect of some warm
chamomile to tuck her into another mindless night's sleep, it happened again. She exclaimed her third
"No!" over a hot teakettle which she was absolutely not going to drop no matter how startled she
was about being reeled backwards by her belt-loop and pulled against soft, warm curves. But this
time, Bellatrix wasn't having it.
"You kissed me back, pet."

A hand closed over hers on the kettle handle, guiding her to set it back on the stove.

"You can sulk all you like—"

And there was the other hand, under her shirt again, just at her ribs, and Hermione was really regretting her continued choice of Muggle attire. The robes she'd brought from the manor might be too warm for summer, but at least they weren't... easy access. Her hand was trembling too badly to pick up the kettle again.

"—but you can't take it back."

"I was caught up in the moment," Hermione protested, trying to sidle sideways out of her grasp.

"Ah! Then you admit we were having a moment."

Her sidling only landed her in the bend of Bellatrix's arm, setting them face-to-face, where Bellatrix was perfectly poised to close the circle with her other arm, step closer, and steal the ground Hermione had gained right back.

"Actually, if you must know, I was having a moment with the forest. Which *you* interrupted!"

Bellatrix blinked, then smiled, tugging her closer still, a hand on each hip, one finger still hooked possessively through her belt-loop. "A good interruption though, hmm pet?"

Hermione would rather have fallen into a hole in that moment than admitted it and she stubbornly clamped her jaw shut, but damn it all if her untrustworthy eyes didn't flick down to Bellatrix's cruel smile.

It became a grin. With one last brush of her thumbs up and down either side of Hermione's waist, she released her, stepped back, and retreated again into her chambers.

She'd gotten all the answer she wanted.

Which left Hermione, for the next several sleepless hours, to wonder whether she would have had the will to push her away again if Bellatrix had leaned in instead. Trying to turn off her thoughts just wasn't working anymore! It was unfair, really, how effortlessly Bellatrix Black could get under her skin. She was so bold and straightforward about... all the things Hermione wasn't. Her every half-feral grin and taunting brush of nails seemed to invite physical pleasure in all its messiness and with all its potential, yet there was also an air of near-religious restraint about her that she'd never seen before; as though, unlike Hermione, she could brush it off in an instant just to remind Hermione how hard she was struggling by comparison, as if she could pull in all feeling with the strings of her corsets and only let them out to threaten and tease.

What an infuriating, self-destructive combination.

Hermione rolled over and stuffed her face under her pillow with a groan.

*Embracing her madness.* The words drifted by on the inescapable coattails of memory. *She took everything around her and pulled it into herself, filling to the brim with more love and anger and pain than any one human could hold.*

An image of Bellatrix painted for her in a haunting conversation about cruel men and crueler traditions flickered behind her eyes. Hermione wondered idly if they hadn't bewitched her somehow,
the lot of them. She couldn't get them out of her head. And they'd changed her. She'd gone from a sexless, amphibious creature lurking in any cave that would hire her and sleeping so little she could barely be called alive to… this, whatever she was now, this pretty little Mudblood who had slept enough she could identify the heartskick, brainsick kind of tired that came from having her defenses worn away at as a separate entity from sleepy or perpetually exhausted, but who couldn't look a Death Eater in the eyes without being tempted to kiss her, and who couldn't seem to remember when having another woman's fingers inside her now and then had become such a demanding part of who she was.

The thought alone made her blush.

If only Bellatrix would stop for a second, for a day, or a week, maybe she could remind herself of all the reasons this particular woman was the last person she wanted to indulge that part of herself with. But even when Bellatrix was gone she didn't stop, she just kept going, running circles behind Hermione's eyes, still engraving herself into the pathways of her mind as deeply as she had the first time they'd met. But in new places, sneaking past boundaries and setting off in unexpected directions. There just wasn't anyone else in this world who was so… so much.

Too much, she scolded herself. She's always going to be more than you can handle, Hermione Jean Granger.

But that voice in her head didn't sound like hers so much as it did a voice from her past. A mother's voice, placating and apologetic and trying to use her full name to scold her, but tripping over it, like she hated the reminder that Hermione had had another mother, once. But using it anyway, and using it always to remind her of what she could and couldn't do.

Hermione didn't always mind being told what to do. But she hated being told what she couldn't.

The next day took on a very similar shape. She was on the defensive, and Bellatrix was on the warpath, stealing every chance to catch Hermione off-guard and leave her red-faced, flustered, and a little bit weak in the knees.

The worst of it was that it was all so… innocent, comparatively. Considering what she knew the witch to be capable of. A fleeting touch here, wandering lips there… Hermione had a hard time working herself up to anger. It was embarrassing, more than anything, how something as simple as a finger tucking a curl behind her ear and lingering at the pulse there could leave her stammering and glaring and off-kilter for hours.

She thought she'd survived another day when Bellatrix retreated after dinner. She washed dishes mechanically, methodically. This was doable, wasn't it? Dodging passes every few hours for a few days until Bellatrix gave up and moved on to some other torment…

Only she's not going to give up, is she.

When the last fork clinked back into the drawer, Hermione closed her eyes and let her forehead thunk into the wall above it with a groan, nose-to-wood, leaning, stiff and lifeless, like a discarded umbrella.

She did her best not to consider where rain might factor into that metaphor.

"Tired, pet?"

Hermione stiffened. How was she so silent?
Before she could do more than lift her forehead an inch off the wall, Bellatrix had caught her wrist in her hand and stepped in, pressed up against her back, a silhouette of yielding iron cleaving to her spine, molten and maddeningly sure, impossibly warm, impossibly close.

The hand that stroked down her side was almost soothing, almost apologetic, distracting from the way the other hand was pulling her wrist up and out and over her head, changing an already dangerous embrace into something else, something like being pinned against a wall, something like get out, now, while you still can. Hermione's head spun, caught too completely off guard, incapable of breathing as deeply as she should. The hand at her waist was moving back up again, under the hem of her shirt, teasing nails across her stomach and drawing every fractured inch of her concentration to their delicate, threatening path until the words she meant to say—Bellatrix, no—came out instead as a breathless whisper of "You'll rip me to pieces with those."

She could feel Bellatrix's answering laugh down every inch of her spine. "Mmm, just a bit." The hum shivered over the shell of her ear and heat followed, a tongue tracing the curve like a drip of liquid sunlight. "And when I have my magic back—" she breathed, teeth dragging against her skin with such assurance Hermione could have sworn she'd peeled it back to lap directly at her pulse. "—I'll heal it all better."

Hermione heard herself gasp, but she didn't feel the air leave her throat, too thrown by a half-forgotten memory of Bellatrix healing her once before, a single cut on her cheek, a rush of heat that couldn't be mimicked by human touch—only created by magic.

And then she remembered other healings, by other hands, soothed and pacified like a caged beast, all the better to be trained, tamed, and kept.

"Stop it," she gasped out.

Bellatrix stiffened. Her palm flattened against Hermione's stomach, a warm, still weight. "Come now, pet. You've already given in."

Hermione drew in a shuddering breath between clenched teeth. "I did no such thing." The fingers holding her wrist to the wall loosened almost imperceptibly, but it was enough for Hermione to pull free. It took both hands to coax the other out from under her shirt, but once she did, she was able to face her again, and deliver her next words directly to Bellatrix's pout. "You have to listen to what I'm saying, Bellatrix. When I say 'no,' I mean it. And if you can't respect that, I'm never going to—" She bit off the rest of it, whatever it was going to be, but the damage was done. The full-face flush she felt creeping up her already pink cheeks and taking up residence on her forehead and the tips of her ears nailed the coffin shut.

Bellatrix's pout transformed into a self-satisfied smirk. "Progress."

Hermione's stammered denials fell on deaf ears, and she slept very, very restlessly that night.

After breakfast the next morning, it happened again: grabbed around the waist, hair pulled aside, kissed just below her ear, soft as silk, fingernails digging into the skin an inch above her hipbone. But after the taunt from last night, Hermione was prepared to form words before Bellatrix could make it anywhere more dangerous.

"Bellatrix, stop it! It doesn't just reset after midnight! I told you to cut it out, and just because I… Just because you…" Bellatrix seemed to be only half listening, one thumb tracing idle, distracted circles low on her stomach. She sucked her tummy in—which didn't help—and tried another tactic. "Take the magic out of this for a second, alright? Please. I know that's what you're after, I know why you're
doing this, and—and—" Bellatrix's fingertips were wandering, spreading ticklish, squirm-inducing sparks all along her sides. "In—in what world would you want to kiss me? I'm not… It's not like I've turned into… Gah!"

She pushed down against Bellatrix's wrists, setting herself free from the still-straying touch.

When she turned, Bellatrix was rolling her eyes. "Oh, please, pet. Not this again."

"Yes, this again! I would be… I'm not going to… to take advantage of you!"

From Bellatrix's raised eyebrows and disbelieving bark of laughter, the concept sounded as ridiculous aloud as it had in her head.

"Seems we're on pretty equal footing these days, pet. You, wandless, me… castrated." Hermione flinched at the sudden vehemence in the last hissed word, but Bellatrix's composure quickly returned. "Besides, you can't think that poorly of yourself, little miss 'self-respect.' You've got some redeeming qualities, you know."

Pink-cheeked and disheveled, Hermione crossed her arms. "Have I, now? I'd bet I don't even need one hand to count the nice things you've had to say about me, but I would run out of fingers and toes listing off the insults." She raised fingers to tap for emphasis. "Mudblood, scum, idiot, thief—"

"—I never said you weren't pretty." Bellatrix held up a finger of her own. She had leaned back a bit, eyes narrowed, lips quirked with something like amusement.

"If you can't even say it without a double negative, it doesn't count."

Bellatrix's half-smile turned into a smirk. "Very well." She stepped closer, running the finger she'd just raised along Hermione's bottom lip. "You're very pretty, pet."

Hermione shivered. Just a little. But she made an admirable effort not to show it. "That nickname counts towards the insults, you know," she answered in a huff.

Bellatrix wagged her finger back and forth an inch from her nose. "Mm-mm! It counts for both." She didn't give Hermione a chance to protest. "Lack of foresight and impulsivity aside, you're good with a wand." She chewed her bottom lip for a second, as though she was mulling over something sour. "And you're sharp. Never would have known it from all the mumbling and cowering and screaming you did when we met, but you've got a brain in that pretty little head of yours, and you've even grown an inconvenient little spine, too."

Hermione was torn between being grudgingly impressed (and slightly flattered) that Bellatrix had managed to raise five whole fingers, and being even more insulted by all the dismissive little barbs she'd worked in between them.

"Whore," she said instead, raising another finger. Now they were five to five. That one had stuck with her, the morning after… her mind skipped over the name like a scratch in a record… after She left.

Bellatrix's nose scrunched in confusion. "I never…" Memory dawned. "Oh. Well. Shouldn't count. I'd have to call myself a damn sight worse."

At that, Hermione couldn't help smiling a little, though she tried to wrestle it down. "I could go on you know."

Bellatrix matched her smile, and hers was distinctly more devious. "As could I." Her head tilted left,
eyes narrowing. "Besides, you only asked why I'd want to kiss you. For that, I could have stopped at 'pretty.'"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know what you think you're playing at." She crossed her arms again and set her chin. "You can't just make me forget why you started all this in the first place. I know you want your magic back, but I also know you can't possibly want it this way any more than I do." She really did need to get better at pretending that wasn't a lie. The kiss had happened three days ago. It was well past time to get a grip. "I'm Muggle-born," she pressed. "And I'm going to keep reminding you of that until you remember what a terrible idea this is. You hate me in a way that 'pretty' doesn't even begin to touch."

Bellatrix pulled her lips between her teeth again and narrowed her eyes to slits. "Sounds to me—" she said after a pause "—like you're the one all hung up on being 'Muggle-born.'" The phrase sounded wrong on her lips, twisted poorly around the space where Mudblood should have been. "What are you so ashamed of, hmm?"

Hermione gritted her teeth. "I'm not ashamed! I—" Her own words crashed into her with the weight of sudden realization and a stuck with a sticky kind of guilt.

When was the last time she'd said that? When was the last time she'd defended her birthparents? She'd spent so many years defending her adopted family while… distancing herself, in so many ways, from those who had brought her into this world. Her mum had always acted like… like she should be grateful. Not just for having this new family, but for having a wizarding family, a proper family, the Trum family name. That having magical parents at her back while living in poverty was infinitely better than the alternative, one foot forever in the Muggle world, had her birthparents still been alive.

"My parents were good people." Her voice was soft, and Bellatrix's brow furrowed, seemingly unsure how to contend with Hermione's sudden shift in mood. "Have I ever told you they were dentists? Do you know what that is? It's a job where you help make other people happy to smile."

Bellatrix gave her a blank stare.

"It's a kind of doctor. For teeth. It's… They helped keep people healthy." In rising exasperation, she added, "And you know what? My real parents did more good in their short lives than you've done in all of yours and if that makes me nothing but a Mudblood to the likes of you, I'm proud of it."

If her foot had been raised, she would have planted it, but as it was, all she could do was square her jaw and stand her ground as Bellatrix eyed her with that same amused sort of curiosity Hermione was getting all too used to in response to her righteous anger. She didn't like it, that amusement. It wasn't fair, that Bellatrix's most mild rage could probably scare the cloak off a Dementor, while Hermione's only ended up making her feel smaller.

"Didn't I just say I don't care, pet? Do you honestly believe you'd be the first dirty toy I've brought to my bed?"

"The first what?"

Bellatrix waved away her indignation over the demotion from pet to toy with a lazy flick of her wrist. "It hasn't even always been witches. There was a Mugglish dalliance here and there. In my… younger days."

If Hermione had been holding something, she would have dropped it. "You're joking."
"Not at all." She had a devious gleam in her eye. "Don't I owe you a story or two by now?"

*Oh, not stories again*. If there was one thing Hermione had been a little glad to do away with once Bellatrix had gotten fixated on sex, it was the stories. She'd had three whole nights without nightmares! Admittedly, they weren't the most restful nights' sleeps she'd had either, but at least she hadn't woken up screaming. "If it's all the same, I think I'll pass."

Bellatrix loosed a short, gleeful laugh. "What, the proud daughter of dentists doesn't want to hear what use I've found for Muggles? They aren't all… entirely hopeless, you know. I'm agreeing with you."

Then why did that shit-eating grin look nothing like agreement whatsoever.

"I don't believe you," Hermione muttered as Bellatrix leaned in, back on the offensive. "You wouldn't. You would never—You. The…the inner circle of the Dark Lord, you…"

"Well it isn't as though I could *breed* with them." She chuckled and prowled closer, invading Hermione's space yet again. "Don't believe I might've been *creative* with my torture? Haven't caught on, hmm? Haven't guessed that I've found how much more fun it can be…"

Fingers traced up Hermione's forearms. She stepped backwards, but not before every inch from wrist to elbow had broken out in goosebumps.

"…to break a pretty little thing with pleasure?"

Hermione had a sinking feeling in her chest. Every time she thought there was nothing left to startle and appall her about this witch, Bellatrix proved her wrong. Before Hermione could get a word in edgewise, she'd already begun spinning the tale.

"She wandered into the Leaky Cauldron, my first little conquest. You know how it is when it happens."

That she did. If not for the overwhelming sense of dread she felt, Hermione might have been surprised Bellatrix had retained the knowledge of her brief bartending stint from some offhand tidbit she'd shared, but as it was, she knew perfectly what happened on the rare occasion a Muggle wandered in to the bar on the border of their worlds. It was almost unheard of elsewhere, but drunks will be drunks, and sometimes even a boarded-up shopfront will begin to look like a probable spot to find the next drink—or take a quick piss. When it happened, a near-deafening alarm would go off (and the jumping in response was anything but subtle) but one silent to Muggles. The entire room would act as normally and non-magically as possible until the Ministry could send someone along to wipe the place from memory.

Unless someone spirited her off first.

And that happened, too. Hermione had seen it, usually a terrible game being played by a raucously circle of low-life wizards drunk on too much firewhisky who liked the thought of easy, exotic—non-magical—prey. She'd even intervened on a woman's behalf here and there, when she had the chance. However, randy men and Ministry tidy-ups weren't the only way Muggles left the pub. The third option was less common, but after the Dark Lord's return, emboldened Death Eaters sometimes took charge of them first, and her boss would have to chase them out of the alley—so the screams wouldn't frighten off the paying customers.

Even the memory made Hermione's skin crawl.

"This one seemed to think the strangeness of it all meant she'd found a quirky little pub for queers."
For a woman who liked the intimate company of other woman, Bellatrix sure managed to make that word sound very much as distasteful as Mudblood. "And before someone could come cart her away... she started chatting me up, the cheeky thing. What nerve."

She stepped in, reclaiming her lost ground, and Hermione scowled when she realized she'd found the counter yet again. She silently cursed the tiny room to every undesirable place she could think of (including the underside of Bellatrix's bed) but it was too late. She was already stuck.

"Would you believe I let her flirt with me? Fascinating, really." A thigh slipped without warning between Hermione's legs, the length of her body only millimeters away, so her breath could take up its favorite job, teasing the shell of her ear her next words. "Toying with her. Sneaking her past the Ministry memory-hounds drooling at the door. Letting her take me home..." Fingers rose to tuck Hermione's hair behind her ear as Bellatrix pulled back just far enough to stare into Hermione's shocked-wide eyes. "I thought about killing her, of course. But..." Bellatrix laughed, and the sound rumbled through Hermione's veins. "Muggle killing is very poor sport. Pedestrian. Much more fun hunting down the sort who fight back. On the other hand, she was... fetching, in her own way. She was just so simple. So disgustingly free with her pleasure... ignorant, vulnerable, and oh, so much fun. Never knew any reason to say 'no' to what she wanted."

For a moment, Hermione thought that was a jibe directed as her own favorite word of the past few days, but as she watched, Bellatrix's posture seemed to be shifting, losing some of its intensity. There was something different in her eyes, a hint of that edge-of-memory distance that seemed to creep over her when she was about to say something unintentionally candid... or about to lose her grip on reality.

"Never knew what it was to see sex as a weapon, a tool... There's no... no politics with the rabble. Can pour into them without breaking, empty little shells, until there's nothing left of the both of you."

Hermione tried to keep still, neither wanting to give Bellatrix the pleasure of seeing how uncomfortable these words were making her, nor quite ready to bring them to an end. There was something eerie in this, reminiscent of the feeling she'd lived for a moment in Bellatrix's memory as she mindlessly fucked some stranger with an empty abandon, taking that girl all those years ago, using her to chase out whatever demons were warring behind her eyes. Hermione knew a little bit more about it all, now. Gathering madness for sanity's sake... Had she been bound to her husband, even then? Did she feel anything at all, in those days, besides other people's terror and whatever small pleasure came from... letting go? What difference would it make, then, who laid beneath her. None of it touched her anyway.

Listening, now, it wasn't so hard to imagine why Bellatrix Black thought the way she did about sex.

Hermione's stillness had the opposite of its intended effect—Bellatrix's eyes suddenly narrowed, head cocking sideways, as though she'd just remembered where they were. "So I gave it to her, I did." She leaned close again, setting them cheek to cheek. "Everything she asked for. More." Her tongue slipped out, quick, snake-like, tracing the curve of Hermione's ear and disappearing before she could protest, as quickly as it had come.

"I fucked her raw for hours."

Teeth, this time, raking down her neck. Hermione swallowed back the sound rising in her throat, not knowing what it might be if it came out of her mouth.

"Then, gone!" Bellatrix snapped her fingers an inch from her ear, and Hermione jumped, which only served to remind her she had nowhere to go—even less than before, as Bellatrix took advantage of the motion to steal an extra few centimeters, leaving Hermione leaning back on tip-toes while still
only able to keep half her weight off the leg between her thighs. "I disappeared."

Relief warred with a horrible sort of disappointment when Bellatrix suddenly pulled away, and Hermione was absolutely refusing to acknowledge the latter.

"And she'll never know who I was, never be able to forget me, never stop feeling me there, between her legs, behind her eyes… like a horrible, beautiful dream."

It took Hermione a minute to get past the smug little smile and cocky words and grasp at any sort of meaning, but when she did, she squeaked in horror. "You did what… what you did to me… to a Muggle?" She wasn't expecting her voice to sound so fragile, and she struggled to clear her throat.

"What I did to you?" Bellatrix's head tipped left again, confusion clear.

"With your magic. You… You put yourself in my head. Your sister had to get it out, you—"

"Ah." Bellatrix chuckled. "No. Do you think I wanted to see the inside of Azkaban at twenty? One does not simply waltz around London bewitching Muggles left and right. If I'd left a trail of mindless, simpering sycophants behind me I could never have made it as far as I did."

"Oh. So you saved that for me," Hermione protested. She pushed past Bellatrix's still-too-close form and out of the corner. It had taken far too long, but she was beginning to learn her lesson about that damned kitchen counter.

"Don't think too highly of yourself, pet. You were hardly the first."

Hermione gritted her teeth. "Not two weeks ago you were spinning me a tale that made me think… god, I don't know, that you at least understood the concept of rape? You told me you knew what was wrong with… with using magic to control someone's sexuality, yet here you are—acting like… What you did, in my head, that was—"

"—That's not sex, pet. That's politics."

Hermione felt like all the blood was beating in her forehead, searing through the front of her brain, heated with disgust. "That's cold, even for you."

But Bellatrix just grinned, her ever-infuriating reaction to Hermione's anger, and followed as she backed away from the sink. "War's a cold thing. May have ended for some of your lot, but not for me. Why? Would you rather it have been sex, hmm? Here I thought you wanted 'Anything but that!'"

Her mimicry of Hermione would have done any pearl-clutching spinster proud, and she felt the heat of her anger wandering down into her cheeks again in an indignant blush.

"Would you rather I had touched you, had kissed you up against that wall that day, instead of just getting you out of the way?"

"That's not what I meant and you know it!" Hermione scrambled for purchase among these strange, charged words, desperate to redirect the conversation away from herself, even if it meant returning to the… story. Her mind just didn't work this way, the way Bellatrix's did, when it came to sex and torture. "If not magic, what did you even do to her? The—the girl from the pub. You just… slept together? How is that torture?"

Bellatrix was getting too near again, silent and deadly, eyes sparkling with a mad sort of glee Hermione knew had everything to do with her discomfort, her words stumbling over every mention of sex, the flush on her face that was always at least half anger, but never just.
"I'm just that good in bed, pet. She'll never have another one like me."

"That's the most arrogant thing I've ever heard." Hermione crossed her arms between them. It was the best barrier she had.

Bellatrix smirked. "What can I say? I'm a heartbreaker." Her eyes were big and innocent, dark lashes fluttering, lips upturned impishly, and she was far, far too close.

"Have'n't you ever thought of anything besides r-ruining people's lives?" Dammit. Hermione bit her lip. Why couldn't she just get out one angry sentence the way she wanted to without tripping over her own tongue! "Get a job! Find a hobby!"

"Harsh words, pet," Bellatrix said, still smiling. "Don't you know by now?" In two strides, the last space was gone. She found Hermione's defensively-tucked hands with ease, unwinding her arms, driving her back three paces until they were against the wall, twining their fingers together and pressing them against the wood by her head. "My work is my hobby." Nails squeezed tighter against the backs of her hands. "Mayhem."

Hermione knew Bellatrix was going to kiss her a second before it happened, a second to think, to move, to get out her favorite word of rejection, but her tongue failed her, and her limbs failed her, and her brain failed her, too. And then Bellatrix's mouth was over hers, and she was shaking all over, head to toe, unable to think about anything but the way Bellatrix's lips felt, tasted—god, still cruel, but so, so soft, and like the cinnamon from breakfast and something else. Death, maybe. Or maybe Hermione just felt like death because she couldn't breathe, because nothing was working properly. Except her mouth, which was opening, welcoming, but no, that wasn't right either, it was just... happening.

And she had not decided to let it.

Using the full force of her body weight, she shoved Bellatrix away, trying not to think about the way Bellatrix's lip felt sliding out from between her teeth—how had that gotten there?—or about the parts of her body that were absolutely screaming at her for doing it.

"You don't get to do that!" she gasped. "You think, after everything you just said, that I want that?"

Bellatrix ran a thumb over her lip, pressing against the swollen places with a smile. "You bite like you like it, pet."

"Hermione!" The way her name snarled out of her own mouth shocked her, and Bellatrix reeled back like she'd been struck. "My name is Hermione!"

She still didn't know what she was thinking, but the anger was back, anger at everything Bellatrix had said, anger that she thought she could wipe it away with her cruel kisses, her unyielding demand for sex, her tool, her weapon, and Hermione wanted out.

"If I come back, you had bloody well use it!"

She spun on her heel, and it wasn't until a second after she'd pulled the familiar shade of deep Disapparation blue to the front of her mind that she realized she'd forgotten a very important element. Her wand.

But the world was warping around her anyway, yanking her out of the room with the scrambled awareness of a shriek of rage, a broken sound that tugged at something already being all jumbled up by magic, and a distant crash was the last coherent thing she heard—if she'd still had a face, she
would have winced. Clearly, she'd condemned the hideout to an unfortunate fate, but not nearly so
unfortunate, she had to assume, as whatever awaited her in the next second when everything stopped
squeezing and spinning and she—

Landed.
Wide-eyed and panic-stricken, Hermione stared at her empty hand, then slowly uncurled her fingers from around a nonexistent wand to frantically grope at her limbs. Shoulders, arms, torso, thighs…

*I'm fine.*

Not a scratch.

"I'm fine!" she gasped. "I'm fine! Hah!"

When she realized she'd attracted more than one curious pair of eyes by bouncing up and down in joy, she retracted her fist from the air and stopped skipping in place. Take that, Bellatrix Black. *Wandless magic. And not dead after all.*

For now, at least. She stared nervously at the street around her. She knew immediately where she was—a childish longing expressed as *I want to go home!*—the leftover thought of a concept that didn't fit a place that no longer existed, had landed her in front of the old inn. Instead, she stood before the new pub, closed for the morning. Diagon, however, was wide awake and bustling about her, sparing only the occasional frown for her Muggle attire and the spot she was taking up in the middle of the sidewalk, so she let current of passers-by pick her up and carry her off in the busiest direction, hands in pockets, thoughts out for lunch.

She was still shaking, her stomach was still doing flip-flops inside of her, but she didn't have to think about it, not here, not now. She could just tuck her chin down and walk. And that felt good.

After five minutes or so, the general flow of foot traffic deposited her at a corner as folks turned left, right, and back again. She stared blankly into the window of the Magical Menagerie, its usual display of cats, rats, and owls away for the summer until the next student shopping season, and replaced by rows of strange and exotic pets in glass terrariums and wire cages, each with a little scrap of parchment affixed to the front, flashy golden text pronouncing the name of the creature within and an ever-changing fast fact—*The flames from the rear-end of the Fire Crab can alight objects as much as a meter away!* *The Giant Orange Snail secrets both its infamous acidic poison, and its own antidote!*—flashing in and out of view.

Just at eye-level, Hermione watched the text on the central terrarium flicker away. Upon its return, it read, *Widow spiders develop social behaviors, but only in captivity!*

The laugh that boiled up inside of her was so harsh, so sudden, she choked on it, doubling over with the force of the gasps that followed.

Thoughts came flooding in so fast she could hardly make sense of them. Was she safe, here? Would she be able to get back if she tried? After everything that had just been said to her, was she planning to? Then again, when was the last time her plans had factored in to anything? In the decisions around the force of nature that was the disastrous family at the center of her life? Never.

*If only I'd gotten as good at dealing with them as I have at running away.*

When her throat cleared and she could open her eyes, there, in the gutter, laid a grimy copy of yesterday's *Daily Prophet*. It seemed as good a tool as any for penning in the straying bits of her brain, so she stooped and picked it up, brushing off the worst of the street dust to stare at the front page.
Hermione shivered. She rounded the less busy side of the shop and leaned against the brick to skim the columns below.

Kingsley Shacklebolt, bold but disheveled, left the meeting of the Wizengamot last evening in the purple and gold robes of a confident man, cap askew. He has been unavailable for comment for the last two weeks.

As the days tick by without a sign of Ministry movement on Undesirable No. One, challengers gather around an unprepared, beleaguered Minister of Magic. Shacklebolt's first term has been rife with controversy: After the shocking reveal last week of a destructive fire at the Black family ancestral home that seems to have been the subject of an extensive cover-up, all eyes are once again on the Minister. Why didn't we hear about this last winter?

Therefore Thuffts, scholar of Magical Law and Punishment and youngest sitting member of the Wizengamot as of this summer's elections, has placed himself at the front of the opposition. In a statement released last night, Thuffts declared his support for the recall. "Establishment forces in our Ministry have failed to handle a single crisis in my lifetime. They failed at war, failed at peace, and failed at war all over again—and still Kingsley Shacklebolt dares to call his tenure a time of peace? This is civil war!"

The latest polling suggests Thuffts' sentiments may be more widely shared than the Minister can afford. Will it be Shacklebolt's head on the chopping block, or will the hunt for Bellatrix Lestrange bear fruit soon enough for her to take his place?

The thinly-disguised opinion piece devolved into further perspective, posturing, and predictions from there, and Hermione's lost interest. She'd thought it would be about Bellatrix, about the escape, but it was nothing but wizarding politics, a topic she knew little about. Her eyes strayed to a flashing photo further down the page on the left-hand side. She recognized image style: this was an Azkaban mugshot. The subject was a youngish man with large, protruding ears; limp, chin-length hair; and a vacant, confused expression in his eyes. As she watched, a hand shoved him roughly out of the frame before he wandered in again from the other side, looking just as dazed.

**FREE STAN SOCIETY GAINS SUPPORT**

With another anniversary of the Second Wizarding War's final days passed by, public attention on incarcerated Death Eaters reaches an all-time high. The accusation: wrongful imprisonment, hasty trials, and presumption of guilt. Drawing particular attention, the gross miscarriage of justice for victims of an Unforgivable Curse.

Stanley "Stan" Shunpike, former conductor of the wizarding world's first Muggle-inspired triple-decker public transportation system, the Knight Bus, has become the face of the movement, though he himself resides in Azkaban, and as such remains unavailable for comment. First arrested at 21 for suspected Death Eater activity, Mr. Shunpike escaped during the second mass breakout and rejoined the ranks. Whether he did so under his own volition is hotly contested by a growing body of Imperius specialists and Azkaban reform activists known as the "Free Stan Society." Their membership roster shows a young group, most not long out of Hogwarts, but their events have been widely attended by witches and wizards of all ages, from all walks of life.

"It's unfair and unequal persecution's what it is," says Theodore Nott, founding member. "If he'd been two years younger, he'd have got off scot-free even if he were doing it just for kicks. As is, you've got boys just past their teens living out their lives in the nastiest prison in the world for no worse sin than being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Not enough to get your mind and body
taken over by a Death Eater, lose years of your life to an Unforgiveable Curse—now you lose the rest to the government! End tyranny! Free Stan!"

The rallying cry has resonated. These activists are concerned with more than wrongful imprisonment. They protest the system of mandatory minimum sentencing applied to Azkaban detainees, one which hasn't been amended for nearly a century, and which still allocates a life term for any witch caught performing a ritual in the nude. While many of these laws have not been enforced in generations, as the nudest coven of West Gingfordly will gladly demonstrate, they do raise concerns about whether other statutes have kept pace with the wizarding customs of the time. The Society also avidly protests very current practices, such as the use of creature torment, as outdated and inhumane.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8

Hermione frowned. *Creature torment?* It was an odd phrase, and she couldn't quite put her finger on why it bothered her, though she sensed the implication of Dementors. She flipped past a glitzy add for Cinnaspark Gum Bombs on her way to page eight, only to freeze as the corner of six flashed by.

**HERMIONE GRANGER: VICTIM OR VILLAIN?**

by Rita Skeeter

Hermione ripped the pages wide so violently she tore the paper halfway down the middle. The grainy, outdated photo of herself beside the column made her heart race unsteadily in her chest, cold sweat beading on the back of her neck. *At least no one can identify me from that.* She couldn't make her eyes focus on the words long enough to read from beginning to end, flashing from one paragraph to another, skittish and stunned.

… eager for a glimpse into the life of the young Muggle-born … orphaned at six, raised in poverty, truant … adoptive father dead at twenty, mother now living in the lap of luxury … her sordid tryst with Narcissa Malfoy—recently Black—plastered over front pages … Ministry records show her living under the very same roof as Bellatrix Lestrange—less recently Black—Undesirable Number One, for at least nine months… bartender, maid, homewrecker… accomplice?

What role has she played in the shocking escape of the world's most notorious Death Eater? Is this a poor, mistreated young girl caught up in a nightmare, tortured and probably dead at the hands of Bellatrix Black as we speak, or is this a perpetrator, a key element in a secret plot of premeditated malice? If the Ministry remains tight-lipped about the scene of the crime and just who was there to witness, we may never know. Yet rumors are swirling. Was one fumbling Auror none other than the legendary Ronald Weasley? Has Britain's favorite ginger-haired golden-boy lost his edge?

By the time she'd read the thing, more or less, Hermione's skin felt slimy, like she'd been touched by something foul, but her eyes kept returning to a single quote in the center of the page.

"Whatever has happened to her, she isn't the little girl I raised any longer," said Virginica Trum in our exclusive interview, eyes glistening with the pain only a mother can feel at the loss of her child.

It didn't really sound like her mum, the wording was all wrong, but the sentiment… stung. After their last angry confrontation, Hermione wouldn't be surprised if she'd meant just this, even if she hadn't said it in as many words.

The next page held obituaries.

Hermione stuffed the paper in her pocket and her hand along with it, scuffing her shoe against the
flagstone. The idea now tempting her was impulsive at best, especially now that she knew for sure her name was floating around in the world as a suspect, but she wasn’t ready to make any bigger decisions. Especially about going back. Which left only forwards to go.

She set out to the right. She was too nervous to attempt a wandless Apparation again, but the nearest portkey hub was only three winding blocks away, and there was someone Hermione wanted to see.

Once the portkey had spat her out in Mould-on-the-Wold, it wasn’t hard to get directions to Glenward Pond. She thought it might have been a Muggle, the graying, rosy-cheeked woman who’d pointed her down the lane, and she was glad, for the first time in many days, to have fallen so thoroughly out of the habit of wearing her robes.

She’d taken a bit of a chance, knowing only that this was the setting of the memorial service, but it was a nice enough day for a walk. After a quarter of an hour, the lane turned into a narrow, pebbled path, at the end of which sat a large, murky body of water. Sure enough, beside it was a graveyard.

She wandered for a while, taking in the lay of the gentle hills and tall, peaceful pines. After the cloying darkness of the Forbidden Forest, this sort of shadow felt… softer. Watchful. Whispering guardians of the white-stone remnants underneath. She gave the larger tombs back-set into the hillside a wide berth—they looked like little houses and reminded her discomftringly of the hideout. She couldn’t quite shake the image of someone dropping a tombstone in front of the door, sealing them into their grave.

It didn’t take long to catch on that newer headstones were farther down the path. Soon, she found what she sought.

CARCINUS TRUM

1950-2000

Loving Husband and Father

She stood in silence in front of the stone for a long time. Now that she’d stopped running, reading, and searching, she found herself just… waiting. She felt like she must be waiting for something, but there was nothing here, nothing but a simple white stone and eight simple words on a simple hillside. Her dad’s grave held no answers, no advice. He’d rarely had either in life, anyway. No, he’d had a pocket full of sweets, a kind smile, a love of the outdoors he’d rarely gotten to indulge, and very little else.

You’d get a kick out of where I’m staying now, at least.

Was this what she was supposed to do at a grave? Talk to him in her head like he was somewhere nearby, listening? She didn’t really know. She had hazy memories of the Grangers’ funeral at best, and that had been inside, away from graves she’d never seen—it wasn’t worth the cost to have the bodies shipped back to England.

I could show you a neat spot in the forest, if you came to visit me.

She found herself smiling a little at the idea. She and Bellatrix Black, still living in the tiny house under the tree, inviting the parents for tea in a glowing hut before a nice stroll in the woods where the trees wanted to eat you.

If there’s anything left of it when I get back.
The *when* in her own thought gave her pause. It was easy to think of going back if she didn't think about why she'd left.

She stared at the dates on the tombstone with sudden intensity, wondering, for the first time, just how old Bellatrix Black might be. As old as her father? Nearly? It was an easy thing to forget when she felt young in a way even her younger sisters didn't, as though the years stolen by Azkaban shouldn't count. It was also easy to forget in the face of all the other things between them. Blood status, attempted murder, and an ideological chasm as wide as the Channel… each alone felt like a far more insurmountable barrier than a mere… thirty years?

Hermione sighed. Now she was just standing around thinking about all the things she'd run away not to have to think about. There was no good reason to linger. She wrapped her arms around herself and bent, wishing she’d thought to pick up a flower in Diagon, and pressed a quick goodbye kiss to the top of the stone instead.

A bolt of red light flew over her head so close she could feel it skim her hair.

She yelped, spun around, and spied three black-robed men running up the hillside. Two more spells were already airborne. On instinct alone, she dropped behind the gravestone, heart threatening to pound its way through her chest. Both stunners made impact in a shower of sparks, but the stone held.

"Freeze! Come out where we can see you!"

She’d caught a flash of red hair among the three figures, and there was no mistaking that voice this time. But how had he found her? What was Ronald Weasley doing at her father's grave?

*Your dad's grave. Oh, you absolute idiot!*

There were all of two things in this world that could be connected to her name. One parent living, one dead. Was it any surprise, really, that someone'd been bright enough to keep an eye on them? Merlin, she was lucky not to have been caught outside the inn!

"I'm unarmed!" she gasped out as another spell cracked over her head. "I'm unarmed!" she yelled, this time loud enough to be heard. Or so she hoped, since there was a momentary lull in the barrage of magic. She raised shaky hands over the lip of the tombstone.

Another spell zinged by her fingertips and she yanked them down.

"Oi, cut it out!" The sound of Ron's voice was followed by a faint huff, as though someone had been elbowed in the ribs. "She's unarmed."

"Come out and we won't hurt you! We just want to talk!" a gruff, unknown voice called.

Hermione slowly uncurled, then gasped as she heard another crack of magic, jerking down again. But the sound of an impact never came. A dull thud echoed somewhere further down the hill, followed by incoherent yelling, a loud "Hey!" from Ron, and a rapid-fire zinging like an overcharged storm, the unmistakable sound of spells being exchanged.

Nervously, she peeked around the side of the stone.

"Mum?"

She could hardly believe her eyes. *How did she know? Why did she come?* The however and whyever were mysteries she couldn’t begin to wrap her mind around, but there, less than ten meters
away, stood Virginica Trum, clear as day, wand out, gray curls loose and disheveled as hair could only get after rolling out of bed… or engaging in a duel.

A duel she was losing.

"Hermione! Get out of here!"

She wasn't dueling so much as just… flicking at things, doing her best to redirect whatever Ron and an unfamiliar dark-haired Auror threw her way. That she was still standing was astonishing all on its own. The third Auror, Hermione could now see, was slumped on the ground a bit farther away, where she could only assume he'd been snuck up on. _Go mum!_

"Go on!"

The internal cheer faded as a beam of red light missed her chest by centimeters. "Mum!" Hermione yelped. "What are you doing!"

At her voice, Ron's head whipped her way.

"I said… leave!"

He glanced back, and with sudden determination, cast three spells in quick succession, the second hitting its mark—her Mum's wand flew out of her hand—the third right behind it, sending her to her knees.

"Go!" she yelled again, hoarse and pained. "Hermione, go now!"

Ron's wand was pointed her way again, the second Auror only half a turn behind him. Hermione took one step forward, reflexive, towards her mother's hunched form, but intent, sure eyes met hers from beneath disheveled gray with a pointed shake of her head.

"I'm sorry."

Another burst of red exploded from the tip of Ron's wand. Still staring at the space where her mum's lips had shaped a near-silent apology, Hermione closed her eyes and spun.

The door hung crooked on its hinges when she landed. Hermione stared at it for a long time, breathing fast, fighting back tears, not ready to go in, not ready to confront what had just happened, what might happen to her mum, now, what would surely happen again, to her, if she tried to go anywhere she'd ever known in her life before all of this. She slumped her head against the roots that framed the doorway, unwilling to let herself in.

Bellatrix must have heard her. She could hear footsteps shuffling towards her, quick and heavy and sliding with their haste. The door almost hit her as it swung wide. She pulled herself out of the way just in time, and Bellatrix grabbed her shoulders.

And kissed her again.

Hermione didn't have the energy to push her away, but her body didn't have the energy to react, either. She was just… standing there, being kissed within an inch of her life, feeling nothing.

"You came back."

Hermione didn't look up. She allowed herself to keep leaning into Bellatrix's hands. It was easier than holding herself upright. "I wasn't going to," she whispered. "Maybe. I don't know."
"You did, though."

Hermione nodded. There was no use arguing, no use trying to explain. "Trash the place while I was gone?" she said, though her attempt at levity only sounded... tired.

Bellatrix made a small noise of apology, something Hermione had finally picked out as the closest thing the other witch ever gave to real remorse. "A bit."

"Well," she muttered. "Let's go in and fix that, hmm?"

Coming back full circle after such a disastrous few hours had left her dizzy and drained. All she'd gotten out of running was something new for the list of things she didn't want to think about. Eventually, all of this was going to come crashing through her poor brain like a bludger, freed from the flimsy, temporary straps of running, hiding, distracting, avoiding...

But for now, there was cleaning, and that was as good a distraction as any.

Indeed, the place had been trashed, and it took some time to set things right again without magic. She tried, half-heartedly, to cast another wandless spell, but she wasn't all that surprised to find it worked so much better when she was fleeing for her life. All her dangerous magic was like that, anyway. It happened when she was feeling impulsive, scared—it worked best when her brain wasn't working at all.

And Bellatrix's kisses had an affect remarkably similar to terror on her thought processes.

When wandless didn't work, she tried, equally half-heartedly, to coax Bellatrix into giving the wand back, but that worked even less. A few things were destroyed beyond salvage, but at least she knew where everything went. That was the good that came from having fixed the place up to her liking once already.

Bellatrix bore holes in her back the entire time. She could feel it, that evaluating, calculating stare, and thought she had a pretty good idea what Bellatrix was wondering, though she didn't have a clue what conclusions she would draw. Why had she come back? What was she looking for, here? What had chased her away? The kiss? The story? What would happen if she did it again?

Hermione, on the other hand, was wondering when she'd gotten so cursedly good at reading the crazy witch, because in another second, Bellatrix was beside her, grabbing her shoulders, pressing her against the closest wall. In another moment, her lips were there again, kissing her within an inch of her life, and Hermione... couldn't stop herself from falling, from getting lost in something so simple, so easy, so warm and sure and just... right... for erasing fear, concern, worry...

Oh, those were all the wrong reasons for this, but it did feel good.

When the lips drew back, Hermione found words. "Dammit, Bella," she gasped.

Why, now, after all this time, did the shortened name come so easily? It slipped off her lips like... safety. Why, why did this feel safe? Safe, here, felt like a red flag, like something she could only be feeling because she hadn't felt it in so long, and her mind was ready to play tricks, to disguise something that was anything but safety as just what she so desperately wanted. Safety was a weakness she had so little resistance to, and she knew it, felt it in her bones, in her skin, in the way she couldn't stop herself from falling, from getting lost in something so simple, so easy, so warm and sure and just... right... for erasing fear, concern, worry...

"Does it always have to be like this?" She couldn't get her voice above a breathless whisper. "Can't
we ever just… sit, and talk, civilly, like two normal grown-up witches? All you've ever given me is… madness, or manipulation, or whatever this is, and I just…"

Bellatrix interrupted her by kissing her again, but when Hermione didn't respond, she fell away.

"Not everyone has an emotional range that jumps from seduction to… to destruction with nothing in between, you know." Her words were pointed, harsh, but she clutched at Bellatrix's forearms like she would fall if she let her go.

Bellatrix's smile softened. "You knew what you were getting in to when you stayed, pet. When you came back… you asked for it."

Hermione shook her head, a flash of anger finally piercing the fog of her post-adrenaline exhaustion. "I asked for my name. And for my wand. And for you to end this."

Because now Hermione wanted to leave the room, wanted to hide in her own bed and pull the covers up over her head and probably cry, for a little while, until she was burnt out on emotions and fed up with presumptions and had to consider what had just happened at her father's grave, what it meant for their safety, what it meant for her mum… but Bellatrix didn't let her move. She pressed back, clasping each of Hermione's wrists down beside her hips, and absorbed Hermione's halfhearted forward motion with her own body. "You don't want me to end this, Hermione."

It was only with the pointed pronunciation of her name that Hermione realized how precarious her position was. She couldn't have pulled away even if she wanted to. Bellatrix's body surrounded her, arms raising, drawing her up until they could be braced to either side of her head, hip cocked to angle Hermione perfectly back into the corner. Here she was again, barely hours since the last time she'd pushed her away, already having made the exact same mistakes. It was everything she refused to want, the strange desire that Bellatrix could provoke even without any real physical contact, a desire that bloomed in the shadow of force, of power, of the thought of being made to do unspeakable things against this wall where she'd once held the other witch pinned by magic not that long ago. The pace of her own heart frightened her, and as Bellatrix leaned in, Hermione thought she saw a flash of that illusive burnt field she'd been trying so hard to reach.

Of course. I'm an emotional wreck.

She could see it in Bellatrix's eyes, but she couldn't touch it.

And Bellatrix seemed as lost in her stare as she was. "You're like… a bad habit," she whispered. "An old addiction, come back to taunt me."

Hermione felt one of her wrists released, but when Bellatrix moved, tracing one of her cheekbones with the tip of her finger, Hermione didn't try to pull away. She was tired, so tired, and at this point… What did she have to lose? Any dignity had been lost the first moment she acknowledged her own attraction, all her denials since had fallen on her own deaf ears, and all her running had landed her back here, back again, trapped as surely as Bellatrix was, nowhere to run, nowhere to turn, nowhere to go. And Bellatrix wasn't going to stop, not now that she had it so clear in her mind that this was the way to get back her power. She wasn't going to stop until Hermione proved her wrong or until… it worked.

Bellatrix's most mercurial smile flickered across her lips and, despite everything, Hermione felt a haunting rush of heat.

And maybe it would work. Maybe giving in to whatever physical draw there was between them would be enough. Maybe it would end this, get her back out there, give her a chance to explain, to
give her own sorry interview to that awful columnist at the *Daily Prophet*, to make sure the Ministry knew her mum wasn't a threat, and… What did it matter, anyway? The sex. It would just be… sex, right? She'd already fucked two of this witch's bloody sisters. Clearly she wasn't holding out for some great, final love to give herself to for eternity. Sex was… as Bellatrix had so eloquently put it… not all that different from politics. A tool. A weapon. Well, fine. If Bellatrix was so determined to go to war over this, Hermione was going to fight back.

Which would start by… giving in.

She could feel Bellatrix's breath on her lips, unmoving, unblinking. Waiting.

"BELATRRIX BLACK!"

A shout from somewhere beyond the door sent them stumbling apart so fast Hermione's knees gave way, and she had to catch herself on the arm of the nearest chair.

"I know you're here! Bella!"
"Narcissa?" whispered Hermione.

Bellatrix jerked as though she had been burned. "No."

"How is she here? What is she doing here?"

"No," Bellatrix growled again, spinning towards the door.

Hermione beat her to it. She rushed outside.

"Narcissa!"

"Hermione?"

A few steps past the tree line, she spotted their unexpected guest. She wasn't alone. "Narcissa? Draco? You shouldn't be here! How did you even find this place, how—"

"Well, we've yet to find it." Narcissa stepped closer, arm lifting and stretching out as though to take Hermione's hand, then falling before it could reach her. "We'll need Bella to let us in— She's with you, yes? Please tell me you're both safe. But we should do it soon." She glanced Draco's way. "I've done my best. International courtesy makes it… unethical, if not illegal, for anyone from the Ministry to be tracking us, but I've also broken any number of border statutes to Apparate here. I haven't been followed, but we can't stay long."

Hermione caught herself staring, barely absorbing half the words, hasty and half-formed as they were. When she shook herself and turned back towards the tree, she realized that although she could see the door, she was unable to gesture towards it or say *It's right there* aloud. Even the thought made her tongue tingle disquietingly.

"Oh." She could kind of… glare at it. She tried to take a step closer, but that didn't work, either. "Are you going to let us in?" she yelled instead.

There was no reply.

Hermione sighed, rubbing at her elbow, turning back to her two companions. They were dressed for travel, Narcissa in a pale blue cloak, the light, loose fabric cinched close at the waist, Draco in trim black robes, similarly light. Hermione's throat felt tight, and she couldn't blame the secrecy spell. "But what are you doing here? Why? I didn't think—"

"You were spotted—it's all over the papers. I had to be sure you were alright. I… I wasn't completely sure, but I had a feeling, and I hoped, if I found Bellatrix, I'd find you." She smiled, but it looked strained. "I've known about a last hideout in the Forbidden Forest for a long time. Even Draco has been worried, when the two of you disappeared and then… not a word, not a hint of trouble. We almost started to believe one or both of you had wound up dead."

"Well, I'm not."

Bellatrix appeared by the hulking shadow of trunk and roots as though out of thin air, and Hermione still couldn't approach the door.

"Bella." Narcissa said her sister's name in a sigh, nervous tension leaving her shoulders and spine
like a ripple of water.

Bellatrix ignored the greeting, prowling slowly towards them, aiming directly for her sister. When she was too close for comfort, her wrist snapped forward, cracking against Narcissa's cheek. The sound startled something to fly, screeching, from the trees above them.

Narcissa slowly rubbed her jaw. "I suppose I earned that," she murmured.

Before she could say anything else, Bellatrix grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her into a tight embrace. "God, Cissy. You shouldn't have come. You shouldn't have left," she added, pulling back. "But you did, and you ought to have stayed away."

"I had to make sure you were alright."

Bellatrix rolled her eyes. "Of course you did. You brought my favorite nephew, I see." She turned towards Draco with a grin, a taunting one, the sort a schoolyard bully gives to the first year he's been "toughening up."

He smiled back with half his mouth and spoke for the first time. "Hey. It's… it's been ages."

"And whose fault is that, you little prick?"

Bellatrix's words were harsh, but she was still grinning, and Draco's smile slowly spread to the other side of his lips.

Hermione kept quiet. She watched as Bellatrix took Draco by the arm and tousled his hair, as Narcissa looked on, stroking her cheek absently. As a group, there was something intimidating in their familiarity, an impression that she watched a pack of wolves at play, safe in their good mood, safe in her invisibility. As individuals, though, Hermione could barely stand to look at them. Bellatrix was breathtaking in mirth as the three exchanged greetings, light words that seemed to carry more weight than whatever was said on the surface, the strange lupine posturing steeped in a history that, even now, Hermione couldn't begin to grasp the ritual of. She was beautiful and confident, things Hermione had acknowledged long before, but in this moment, she radiated a devastating charm, powerful in her circle of family in the shadow of the circle of trees—a witching circle, a place to work dark change upon the world beyond. Narcissa, by contrast, was breathtaking like a punch to the gut, elegant and refined as always, completely contained—an enigma in this forest. Only in her eyes could Hermione see a hint of that restrained lethality that so complimented her older sister, a deadly allure to that poised exterior, as painful to stare at as fresh snow in the midday sun.

Hermione found herself a little chilled. In that moment, it didn't feel like summer.

But after a time, Bellatrix led them all inside.

Hermione began to cook out of habit. To her surprise, Narcissa joined her, taking over the simple tasks. They worked in complete silence as Hermione tried to come to terms with this. She hadn't expected ever to see her again. Least of all now, but mostly… never. When she'd left, her absence had been so stark, like a piece of her had been carved away, but now that she was here again, standing beside her… The hole wasn't gone, not exactly. But the piece… didn't fit.

Hermione heard a door slam and turned to see that Bellatrix had stolen Draco away, leaving the two of them alone.

Hermione jumped when Narcissa's hand touched her cheek. Too warm, too real.

"Your mind is so closed to me."
"I—I don't think it is," Hermione admitted. "I think I just… I don't know what I'm thinking… or feeling."

Narcissa dropped her hand with a sigh. "Maybe that's for the best."

Hermione nodded, trying to ignore the ache behind her ribs. "It is." She almost believed it, too, when she said it like that. She paused, glancing again towards the door where Bellatrix had disappeared. "I hope you're happy. Out there. It seems like Draco is…"

"He's coming around. Slowly. He's had to come to terms with a lot of things, but he loves me, and he… he asked to come along today. The two of them used to be quite close. She taught him so many things I never wanted him to learn, but he… He's chosen, for the most part, not to use them. I'm proud. I think, deep down, she is too."

Hermione found herself smiling. Narcissa looked… different, now, talking about her son. She looked brighter. She was a bit less thin, less stretched, and there was color in her cheeks. "I'm happy for you," she said, and this time, she meant it.

Narcissa smiled. "Enough about me; what are you doing here? What happened? Well, Andromeda did try to explain, but I'm not sure she understands herself. And besides, I would have thought you'd be long gone by now. As soon as you could get away."

Hermione slowly shook her head. "I almost was. More than once. Believe me."

"Why stay?"

Hermione let out a breathy huff of laughter. "Merlin, I don't know. It's been one thing, then another, then another… Now it's—You know about her magic, right?"

"Yes. Andromeda told me you… erased it. Completely."

Hermione offered half a shrug, half a nod. "I didn't mean to. But it really seemed that way for the first month or so. Now… I don't think it's actually been erased. It's still there, just… broken. And I might be able to fix it, but I… God, what would you do? If you thought it was in your power, if you knew you could set Bellatrix back out in the world, as whole and dangerous as ever, if you could—"

"—My advice?" Hermione clamped her lips between her teeth and nodded helplessly. Narcissa offered a reassuring smile. "If she wants it, Hermione… nothing will stop her from getting it. Does she deserve it? Perhaps. Will she make more mistakes once she has it? Most likely. Should you let yourself get hurt trying to keep it from her? No. And I think if you had any intention of just… leaving, you'd have done so by now."

Hermione stared down at her feet. "What if I'm going to get hurt giving it back?"

Narcissa reached out again, lifting Hermione's chin, searching her eyes. "Hermione?"

She pulled back, unwilling to meet the intensity of that stare. "Nothing, never mind, I—"

"—Hate to break up this little pow-wow, but it's time for us to eat, and then it's time for you two to leave." Bellatrix was standing in the doorway. Her approach had been as eerily silent as always, and Hermione had no idea how long she'd been there. "It's a work day for our dear, darling Draco, which you didn't deign to tell me, and the both of you are going to get caught if you're Apparating across the border without the daytime traffic." She clasped her hands and swept the table with narrowed eyes. "Let's feast."
It was the last word that could apply to the hasty spread, but by the time they had all settled on damaged and make-shift furniture around the small table, the chatter rising to fill the small room felt very much like a banquet. Over the meal, Hermione confessed to the events of the hours before Narcissa's appearance. Bellatrix reacted to the close call with her expected fury, but Narcissa was able to calm her with news: The Ministry was none the wiser to their current location now than they had been before her run-in at the graveyard. She had news to ease Hermione's nerves as well: Her mum was still alive. In custody, but destined for questioning, not prison. She'd been cooperative since Hermione's disappearance, was even responsible for the suggestion to set a trap at her father's grave, and the assumption at the Ministry was, fearing for Hermione's life, seeing three strangers attacking her, she'd snapped as any mother would. From what Hermione had seen, her mum's interference had been entirely lucid, but if the Ministry wanted to spin a yarn about a distraught parent afraid to lose her child, Hermione was happy to let them. She could breathe a little easier.

"On the other hand, no one seems quite sure what to make of you, Miss Granger," Narcissa said with a sad little smile and a pointedly raised brow.

It was all she could do to muster a nervous laugh and look away. How strange, to be someone the world was trying to make sense of. And stranger still, to be called by her last name, after so many weeks of nothing but pet and the occasional grudging Hermione.

Draco helped her clear the dishes, which she hadn't expected, either. He paused by the sink, slightly in her way, and stared down his nose at her in an eerily familiar manner. Hermione had become quite accustomed to being looked at like a slightly distasteful curiosity. "Neither my aunt nor my mother has a bad word to say about you, you know."

At this, Hermione's laugh came unforced. "Bellatrix? No. She must be saving them to say to my face."

Draco inclined his head. "If you say so." His nose wrinkled in another flash of familiarity. "I think some gratitude is owed, on my part. I'd rather not think about it any more than I have to, but whatever it is, exactly, that you did for my mother—thank you. I know she would not have been at my wedding, otherwise."

Hermione flushed, knowing he'd likely seen at least as much as ended up in the papers, hoping he hadn't guessed more, but she managed to stammer out some semblance of "You're welcome." The part of her that had spent so many years helping with customers at the inn tried to scold her for not choosing the more polite "My pleasure," but the part of her still flushing at the implications of those two words had thankfully won.

He left her to the washing alone.

She could hear the beginnings of goodbyes from the living room, but she lingered by the sink. She had a horrible feeling of vertigo, like she was suddenly standing at the edge of a great precipice, or finally seeing the drop that had been there all along. She was afraid rejoining the others would amount to stepping off the cliff.

Narcissa found her instead. She leaned in the doorway, studying Hermione in silence until they both heard the front door creaking open in the next room. "What aren't you telling me?" she murmured, too softly for the others to hear. "What happened to your wand?"

Hermione opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again. She looked away. "You should go," she said at last. It was the best reply she could offer. She could feel Narcissa's stare upon her, but she didn't look up.
"Please, Mindre. Take care."

Hermione's eyes squeezed shut at the gentle words, and by the time she opened them again, Narcissa was gone.

The air in the house felt twice as heavy when the two of them were alone.

Bellatrix seemed to understand this was no longer the time for tricks and teases. She sat quietly in the least-damaged chair and watched Hermione putter around the room, aimlessly cleaning things that were no longer dirty, failing to repair the same things she'd failed to repair before. Eventually, she retrieved a long kitchen knife and set to trimming her nails.

Hermione flinched every time the blade got to close to a fingertip, so she gave up on the puttering and took up another bland drugstore paperback instead, settling into the second-best seat, turning pages, not absorbing words. It was all she could do to avoid considering the decision she'd almost made, just how impossible that decision would have been to take back, had Narcissa shown up even two minutes later. How that decision would still be waiting tomorrow, the next day, the day after that...

She closed her eyes with a sigh. Narcissa's presence always seemed to have a calming, sobering
effect on Bellatrix. If there was ever a moment to press a serious subject, it would be now. The trouble was, Hermione didn't know that she wanted to press anything right now, or what thing she would press if she did. There were so many conversations that had only happened halfway or had ended somewhere she couldn't be content with, it was hard to know where to begin.

"We have to talk, you know," she said softly. There, she'd made a start. Where it would go was anyone's guess, though hers figured it would end in another fight.

The silence after her words felt even thicker than the one before. It felt heavy and sticky in her lungs, cloying, like poisoned perfume, like she could sit here until she choked in it, slowly, and died.

Bellatrix left the knife fall, point first, onto the floor. It stuck, shivering with the impact. The faint vibration felt like a breath of fresh winter air: chilling, sobering, but welcome.

"You are going to be very quiet for the next fifteen minutes." Bellatrix's voice was as cold as the steel sticking out of the floorboards.

Her eyes raised, and Hermione swallowed thickly, then nodded. She could do quiet. Quiet would almost certainly be easier than deciding what she was going to say, anyway.

"I've never forced anyone. Never. I've never done that."

Bellatrix's voice was harsh, almost angry, but barely above a whisper

"If you tell me never to touch you again, I won't."

"I—That was a lie. That there were others. That little trick I played in your head, that… I'm not saying I haven't violated anybody's thoughts before. Oh, I have, pet. With agony, pain, nightmares they couldn't run from… drove them insane from the inside out, but… not like that. And doing it to you was…" She coughed, an angry bark of air that nearly covered the next word. "…wrong." Her voice was so strangled Hermione had to lean forward to hear her. One hand clutched the arm of her chair, knuckles white, while the other wrapped around her own wrist almost as tight, nails digging red crescents along the line of her Cruciatus scars. "I haven't—I hadn't—that wasn't my trick, not really. If I'm leaving myself in your head like that… it was only with willing partners. I'll swear to it. Hadn't done it since… since school. Sometimes Cissy still had to come clean up after me but… that was carelessness, the arrogance of youth, never a matter of… of—"

"Consent?" Hermione prompted gently.

"Yes," Bellatrix snapped. "That." She rested the ball of her foot on the top of the knife, driving it deeper into the wood. "I was angry, and shortsighted, and—and distracted, that day. I was so—" The foot came down again, splinters of wood rising as the blade buried half its length in the guts of the hideout. "—furious—" And again, it drove in to its hilt, the sound like nails against a blackboard setting Hermione's teeth on edge. "—at what Andy was willing to do for you and I needed to chase you out however I could, whatever it took, so we wouldn't get here and I—I—Well I couldn't hurt you, could I? And you came to me. Smelling like sex. All innocent questions and puppy-eyed apologies and I couldn't… Just kept thinking… What in hell did she see in you? And that just got…" She growled, and Hermione's skin broke out in goosebumps. "…fucked. All jumbled up, the way everything does."
She shook her head, a jerky movement, shrugging back her shoulders and glaring up at the ceiling. "Look, I'm a mess. My head is a mess, pet. Some days I don't feel like… I don't even know if I'm…" She gave a huff of frustration, as though angry that she couldn't put together the words she wanted. "That's no excuse, but it's… And I was…" She kicked the knife handle, hard, and it snapped clean off, leaving the faintest sliver of a razor's edge sticking out of the wood. "I was just…"

Scared, Hermione thought. Scared of this. Scared if I stayed you'd wind up dead, or worse, wind up just where we are now. And you can't say it. You've finally started re-learning how to apologize to me but admitting to fear? We're not there. Yet. Maybe never. But I'm not the only one who's an open book, now and then.

"I get it." Hermione frowned and looked away when Bellatrix's eyes dropped back onto her. She wasn't sure it was the end of her fifteen minutes' silence, but Bellatrix had wound to a halt, and she'd already interrupted once, so now it was her turn to talk to the ceiling. "And… thank you? For trying to explain. I—I didn't mean to accuse you of that. I believed you, about Narcissa. I didn't even… I never… I didn't think of it that way. As any real… violation. Not until you said what you did. About her and Lucius. I didn't even notice you'd done anything until she got rid of it. Nothing happened. I… It never upset me, and maybe it should have, but in the grand scheme of everything that went on when I first lived with you all it… barely mattered."

Her gaze had sank down the wall, and now she talked down to her hands in her lap. "Maybe this is a terrible thing to say but, well… as for the rest… I did ask, you know. For you to show me healing. And—I don't know that I ever told you but, she wasn't, by the way. Doing that. Andromeda. It was never, um… sexual. She made it… comforting somehow. Did you know you can do that, too?"

Bellatrix laughed, and Hermione's eyes snapped towards her. She had leaned back, and looked far more relaxed after Hermione's stumbling offer of something like forgiveness, but the laughter was unexpected. "Did I know? You tried it on me two months ago!"

"I did what?"

Bellatrix stared at her in apparent disbelief. "The day we got here! Oh, don't tell me you didn't know."

Hermione frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Bellatrix laughed through her nose. "For fucks sake, pet. You were dead on your feet and you still tried to pacify me with a healing spell."

"Pacify?" That sinking feeling was back. She remembered, in the exhausted haze of the day they'd fled here, struggling to heal Bellatrix when they'd first stumbled into the hideout, holding her wand against the open wound of one weeping wrist…

But it was only healing.

"You really didn't know." Bellatrix shook her head. "No wonder it was like getting hit over the head with a frying pan full of sunshine and daisies."

Only Bellatrix could make sunshine and daisies sound like the worst fate known to wizardkind.

"I—I didn't mean to." Hermione pursed her lips. "She never taught me. Only how to do it, not how to make it… feel like anything."

"I find more holes in my sister's curriculum every day. Hogwarts should be closed for negligence, letting her teach there. Letting her teach that." Her nostril's flared in anger. "Do you have any idea
what you can do with that kind of magic? It's a direct line between one person and another, right at the stuff that keeps us alive. A skilled enough witch can make anyone see anything, feel anything they want you to, connected like that." She scowled. "It was Andy's little quest as an Auror, you know. She worked very, very hard to get it unclassified as dark magic. Shouldn't have, if you ask me, though no one ever does. And it was useful enough she succeeded. It's blood magic. In the right hands, it's still one of the most dangerous talents there is." Her face twisted into something that wanted to be a smile, but got stuck as a grimace instead. "Why do you think I learned it?"

Hermione let out a nervous, breathless laugh. "The thought had crossed my mind."

The air seemed lighter in its wake, and Bellatrix's grimace lost its edge, slipping into something closer to a real smile.

Hermione worried her lip between her teeth, considering. "What happens when it's accidental?" She offered an apologetic smile. "Sorry, but I don't actually know what sunshine and daisies are supposed to feel like in a healing spell."

Bellatrix snorted. Hermione was glad to see the question didn't seem to anger her. "It feels like your intentions. Felt like you wanted me to calm the fuck down." Her gaze slipped sideways a little, no longer quite able to meet Hermione's eyes, and her voice softened. "Felt like you cared." She frowned. "I wasn't expecting that."

Hermione looked down at her hands, at the floor, at the glint of blue reflecting off the line of broken steel in their floorboards. I did care. I do. "I wasn't, either."

Darkness settled slowly, and as though by some unspoken accord, they got up and parted ways, retreating to their rooms for the night.

She hadn't expected to find herself here again, in this strange dream that didn't seem to belong to her, but Hermione would recognize it anywhere, this grass-filled incompleteness that felt like the London Underground, but only, she now realized, because she sensed that great trains had left this place, some time long before.

But now, the grass was golden and flecked with frost, and she was alone.

"Hello?" she called, and it raced over the ground like a spark, carving a path through the grass until it caught somewhere just at the edge of her vision, whirling around itself, and curling back.

"Hello?"

It slammed into her mouth and returned to her lungs, her diaphragm, and it tasted like ash.

When Hermione looked down, there was something in her hand, a dark, sticky thread, stretching out along the path her word had just traveled. She stood, marveling as the grass parted around her ankles, unfelt, but aware of her presence here. She followed the string of clinging nothing, winding it between her fingers, a half-forgotten nursery rhyme playing somewhere between her mind and her lips as she did.

Mistress Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow? Silver bells... Cockleshells... Pretty maids all in a row...

There was a figure in the grass, lying prone, a riot of frost-laced darkness among the autumn-golden grain. The thread about Hermione's fingers led between her teeth. She couldn't seem to stop winding, drawing closer until she, too, knelt in the grass. When three fingers rested against closed lips, they
parted, drawing her in to a darkness as warm as fresh charcoal.

She felt a scrape of teeth against her knuckles, and when she pulled free, the darkness was gone from her hands.

Still, she watched those lips with an indifference she rarely felt in waking life, watched until they parted again, nothing but darkness inside, and words spilled from the hollow.

"Did you think my sister the only one who dreams of ice?"

Hermione woke in a cold sweat. It took her a moment to identify the sound accosting her ears as a human scream. She staggered out of bed and slipped half-awake through the root-lit living room, bleary-eyed and blinking. By the time she'd reached the opposite door, silence had fallen again.

She knocked tentatively. "Bellatrix?"

She heard nothing.

Cautious, she pressed her palm against the wood. It swung open without protest onto the faint green glow of the half-covered potions rack. The bed stood empty. As did the chair.

A low, eerie rumble emanated from somewhere against the furthest wall.

"Bellatrix?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

The rumbling quickened into a snarl. Hair rose on the back of Hermione's neck and she rubbed her shoulder uneasily, but stepped across the threshold anyway. She was wary—of the sounds, of her own good intentions—but she'd already opened the door. That was too far to back away.

Bellatrix sat rigid against the far wall, legs tangled in a white sheet, some sort of black nightwear fallen half off a shoulder. Her breath came hard and fast and shallow, eyes wide, wild, and unfocused.

She didn't seem to see Hermione at all.

"Bella," she said gently, realizing too late she'd shortened her name for the second time in a single day, but she had greater concerns than her own weakening resolve. A few feet away, she lowered herself down to her knees. "It's me." Hermione wasn't even sure she was awake. Her eyes flicked left, right, crossing Hermione's face like she was nothing more than a ghost.

"Cissy?" she muttered, the name garbled and angry. She frowned. Her eyes fell closed again.

Hermione shivered.

"Get out while you can." The words came slurred and sing-song as Bellatrix's cheek slowly slid to rest against the wood of the wall beside her. Her hand was clenched around her wand.

Hermione's fingers twitched with a knee-jerk impulse to steal it from her, but then her ankle twinged, and she remembered she'd had more luck running without a wand than she had with Bellatrix's. The two of them didn't get along, she and that wicked claw of a thing, and besides, it would be very rude to steal a sleeping witch's wand. Some part of her was still trying to be the bigger person, here.

Bellatrix muttered again, and Hermione had the sudden feeling she was intruding. Whatever nightmare she'd caught the tail end of was neither her concern nor her business, but she couldn't bring herself to just leave Bellatrix slumped in the corner, either, stiff and cold in sleep. Cautiously,
she rose and grabbed the comforter still pooled around the legs of the chair. As she draped it as gently as she could over Bellatrix's shoulders, she stirred faintly, muttering unintelligibly. She let go a little too fast. It dropped the rest of the way, settling with a muffled *whump*.

Hermione quickly turned to go, then nearly shrieked as a hand slid out from beneath the cloth and grabbed her wrist.

This wasn't the firm grip of a waking woman, just a passive sort of wandering touch that had found something warm, and was reluctant to let go. The muttering softened into mumbling, and the hand hung limply from Hermione's arm.

She could have shaken it off without too much difficulty, she supposed, but without waking her? She was less sure. Breathing quickly through her nose and completely disbelieving she'd somehow gotten herself into this situation, Hermione slowly sank down against the wall until she sat on a lump of the comforter, back against the wood. Bellatrix grumbled, her grip tightening. She pulled at Hermione's wrist, and when it would only stretch so far, turned in her sleep, knees rolling to the other side of her body, torso following, forehead abandoning the hard, dusty pillow of the joining wall. With nothing to stop its decent in the new position, she slid slowly down the wood until her head encountered Hermione's shoulder, then farther still, gravity having its way until Hermione found herself frozen stiff, heart racing, with a pool of dark curls in her lap, a cheek against her thigh.

*She's going to murder me. The minute she wakes up, I'm a goner. This is it. This is the end.*

She must be dreaming. There was no other explanation. This was nothing more than the extension of the dream she'd been having in her own bedroom, safe in her own bed. After all, why would her waking self have even come here? It wasn't the first time she'd heard strange sounds from Bellatrix's rooms in the middle of the night— *yes, but it not ones so... pained... and you've got a bleeding heart that cares, apparently—but she'd never once been tempted to open that door. I'm still asleep. I'm still asleep. I'm... Oh, she's rolled half out of the blanket again.*

Hermione carefully readjusted the comforter with her free hand, covering Bellatrix's back along with her own knees. *No reason to be freezing when I die. Which I won't, because no one ever dies in dreams.*

But there was something strangely... comforting... about this, too. This furnace-warm weight against her side, the surprisingly even breath she could feel where her long sleeping shorts met her bare thighs, the presence of another person after a long, draining day...

After several minutes of stiff-backed, red-cheeked embarrassment and escalating yawns, Hermione's exhaustion won against her fear and self-recrimination, and her eyes closed to the green glow.
Chapter 36

Her face was warm and everything was a little bit sideways, and there was something uncomfortable digging into her ribs.

Hermione shifted restlessly, not remotely prepared to be awake yet, squeezing her eyes even more tightly shut and burying them in the softness underneath her. Everything felt warm and hazy and smelled faintly of juniper; she curled her knees in, prepared to nest for at least another year.

Then her pillow started laughing.

Hermione's eyes sprang wide. She jerked upright but couldn't quite figure out which way upright was, so she wound up sort of crouching, staring down at dark fabric and the faint impression of knees beneath it, the tip of a wand to the right where it must have been digging into her side, wondering how on earth she'd gotten from leaning against a cold, hard wall with Bellatrix sleeping half on her—not a dream—to being the one with her head in Bellatrix's lap.

"You know, pet, there usually has to have been a night before to have a morning after."

When Hermione managed to look up, Bellatrix seemed amused, a little disheveled, one shoulder—the same shoulder? The other one? The night's memory was a blur—exposed to the chilly morning air and tinted a faint seafoam by the glow from across the room. Her skin looked soft. Her sleep-mussed curls looked soft. Even her smirk looked soft.

Hermione stammered, struggled to her feet, spent a good two minutes untangling herself from the comforter, and fled, Bellatrix's soft laughter chasing her through the door.

She wound up in the bathroom, staring into the mirror over the sink, trying to blink sleep out of her eyes and chase the flush out of her cheeks with cold water and sobering thoughts. Alas, the later seemed to be in short supply. Teeth-brushing. That was sobering. Minty toothpaste, mechanical movements, more cold water…

Then why was her pearly-white smile only making her see the big bad wolf in the mirror over her shoulder, whispering, "All the better to kiss you with, my dear," in a voice as sweet as poisoned fruit…?

Her eyes were bright. Her cheeks were still crimson.

The wolf was waiting the minute she stepped out, leaning against the wood between the door of the washroom and the door of Hermione's bedroom, her smile unthreatening, but poised to pounce.

"So. I wake up with a little present in my lap but she runs before I get to unwrap it."

"Please don't." Hermione hovered in the doorway, eyes closed in denial. "I'm not in the mood."

"Then why come crawling into bed in the middle of the night, hmm? Did someone have a bad dweam?"

The baby voice needled her into sharp irritation. "Yes," she snapped. "And it wasn't me."

Bellatrix stiffened almost imperceptibly. Hermione felt a twinge of satisfaction, but when stiffness stretched into silence, the glee turned guilty. She sighed and looked away. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gone in. I had the strangest dream, too, then I heard you scream, and, well, I—"
"—thought you'd fall asleep on me?"

Hermione was tempted to correct her again, but this time, it was a hint of self-preservation that stopped her tongue. She'd probably been right the night before. If Bellatrix knew her sleeping self had decided to use Hermione as a pillow, she'd never be allowed out in the world again for fear of a ruined reputation. Whatever improbable drowsy rearrangement had landed them in the opposite configuration, it was doubtless her saving grace.

"I thought I was still dreaming," she confessed at last. It wasn't a lie.

Bellatrix studied her through narrowed eyes, so Hermione returned the stare. In the time she had been having her mid-morning crisis, Bellatrix had put on real clothes. For all intents and purposes, the only difference between her black nightwear and her black robes and dresses was the softness of the former and the corsets of the later, but it still left Hermione feeling mostly naked and half-formed in her pale gray nightshirt and loose, thin shorts. She crossed her arms uncomfortably high on her chest, wishing desperately that Bellatrix's probing stare wasn't between her and all two of her bras. She was the morning person in this…

**Relationship?**

…whatever this was, and Bellatrix being the first one looking human had her all out of sorts.

"So, you fell asleep on me," Bellatrix prompted again, slower this time. Pointed.

Flush deepening, Hermione shook her head. "It wasn't like that."

"Then what, dare I ask, was it like?" She straightened out of her slouch. Hermione took a step back even though she hadn't gotten any closer, and she smirked. "The wicked witch bays for blood and you come running? Thought she'd showed up in your dream just to give you a nice pillow?"

"That's— That's not—"

"Thought you'd just whisper 'Bella' in her ear and crawl in beside her and—"

Hermione's eyes went wide. "You remember!" She thrust a finger at her in accusation. "You were awake!"

And Bellatrix's taunting little tirade stammered to a halt.

They stared at each other across the two feet of space between their noses, the first hint of sunlight beginning to stretch towards them across the floor from the kitchen window. Bellatrix's face flickered between expressions so quickly Hermione could hardly grasp hold of them. She caught a frown of anger, a twitch of distance, a little skittish eye-slide of embarrassment—and a final hissing sigh. Her arms came up, mirroring Hermione's, crossed in a defensive sort of posture Hermione had never seen before. *Score one for me. Only took sixty-four days.*

"Or perhaps," Bellatrix spat, defensive. "I was still dreaming myself."

Hermione's brain stuttered all over those words, too. After a minute of stillness, she remembered how to blink. "Oh." Bellatrix's eyebrow rose, and Hermione shook her head. It still wasn't working, the idea of herself in Bellatrix's dream, what the outcome had been… "Alright." She went to stuff her hands in her pockets and encountered only the waistband of her shorts, which she poked at for a second before realizing she had nowhere to go. "Dreams are… stupid. Let's just…"

"Leave it there?" Bellatrix prompted, a hint of acid creeping back into her tone, words landing with
corrosive intent against Hermione's skin. "Why? Afraid, pet?"

Now she moved forward, and Hermione had only so many feet of washroom to back into before she'd run up against the far wall. She held her ground as two feet shrank to one, one to inches.

"Afraid you'll end up in my bed again?"

"First of all—" Hermione put up a hand again, one finger raised between them. "—that was not your bed. Second, I'm not afraid of you."

Bellatrix flashed a caustic grin. "Liar."

"I'm not!" Hermione insisted. It was… mostly true. She hadn't been afraid of Bellatrix in… at least a little while. Afraid of her taunts, her promises, her own reaction to all of the above… Perhaps. But the witch herself? Afraid in the way she'd been the first few times she'd encountered her? The wild, animal fear for her life? No. That had passed.

But Bellatrix's darkening stare threatened something else. "Not even when I kiss you?" Voice light, words teasing, Bellatrix's eyes flicked pointedly to her lips. "Not even when you wake up beside me?"

"I—I already answered you. And I know you're just… You only want to distract me from what you said! You fell asleep on me!"

Bellatrix smirked at the little squeak at the end of her words. It seemed her moment of embarrassment had passed. "You know, pet… sometimes we're drawn to what we fear the most."

Hermione inhaled sharply. "Alright, stop it," she said. "Let's sort this, here and now. I'm not afraid, and I'm not—I'm not drawn to you either."

"Good to know." Bellatrix's reply and dismissive little grin infuriated Hermione like no words before, but she didn't have time to respond. "Then it won't bother you at all if I—" One bare foot smacked against the floorboards, pointedly loud, then a second. This time, Hermione did move back, but, as she'd known, as was always the case in this cursedly tiny hideaway, there was simply nowhere to go. "—double check."

"I never… I didn't say it didn't bother me!"

Hermione scrambled desperately for more words to fling between them, but Bellatrix was no longer listening. She'd crossed the bathroom floor and raised a hand to Hermione's cheek, pointedly gentle, thumb sliding across her bottom lip in a gesture she'd long since learned was most effective for ruining Hermione's attempts at speech.

Then she was leaning in, notching them together, tangling their legs, looming dark and close and larger than life as Hermione shrank back against the wall and let out a tiny sound of distress that was probably already disproving both of her claims.

She was a little bit scared, and it had everything to do the draw. Drawn was the wrong word, though. She wasn't drawn to Bellatrix like an interesting bit of art on someone's wall; Bellatrix was magnetic, gravitational. Planets should fall into her orbit. Then at least Hermione would have company in falling.

And she was falling, there were no two ways about it, leaning in a bit as Bellatrix's lips drew close enough to share breath… expecting to make contact, knowing what was coming… but not quite there… not even with her neck arched and fully exposed… not even on tip-toe… why couldn't she
The phantom kiss of air vanished.

Hermione's eyes shot open as words caressed her ear. "Just as I thought, pet."

Hermione stiffened, but it was too late. She'd failed the test. And Bellatrix hadn't even kissed her for it.

But, oh, then there was a kiss, lips at side of her neck, a tongue at her pulse point, a searing reminder that Hermione, too, had a tongue, and should be using it to counter the narrative about fear and want Bellatrix was quickly crafting into an airtight argument—

If only she could remember how something as unwieldy as a tongue worked when her blood was busy waking up and singing.

Hermione spent the next few minutes spluttering out disjointed words, none of which had any effect on the woman whose nails were digging trenches into her shoulders as her lips seared into her skin. "Bella—trix, I didn't say you could—" was too long, she couldn't finish it, couldn't keep her lips working that long without a gasp, so it turned into "Bella, please, I just woke up on the floor! Won't you… Can't we … slow down?" but, Merlin, that sounded like a question. Nails ripped at her shoulder, dragged the neck of her nightshirt wide enough she could hear it tear. "Bella! Oh, if you'd just—" A hot tongue dragged across her shoulder and up the column of her neck. "—give me a… a —" The nails slid higher, pricking the base of her skull, pulling her head back so she could spread searing kisses up the path her tongue had just taken. "—a second," Hermione gasped when she remembered words again, but she couldn't remember the first half of the sentence, couldn't remember why she'd said it at all, because she was too busy desperately wanting to reel Bellatrix in for a proper kiss.

But her right arm was pinned to her side by the ill-stretched neckline of her nightshirt while her left had gotten trapped between them—had she been trying to push her away? "I—I'm not—" Wild, eerily dark eyes suddenly seared into hers, and Hermione felt more than heard the growl of exasperation that rattled Bellatrix's ribcage.

With no further warning, teeth sunk into the meaty bit between neck and shoulder, and Hermione yelped, jerking sideways. "Hey!"

But then, as Bellatrix's lips lifted clear, blood flooded the mark in a rush of heat. Her heartbeat chased it, pulsing in the crease of her neck, dragging something from the back of her head along with it, leaving her feeling flushed and stretched and a little bit out of her own mind and… The whimper she heard escape her mouth in its wake sounded an awful lot like a request.

Then, Bellatrix bit again, higher this time, and no more gentle than the first. "Bella?" Oh, no, not another question… And again, lower, below the nearest collarbone. "Ah, you—" Her brain felt like taffy, stretched between the words she was trying to form and the pricks of heat constellating down the front of her body. She felt herself going limp, held against the wall by nothing more than Bellatrix's torso against her, Bellatrix's thigh between her thighs. By the time she finally bit the thin skin between Hermione's breasts and slid sideways, sneaking a tongue beneath the ragged hem of Hermione's shirt to tease across half of her nipple, Hermione felt boneless and brainless and entirely composed of the places Bellatrix Black had touched her—

"Thought you were never going to shut up, pet."

—and she couldn't even manage the first sound of an angry retort, because finally, finally, Bellatrix
was kissing her again.

Hermione whimpered and kissed her harder, mashing her nose against Bellatrix's, freeing one hand only to get it all tangled up again in dark, heavy curls, all the better to tug at, grab on to, pull her even, impossibly, closer.

*All the better to eat you up.*

The stretch of hallway between washroom and bedroom was a blur. Hermione had the faintest sensation that her feet couldn't possibly have touched the ground even once, pressed against one wall, then another, held so tightly about her waist it didn't much matter that her legs weren't working, knees incapable of bearing even an ounce of weight. Then the light was green and ghostly and downright dripping with just-passed *déjà vu* and Bellatrix's skin was glowing again, the bioluminescence of a drowned angel... and Hermione was dropped unceremoniously on a mostly-bare mattress with a thoroughly undignified *oof!*

Bellatrix crawled up after her.

"Are we done, pet?" Her voice dripped over Hermione's skin like oil. "Have we finished your games? Is it *my* turn, or will you drag yourself away in yet another ridiculous display of your pride?"

Hermione stared up at her, braced against her elbows, biting her lip. Having the wind knocked out of her seemed to have knocked her sense back in a bit, too, but right now, it was losing every argument against her bruised lips, bitten skin, and the unadulterated heat in the pit of her stomach. "I don't know." she whispered.

Oh, but that was a lie, of course it was. There was no pride when it came to this. She'd been done yesterday, for the wrong reasons, before Narcissa and swept in and muddled everything. But she was done today, too, because Bellatrix had fallen asleep on her, had apologized to her, and because she, well, she *wanted it*, now—her body was being very demanding about that, and her common sense just... didn't seem to mind. Then again, she already knew her body wasn't to be trusted, and maybe now she couldn't trust her head, either. But if she couldn't trust her brain or her body, what was left?

*Her heart?*

Hermione laughed aloud.

Oh, good, now Bellatrix was glaring at her again.

"No," she said instead of trying to explain. "I'm not. Pushing. Or…"

The storm in Bellatrix's eyes didn't clear. She prowled closer until Hermione's throat went dry, until she was fully poised over Hermione's body, then bent, wrapping her lips around the first bite she'd left on Hermione's shoulder. She sucked—hard, and Hermione's head spun as she let go to mutter, "About—" The second bite, then. "—fucking—" And again, between her breasts, laving faint teeth-marks with her tongue before drawing even with Hermione's eyes. "—time."

"Oh," Hermione managed, breathless. "Shut up!"

Before she pulled Bellatrix in for another kiss.

Bellatrix laughed against her mouth before returning it, knocking Hermione's other elbow out from under her so she fell against the sheets, so she could kiss her into the mattress, bearing down until Hermione's neck was bent backwards, back arched up, hands clenching and unclenching in curls she
couldn't seem to find her way out of, wasn't sure she'd remember how to let go if she did.

But that was okay. She wanted to do this forever.

Bellatrix seemed content to let her. She hummed into Hermione's kisses and overcame them with teeth and frustrated them, too, getting off-rhythm in a way that felt very intentional, but which meant Hermione found herself gasping against a closed mouth, finding the tip of a hot tongue teasing the corner of her own shut lips, prying them open to overwhelm her, and oh, it was so, so mean, that Bellatrix was still teasing her now, like this, in her bed, after she'd stopped fighting…

But it felt good, too. Begging for a kiss with her breath, having the next one stolen from her the moment she'd given up. She wasn't counting, again. Kisses were impossible that way. She'd learned it by now, but still, it must have been at least ten—ten decadent, merciless kisses—when she whimpered, totally needy, completely shameless, until she felt Bellatrix's grin.

Then she flushed all over.

"That's a good sound, pet."

And she wanted to say shut up again, but she didn't mind the nickname so much, here. It teased over her skin like a bite, like a kiss… like permission.

So she took it, pressed another kiss against closed, smiling lips. To her surprise, Bellatrix opened, drawing her in, tasting her—

Then yanked the collar of her shirt so hard the tear at her shoulder widened to the bend of her elbow with the warning crack of failing cloth, exposing half her chest.

"Hey!" Hermione yelped, freeing her hands from the back of Bellatrix's neck with more than a few curly hairs still attached. Trying to shrug it back up, she succeeded only in losing it off the other shoulder.

Bellatrix smirked down at her, lips stretched thin and dark with the shadow of their kisses. "What," she drawled. "Did you want to keep it on?"

Disbelieving she still had blood left to rise to the surface of her skin, Hermione felt her flush deepening nonetheless, creeping down her cheeks, spreading down her chest, an uneven rush of heat. Her breath caught when she tried to speak, her nipple suddenly straining against the soft nightshirt, confused and demanding over its brief exposure to the chilly air. "Well, no," she confessed. "But I did want to keep it."

Bellatrix laughed. "Did you, now."

Something in her voice made Hermione's heart stutter. Her fingers drew pointedly closer, ignoring Hermione's hands where they clutched her neckline in favor of picking up the bottom of the tear she'd made. Gaze never faltering, she began to pull again, widening it ever so slowly, inch by inch, easy now that the weave had begun to part.

Hermione couldn't seem to look away from those devilish, green-lit eyes, but she could see gray fabric giving way at the edge of her vision. A thrill lanced up her spine, icy and hot all at once. It was such a gentle display of violence. Destruction with the utmost care. She felt the back of one close-cut fingernail drag against her stomach and she shivered, finally looking down just in time to see the last two inches go with a sharp twist of Bellatrix's wrists, overcoming the resistance at the hem.

"Oh," she said. Like she hadn't seen it coming. Like she'd been surprised.
"You won't need it," Bellatrix murmured, a little soft, a little cruel.

Nails wandered back up the trail of skin she'd uncovered, playing up along her side until she met Hermione's white-knuckled hands. She wrapped them up in hers, pushing down and back until they were pinned beside Hermione's shoulders, each still clutching one half of a split neckline. Exposed.

Her heart began to race.

Bellatrix raked her stare down the line of Hermione's neck, chest, waist. She licked her lips, a flicker of pink. "You won't miss it," she muttered absently.

Hermione barely mustered the comprehension to realize they were still talking about the shirt she'd long since given up on. She could hear herself breathing shallowly, quickly, feel herself tugging her wrists like she wanted them freed—and she did, she wanted to reach, to grab, to touch—but she didn't, not really. Staring was good, too. And shivering. And listening with less than half a brain as Bellatrix continued to breath strange, threatening, promising words.

"Not now. Now that I've got you…” The words were absent, almost an afterthought. Bending down, she raked her teeth over the bite Hermione could still feel, heavy and warm, between her breasts. "I'll have you like this always."

Hermione's heart skipped, then sped to double-time, sensing danger.

Too late, her brain added helpfully.

Too late, her nipples agreed, tightening delightedly as Bellatrix's curls teased across them.

And her heart continued to beat out panic at a pace that would have made her concerned over staying conscious, but Bellatrix's nose was dragging sideways across the top of her chest, warm breath smoothing away goosebumps just above her breast, then lower, and Merlin, she had to stay with the living at least long enough for her to— to—

But she didn't. the nose dragged up her neck again, breath lingering over bites that Hermione was so conscious of they might as well be new limbs, blooming from her skin, reaching out for the one who had planted them in the way Hermione's hands couldn't.

"Just… like this…” Bellatrix seemed fixated on her marks, her entire body vibrating with barely constrained energy as she kissed them with her teeth.

Do it, Hermione wanted to whimper, to plead. Do it again. But she didn't ask, couldn't quite bring herself to beg for ruin just yet. "Bellatrix…” she managed instead. Was that really the safer choice?

She drew up at her name, a dark, wild-eyed shadow staring down at Hermione with a hunger she could barely comprehend. Her stare wandered, mapping Hermione's face, drifting lower. Her pupils dilated.

Hermione's mind blanked. She felt the growl before she heard it, rumbling through her thighs where they pressed together, almost angry, almost inhuman. Without warning, her hands were freed, and Bellatrix's palms dragged up her sides, harsh and heavy. "Pretty Mudblood…” she hissed, pressing both hands flat below her breasts like she could crush her with one exhalation, could dig her thumbs in and pry open her ribcage, could—

Hot, smooth palms raked up and covered her nipples, and Hermione choked on air, couldn't breathe. She was already half dead from cold air and soft fabric and teasing curls, and now Bellatrix was really touching her, Bellatrix, and that oh, so much worse, because—fingers, thumbs… nails…—the
ache was spreading, this had to be the start of death, because sex didn’t usually make her want to…
to scream, and maybe cry, and probably break things.

"Yes," she sobbed, and that wasn't what she'd meant to say, was it?

But, Merlin, Bellatrix grinned down at her, all teeth and cruel-curled lips, and rewarded her with a
sharp pinch to each nipple that she felt right between her legs, and yes seemed like the lone possible
word for it after all.

It was only when her blindly reaching fingers found the leather at Bellatrix's sides that she
remembered she had hands, too. Now that Bellatrix had given them back to her, that was. "Oh," she
heard herself say again, and this time it was a sound of realization. The urge to break something was
building somewhere between her ribs and her thighs, and by the time her fingers wandered up along
Bellatrix's spine, the first threads of the corset seemed like the perfect target. Why should she be the
only one losing clothing? She hadn't even had the chance to get dressed before… before Bellatrix
swept her away, stole her reason, started…

She yanked, wishing the string would snap clean in two, that somehow the entire thing would come
unraveled at her touch. Instead, one loop of the top bow tugged free in her hands, limp and
ineffective.

Bellatrix's nails raked up her shoulders, leaving her breasts stinging with trails of heat. Before she
could pull the other loop, her wrists had been steel-trap caught in a cuff of Bellatrix's fingers, bone
grating against bone.

"No," she growled, shoving forward and down, pressing Hermione's hands over her head.

No?

Dark, narrowed eyes bored into hers, each of them breathing hard. Hermione squirmed for a second,
then slumped, frowning. "Why?"

Bellatrix's only answer was to ply her with kisses, pointed nips at her bottom lip, and Hermione
could feel the frown melting into a pout, then wiping clean as she gave in, as she opened to the kiss,
as Bellatrix's tongue taunted her with the promised reward of compliance.

But where was the fun in that?

The moment Bellatrix relaxed her grip, Hermione yanked free and went for the ties again.

This time, she was caught mid-air, nose-to-nose, her hands immobilized and trembling with the
sudden inertia. As Bellatrix put more weight into it, Hermione struggled but was pressed inch by
inch back into the mattress, denied.

"Why—Why won't you let me—"

This time, the answering kisses were anything but tender—bruising, head-spinning kisses, kisses that
left her shaking all over, kisses she would gladly give up breathing forever in exchange for, but…

"D-did you want to keep it on?" she managed to gasp out once Bellatrix let her up for air.

Stiffening at her own words, Bellatrix stared down at Hermione like she'd almost forgotten she was
there. She cupped Hermione's jaw with one warm palm, sliding her thumb over Hermione's bottom
lip in a very familiar gesture, then sliding it between them, running it pointedly over her teeth. "Yes,
pet," she said at last. "I do."
As Bellatrix shifted her weight, Hermione's second wrist came free. She saw the challenge in Bellatrix's stare. Do it again. Reach for them. Just try to touch me. Defy me. I dare you. She bit her lip, thought better of it, and leaned up to nip at Bellatrix's instead. It was almost a kiss, almost an apology, but Hermione was feeling anything but contrite.

"Why all this?" she asked as she drew back, running the freed fingers of her left hand through the air an inch from Bellatrix's waist, not quite touching. "Why now?"

A funny feeling was bubbling up the back of her neck, a little bit giddy, a little bit devilish. It sparked along the tracks of bites and scrapes leading down her neck, a blaze of reckless bravery. All of a sudden, she couldn't seem to stop smiling. The nervous electricity from just moments before had filled her, overflowed, and fled. Now, she was here. This was happening. She'd said yes—or, at least, a very convoluted double no. The fear, the draw... all of it, everything standing in her way had been admitted and demolished, and here she was, half naked, with the strangest desire to laugh and, stranger still, with a thousand stupid questions bouncing around in her head. "It's the middle of summer," she said through her sudden smile. "And still, all black, all the time?"

Bellatrix's brows had crept steadily higher with each question. "You want to ask me this now?"

Fingers wandered over the dangerously ticklish skin at the bend of Hermione's stomach as Bellatrix spoke, and her voice emerged in a breathless giggle. "You have to admit it's... intimidating." She changed the word silly only at the last moment. The look in Bellatrix's eyes wasn't silly at all.

"Or you are easily intimidated." Bellatrix frowned down at her. "It's traditional." Suspicion dripped from the words. "There isn't any statement a witch can make that can't be done in black." The words were slow and clear, but her touch continued to stray, absent and distracted.

Hermione squirmed, but the desire to wiggle away lost to the faint, pleasant warmth left behind. She wanted to laugh. She wanted to listen. She wanted to kiss her.

Trouble, that smart, smart part of her brain scolded.

It was right, of course.

She told it, in no uncertain terms, to shut up.

"Anything else—" Sliding downward, Bellatrix's nails snapped the waistband of Hermione's shorts against her hipbones in clear retribution for the distraction. The sharp flash of heat made her flinch upward, the hook of Bellatrix's finger under cloth dragging it two inches lower as she did. "—is meaningless." The new skin she'd won was twice as sensitive as that above, and Hermione whimpered when she couldn't curl her knees in, trapped against the ticklish brush of nails by Bellatrix's weight over her thighs. "A frivolous display of modern indulgence."

Hermione gasped when the tickle became a quick pinch, then smiled at the mouthful, each word divided into the separate syllables of a well-rehearsed argument. Just as quickly, her smile faltered, giddiness fading. The thought dredged up memories Hermione would have done anything to leave in the deep, just then. Daring crimson blouses and tailored slacks swam behind her eyes, the picture of a contemporary, trend-setting sort of witch, early outfits from the rare Diagon outings with Andromeda; then shimmering silvers, pale greens, and deep, disappearing blues drifted by, the colorful, understated elegance that always graced Narcissa's presence, effortlessly timeless. She closed her eyes, just for a moment, and let the contrast wash over her. Pretending the events that led her here had never happened would do no good. The younger Blacks were going to be a part of her forever, rebellions of color and all.
When she opened them again, she stared up into the darker simplicity above her. She could see another retort half-formed and waiting to snap off Bellatrix's tongue like a well-placed blade, and Hermione found herself still wanting to smile.

"You'd be stunning in gold," she said softly.

Bellatrix's fingers stilled. Five points of heat pooled against her skin. "Someone's chatty when she's nervous." The words were harsh, dismissive, but Hermione could sense the battle behind them. The playful edge crept back into her smile. Bellatrix was not one to tolerate an interruption of her plans, and Hermione's strangely-timed turn towards conversation contributed little to the mood, but the thin skin on either side of her throat had darkened at the gentle flattery. She had almost made Bellatrix blush.

Hermione let her fingers make contact in the center of Bellatrix's corset, well away from the strings that had gotten her pinned last time. "Why all these?"

Shaking off the disorienting compliment, Bellatrix cocked her head, hair falling over one shoulder. She offered a knowing stare. "If you are hoping to distract me..." She bent, pressing a quick kiss to Hermione's lingering, impish smile. "It isn't going to work."

Those words were all teeth. She kept close as she said them, then slowly bent further. Leather cleaved to Hermione's skin, slick and yielding, gladly sharing the warmth of the woman beneath. Then, she moved, a sinuous, snake-like motion that dragged the ribbing of her corset, ridge by ridge, across Hermione's nipples.

She gasped, levity fleeing, each crest plucking at her skin like a spark. Bellatrix ended her tease sitting back on her heels, one hand braced against the headboard, rising over Hermione's wide-eyed whimper like the figurehead on the prow of a ship, curls and waistline sculpted from the night sky, skin carved from marble, too weighty for the sea, beauty chosen just to drown those in its care.

At the look on Hermione's face, Bellatrix cackled, and the illusion broke. Hermione gulped. She was no less deadly as a woman, no less deadly with a grin splitting her lips and setting laugh-lines into sharp relief. Certainly no less deadly slinking low again, crouched over ready-prone prey, closing them in behind a curtain of curls, eyes dancing, lips curled. "Why indeed, pet."

Too late, the question was gone, Hermione had lost it. She'd grasped at strings again—different, invisible ones, but strings nonetheless—and had been pinned just as surely as before. This time, when Bellatrix's scalding palm slid up her stomach, she was out of words.

Bellatrix seemed to like her noises better, anyway.

Distractions forgotten, Hermione groaned and reached for her, rising up to wrap her hands around Bellatrix's neck. She no longer cared to consider why it was safe to bury her hands in her curls while the strings just two inches below were fully off-limits—didn't much care about anything, she decided deliriously; anything besides the craving for Bellatrix's hands on her skin.

And Bellatrix seemed happy to oblige, nosing along her jaw, nuzzling just beneath her ear. Instinctively, Hermione tilted her head. The thought of giving her throat jolted through her and kicked her heartbeat up another notch. It was all very much like panic, really. Delicious, dizzying, pulse-racing panic—

Bellatrix hummed against her pulse. Hermione shuddered at the sound of it. Hands drifted over Hermione's bare stomach, the sides of her breasts — A tongue dragged, pointed and slow, over the fading bite — Lips sucked marked skin deep into her mouth. She felt bruised, tender; it almost hurt...
Almost. It was just enough to keep Hermione snared in the moment, stiff and trembling, and she wanted—wanted—

When hands and lips went no further, she mewed.

"Want something, pet?" Breath slithered against her ear.

Hermione half choked on a painful laugh. "You're horrible," she groaned. She dug her nails into Bellatrix's neck. "Please…"

"Please what?"

Hermione bit her lip. Her body was already asking, straining into a touch she hadn't quite been given, offering up the places where blood ran closest to the skin, but she couldn't say it. She wasn't about to just let Bellatrix goad her into—

A hand clawed into her curls, dragging her head back with a demanding strength that made her gasp, but no pain. Haunted, enticing shadows swam with the sparks of green light reflected in Bellatrix's eyes, beckoning her, promising pleasure and damnation in equal parts. Hermione would have kissed her, but she couldn't move closer, could only swallow against the plea rising in her throat. Need flared, pulled from the same primordial depths that made her heart race and her lungs flutter with a fear of drowning, a whole ocean of blood and heat inside her breathing yes, yes, yes. Distantly, common sense, or maybe the angel on her shoulder, was still doing its best to call out something like danger, but what match was one tiny piece of her mind against a red tide? When had she ever felt anything like this?

Who did she think she was fooling? Of course she would be goaded. Of course she would let her.

"Bite me again," Hermione gasped. "Please," she panted, wishing she were too warm to blush any deeper.

Bellatrix's eyes widened, pupils dilating. "Oh." Aching slow, she drew Hermione's head to the side again, leaning in, breathing in, exhaling words that rasped and grated together like stones in the deep.

"You know, pet. I thought you were just going to say, 'touch me.'"

Before embarrassment could creep in, Bellatrix's lips went for her throat again, teeth dragging against tendons until they nestled perfectly into the shadow they'd left before, closing almost reverently, the ache sending Hermione's head spinning as Bellatrix's growled deep in her throat. The primal, possessive sound made Hermione's breath hitch. It sounded as starved as she felt, as needy. It filled her with an illusion of power she wanted to cling to, wanted to imagine she had, here—the power to make Bellatrix feel something, maybe even something good, maybe even real desire, after all these weeks of distant stories and cruel insults and impossible games.

Before she could chase the longing out of her head, Bellatrix's jaw released, and Hermione cried out, arching, thoughts fragmenting and swirling away through her blood. Before she could gather them again, teeth were back. Lower, tighter, drawing a whimper, a gasp upon release. Merlin, it felt good not to think. Dizzier than the hands on her body, more peaceful than sleep, hotter than the blood pulsing under almost-broken skin. Just this side—that side?—of terrifying. It felt good to let go, to have her reason stolen right alongside her breath, to come up gasping and lost and see only dark curls bowed over her, mouth kissing her throat like she was starving for it. How could this not be real desire?

Skipping the third bite, the one between her breasts, Bellatrix chose to close her teeth around Hermione's right nipple instead. She sobbed. She pressed upwards, head fighting Bellatrix's cruel
grip as it jerked back against the sheets. Bellatrix's lips were liquid heat, her teeth cool glass, sharper and smoother than they had any right to be, like they could break her and mold her and mend her all at once. Bellatrix clutched her tight and sucked her in. "Please," she gasped again, and this time she had no idea what she was asking for at all.

Bellatrix chuckled into her flesh, vibrations racing through her nipple and straight down her spine. With one last flick of her tongue, she let go with both lips and hand, speaking roughly into the fragments of Hermione's concentration. "You waited..." Teeth dragged lower, spreading quick, sharp bites in a diagonal across her stomach between words. "...so long...to... let me... touch you." She stared up the line of Hermione's body from just above her waistband, one thick curl dangling over her right eye, caught in the moisture at the corner of her lips. Her eyes were impossibly dark, heavy lids lending even deeper shadows, proud nose and sharp jaw as keen and cutting as her teeth. She was a study in feral intensity, the green light only furthering the image of something wild, a royal bloodline of the forest, untouched by human civilization, undomesticated, proudly poised over her kill. "Now you're begging," she hummed, voice still low, but lilting with evident pleasure.

"Mmhmm," Hermione managed, half agreement, half whimper, half plea. There were at least three halves. They all had to fit into that sound. There was nowhere else for them to go. She sure wasn't about to come up with any actual words, not now, not for this.

Bellatrix was grinning, breathing deep, nostrils flared. Suddenly quite sure Bellatrix could smell her, was tasting her need on the air, Hermione flushed all over. Tongue and lips ghosted across the line her fingers had wandered earlier. It led directly between her legs. Her heart was picking up again, or maybe just faster, speeding, pounding. It couldn't seem to get past the instinct to run, though Hermione had the distinct impression it wanted her to run until she ended up just where she'd started, run until she could be caught at the end and find herself sprawled here anyway.

Teeth raked down from her bellybutton, catching on the waistband, tugging, teasing. Hermione wasn't breathing. Lips slid lower, hot breath playing through the layer of inconsequential cloth and curls beneath, lower still, slowing with each painful inch, until Bellatrix's lips were hovering just over her, until the air pressed against the damp fabric with each exhale, hard enough that she could feel how wet she was, how—

Oh.

Bellatrix mouthed her through the cloth. Hermione's hips jumped, cotton dragging against hot, wet, sensitive skin. She was making noises again, could feel them in her throat, but she couldn't hear them, not while blood was pounding in her ears, racing through her veins to flee every extremity and swell the need under Bellatrix's lips.

The fingers snuck up on her, grabbing the sides of her shorts, yanking them down to her knees in one harsh tug. Eyes meeting, Hermione felt a shock race through her spine, an electric chill. Bellatrix's stare was as clear as black ice, no trace of skittish madness, no hint of cruel anger, spearing Hermione with a single-minded focus that made her feel twice as vulnerable as her bare skin, twice as exposed as her desire, but also... strangely... trusted. That stare was guileless, unshielded.

But what must she see? Hermione swallowed against a sudden rush of insecurity, a sudden reminder that, after this, Hermione would be just Hermione again. Hermione Granger, fumble-fingered Mudblood extraordinaire, the one who'd gotten them in the mess this had become last ditch way out of, the one who had spent every minute of the last year—when she wasn't having highly questionable, highly scandalous sex—ruining things. Honestly, she'd probably ruined a thing or two through sex along the way. Who did she think she was—
Bellatrix bit her without warning, sinking her teeth into Hermione's left thigh hard enough that she yelped and kicked out, heel dragging ineffectively against the sheets. As Bella let go, the swift release of pressure sent her reeling again, every bit of her brain skittering away to throb in a tight ball of heat and need between her legs.

"Stop thinking," Bellatrix rasped. Hands gripped her thighs, pushing them wider, drawing her knees up and in.

Hermione gulped, muscles in her stomach jumping and twitching, pulse beating fast and hard, like it could pummel her uncertainty into oblivion on its way right out of her skin. It crawled back up her body, slinking low in her belly, curling between her breasts, clambering up her throat, teasing its way between her lips until she finally blurted out, "Make me."

Bellatrix's hands flexed on her hips in time with a sharp, indrawn breath. Nails raked down her unbitten thigh, shooting tiny tendrils of pleasure up between her legs. "Bossy, pet." Teeth glinted in the halflight. "Tsk tsk." She bent, breathing over her, but didn't touch.

Hermione groaned, hips shifting restlessly.

Bellatrix slapped the skin her nails had just scored with the flat of her hand, lightly enough Hermione didn't kick away, but hard enough to raise heat in its wake, each teasing mark tortuously close to where Hermione wanted her, wanted her so badly it was starting to make her think of dying again—

"Ask... nice-ly."

That little lilt, almost sing-song, almost cruel, set every hair on Hermione's body standing on end. Her mouth went dry as ash. Please , she mouthed, not ashamed to ask for it, but only air slid between her lips. She licked them. Bellatrix's tongue flickered at one corner of her own mouth, a teasing imitation. A promise. Her clit twitched and throbbed. Each of Bellatrix's fingers on her hips felt like a brand. She was barely aware of her own hands fistig in the sheets, still up by her head, waiting, obediently, where Bellatrix had placed them. Her white-tight knuckles were asking. Her trembling thighs were asking. Her wide, pleading eyes were begging. But her tongue wouldn't obey.

Bella's hands strayed upwards again, fingertips vibrating against her skin, nails rippling over the bump of a rib, the pebbled edge of a nipple. "Ask, pet." Her voice was wavering again, wandering, her stare getting lost as it tracked the path of her own hands over Hermione's skin. "Beg for it." Volume and pitch slid lower with every word. "Let me hear that pretty silver tongue—wrapped around my name."

The eerie, specific demand dripped down Bellatrix's lips like beautiful decay, eating through Hermione's ribs to slick over the heart beneath, sending the danger! sirens wailing behind her eyes again.

"Bella," she choked, and everything in her head went silent. "Bellatrix, oh, please—"

"Mmmm." Eyes searing into hers the whole way, Bellatrix's head lowered between her thighs. "Again," she breathed over her, and Hermione almost sobbed at the phantom touch.

"Please," she gasped again, speech returning all at once, slamming into her in a wave of sound. "Bellatrix, Bella—"

Feral intensity returned to Bellatrix's face, sculpting it into harsh lines of need, a single-minded intent to finish a hunt, to claim prey. Lips lowered with aching restraint, as though only the force of Bellatrix's will kept this from ending in blood, and Hermione sobbed out her name again as her clit
vanished between soft, hot lips.

All she could feel was the thick, lethal force of Bellatrix's desire flooding into her—her head spun, sound pinched to nothing but the thrum of her blood in her veins and the competing sirens whirling behind her ribs, one wailing danger, the other screaming yes—yes—yes.

Bellatrix kept her touch light, teasing, and open—all heat, little pressure, lips settled against lips, tongue just parting her, until Hermione's garbled repetitions of her name had jerked six steps up in pitch and fallen off in pleas. "Bella, oh, I—Bella, I— Please, please, I need—"

Bellatrix's nails gouged her thigh, digging deep, a shock of bright, sparkling pain that shot through her, and Hermione swayed at the edge of falling. All she could think about was Bellatrix's tongue—the place it had found to the right of her clit that made her want to just scream and—

And Bellatrix pulled back, ignored her whimper, hissed "This" against her flesh, lower lip dragging cruelly only centimeters above her clit. "You need this. I know what you need."

"Y-yes," Hermione gasped. "Please, yes." She had no will left for arguments. She was wound so tightly into herself she might as well have been composed of nothing more than twenty raised scratches, ten perfect crescents at the crease of ass and thigh, six blood-bruised bites, two pleading nipples, and one aching, swollen, begging clit. And Bellatrix's eyes just above, promising relief. "Merlin—Yes."

Because Bellatrix had had her on edge for days, now. She'd known what she was doing then. Of course she had. Every touch, every taunt, every gibe. She'd been ripping open a beautiful disaster with fingernails and teeth and taunting, promising words until it didn't even recognize itself, until only she could piece it back together.

"Oh, no," Hermione whined, shuddering, half with need, half with the terrifying thought of just how impossibly altered anything reassembled by Bellatrix might be. But to get there, she had to—Bellatrix had to— "Oh, please," she whined, and Bellatrix drove two fingers inside of her, drove the thought right out of her head.

"Yes, pet," she breathed. She set a rhythm, slow and cruel, each press a second before Hermione could breathe in, each curl a second after Hermione's whimper. Her other hand braced against Hermione's stomach, holding her down, stroking her lightly, petting, feeling every movement of her own hand inside of her. And Hermione knew, distantly, with some part of her not just wide-eyed and open-mouthed and thinking with the thrust of her hips, that Bellatrix was still speaking, crooning words over her fingers buried in Hermione's core. "I knew I could make you into this. Knew you'd beg. I knew you'd look at me just...like...this."

Everything inside of her was folding up on itself, tightening, How long, Hermione wanted to ask. When did you know? When did you think about this? But her mind deadlocked with pleasure, her voice lost down between her legs, and all that came out was a sharp, desperate, "Ah!"

Her fingers moved deeper, slower.

"Mine."

Oh. Oh no. Oh, that was a dangerous word, the most dangerous one she'd ever said, back then, when she'd said it beside the water, in the clearing, and twice so now, in the green light, when Hermione was peeled open like this, so desperate and so vulnerable and so, so desperately needy and——
"Mine now," she growled, and Hermione felt something break.

"Yes. Oh, yes, please, please—"

Her hips began to grind. One hand held her down, the heel of the other palm pressed hard against her clit while her fingers curled, digging into a place inside her that made Hermione want to scream, made all the little tight-wound curls all throughout her body start to unfurl like they were reaching for the sun. Any second—Any second, she'd—she'd—

"Say it," Bellatrix demanded.

A cry, high and wordless, burst out, because Hermione didn't know what she wanted, didn't know the words, any words. But Bellatrix's nails dug a little deeper, scouring her own name out of the depths. "Bellatrix!" she gasped, and it was an offering. "Bella." A plea. "Bella?" Whimpered. A question.

Teeth pinched her hipbone. Wrong answer. "Say you're mine," she breathed against her.

Oh.

Oh. No, no, she couldn't, couldn't concede, couldn't give her own voice to the ownership Bellatrix had claimed, couldn't speak willingly to the twisted possession of her magic that had somehow become possession of her body, her desire, her sanity; threatened to become possession of her humanity—

"Say it."

Shouldn't, couldn't—That was more, more than just saying yes, more than begging for a touch, more than digging her hands into the folds of the sheets so tightly she couldn't tell where her skin ended and cloth began, more than teetering over the edge of an orgasm she wanted more than she'd wanted… well…

Anything.

That couldn't be true. Could it?

But her body, right now, said it could. And, worse still, Bellatrix's stare said it could. Her eyes weren't empty. They were dark, full, and asking, almost pleading, even while her words were an order, a demand. No one had ever looked at her like that. Like a necessity. Like salvation.

Hermione's hands left the sheets, reaching down, arcing up. She gripped her hair, pulled Bellatrix up to her, pulled until her lips were at her throat.

"Yours," she gasped as need and pleasure stole her reason.

Bellatrix's teeth sank home, and she came with the word still on her lips.
Chapter 37

Hermione's arm felt glued over her eyes. Her arm was lead. Her arm wasn't moving. Her eyes were not going to open. "Um…"

Bellatrix was laughing. How dare she be laughing. Hermione couldn't see it, couldn't hear it, but she could feel the vibrations against her stomach, and she was way too spent to elbow her for it.

By the time she had started breathing again, Bellatrix had shifted out of easy reach, just to one side, one hand still braced gently just below her navel, but otherwise distant, untouchable. Hermione had reached for her, then given up halfway, groaning at the bone-deep lethargy that had taken over and made it impossible to be huffy at the continued rejection of her touch.

Alright, she'd earned that smug little laugh. Hermione hadn't thought there were as many parts in her body as she had felt in that orgasm. She sure wasn't going to say it aloud, though. Bellatrix's head didn't need to get any bigger.

Still. Merlin. That happened without magic? It could be that damnably good without magic?

Without magic.

Ah. Right.

"Weren't you supposed to hand me my wand?"

The laughter died. Slowly, Hermione peeled her arm away from her face, letting it flop down beside her as she stared into Bellatrix's suddenly reserved eyes. "It's right behind you."

The words hit like a wash of ice water. Drawing her knees out from under Bellatrix's arm, Hermione tucked them up against her stomach as she pulled herself upright, feeling suddenly vulnerable, exposed. She'd just said… a lot of things. Out of the most immediate heat of passion, she wasn't ready to face any of them, but the distance in Bellatrix's voice still managed to needle at her like a shard of glass between her ribs. She shook herself: This was more important. It had to be. It was why they'd done this.

She turned to see her wand tucked quite conspicuously into a half-inch groove in the headboard's carvings. If not for feeling like she'd been wrapped in at least an ocean's worth of post-sex fog, she would have been stunned. Poking her finger into the space by its base, she levered it free, turning a glare on the one who hadn't even bothered to properly disguise it.

"Don't give me that look, pet. It's hardly my fault you're appalling at hide and seek."

Hermione opened her mouth to grouse, but the look on Bellatrix's face gave her pause. Her eyes flickered every-which-way, lips thin and pale. She looked anxious. She looked vulnerable.

Swallowing down a sudden wash of nerves, Hermione wrapped her hand more tightly around the thin length of vine. As a moment of truth, it felt foreign against her palm, flimsy and inconsequential compared to the promise she'd made, small and fragile compared to the half of a bargain she'd never agreed to that already slicked her skin with sweat and indebtedness.

Her hand was shaking.

Bellatrix licked her lips. "Well?"
"I—I don't know. Give me a minute?"

A minute passed, both of them still, the air between vibrating. Hermione reached for anything with nothing, reached for the flash of heat only just past, the half-crouched wildness at the foot of the bed, the memory of a violent-dormant field, snow flurries, sparks. Her wand threatened to bruise her palm with hope. This could be the end, it seemed to say, the moment, the cure. She saw herself cradling a protesting Crookshanks in her arms, suitcase beside her feet, chin up, staring defiantly into Headmistress McGonagall's eyes at the pig-flanked gates of Hogwarts, asking if her offer might still stand.

Then, the vision flickered, faltered, and she saw only Bellatrix, face remote, carefully masked, but eyes eager, and all Hermione could think was how this wouldn't be the end—not for her. What kind of beginning it would be—Bellatrix loose in the world with her magic, Hermione left naked in bed—she couldn't begin to guess, but she doubted it would look anything like her flight of fancy.

And then, it didn't matter. It wasn't going to look like anything at all.

Bellatrix spotted the tears before Hermione felt them on her cheeks. "No," she growled. "No!" And lunged forward.

Hermione flinched and dropped her wand, tipping backwards onto an elbow, but Bellatrix was over her in the same breath. Hermione's eyes screwed tight, waiting for a grab, a strike, a knife, anything… anything but the press of a palm against her cheek, a thumb roughly chafing away the stinging salt.

Her eyes sprang wide. Bellatrix looked furious, feral, but her hands were gentle. "We'll try again," she muttered, voice like broken gravel. She pressed her nose into the crook of Hermione's neck, inhaling deeply. "It will work." Her words were desperate, raw. "This time…"

Fingers were already wandering, dragging up Hermione's side, clutching at her shoulder. It was all Hermione could do to stay still, staring into the drowned light, struggling to constrain her breathing. Lips mouthed at their favorite bite, scalding and near worshipful. Raising a shaking hand to the back of Bellatrix's head, Hermione grabbed almost as tight as she was already held, breathing in juniper and salt and skin like she'd already forgotten how to breathe without it.

Half-formed promises to no one continued to spill from Bellatrix's lips. "This time I'll have it," she breathed, and Hermione felt tears stinging at her eyes again. She clutched her wand so hard she feared it would snap clean in two, her other hand still lost and aimless in Bellatrix's curls.

"Why?" she whispered. "Bella? Why?"

Breath picking up audibly, Bellatrix licked a trail from bite to ear. "Because it will be different," she muttered. "Because I've changed you."

Swallowing thickly, Hermione shook her head, chin bumping against the side of Bellatrix's neck. "Nothing's changed!"

"No?" Bellatrix laughed, abrasive, a sound on the edge of anger. "Ah, but it has, pet." Nails found Hermione's side. "Silly girl. We're one step from everything."

The patronizing words set Hermione's teeth on edge, set her fear and sorrow against a rising anger of her own. Her nails tightened on the back of Bellatrix's neck. "It didn't change anything! Can't you see? I can't, I'll n-never—"

Bellatrix withdrew. She stared into Hermione's eyes with sudden, brutal sobriety. "Of course it did.
I've dragged you off your pedestal." She trailed the back of one finger up between Hermione's breasts. "No more moral high ground," she sang softly. "Now you're..." She tapped her finger between words, the touch reverberating through Hermione's breastbone and deep into her heart, fighting its natural rhythm. "...right...down...here...with...me." A final tap, and she let her hand fall away.

Hermione sniffed, then frowned. "We had sex, Bella. Or, or one of us did, at least. I didn't torture anyone. I didn't commit a murder."

But Bellatrix's knowing stare didn't falter.

"I'm still the same me I was an hour ago!" Hermione spluttered, hating the look in Bellatrix's eyes, hating the way her nipples tingled and tightened in the air between them.

"You begged for my teeth in your throat, pet."

Hermione flushed. "I— I did, yes. Because it felt good. No one got hurt." She paused, rubbing restlessly at the side of her neck with the hand that held her wand. "No one got saved. Nothing changed."

Bellatrix shrugged, a smooth, dismissive motion that drew Hermione's eyes down to her chest and back up again, a guilty flicker. She wished she'd gotten her clothes back on the minute she'd finished spouting embarrassing declarations and screaming Bellatrix's name. It was hard to hold onto proper emotions while naked. Harder still to hold on to a train of thought.

"Positive intensity," she said. "Towards me."

Hermione's frown deepened. "I did say sex wasn't going to cut it."

Bellatrix shook her head, curls gliding back and forth across the back of Hermione's fingers. "For a bright little Mudblood, you're being awfully dense." Her voice was light with insincere patience. She brought her face closer, until there was scarcely room for air between the tips of their noses. "If you're going to fix me, you're going to have to like me," she breathed. "All of me. I will give up nothing else to get back what should have never been yours to steal." Her words gathered fire, eyes flashing green sparks. "I will not change for you. I will not be castrated by you. So you, pet..."

Her words fell, rumbling low, and she slid to the side, rubbing her cheek against Hermione's, who shivered. Her hand clenched beneath Bellatrix's curls as though that would be enough to remind her she had a woman at her throat, not the deadly nuzzling of a great jungle cat, an inch from a feast of flesh and blood.

"You had to learn to like the dark."

Bellatrix pulled up to face her, to kiss her again. Hermione's fingers tightened further, almost keeping them apart, but Bellatrix paid no mind to the fist in her hair, the tugging at her scalp. She kissed her like she wanted to drown her. Hermione realized her other hand had found the skin at the back of Bellatrix's neck, clawing at her like she could scramble free of the water with her nails and her regret alone. Her wand raked accusation against her palm, driving Bellatrix's words into her skin. You begged for my teeth in your throat, pet. You had to learn to like the dark.

And, Merlin help her, it rang a little true. If that was Bellatrix's darkness, she had welcomed it with open arms and a very, very nice orgasm. But it wasn't. Bellatrix had far deeper darkness than a little rough sex, a few nasty, possessive words that a more self-respecting Hermione might have offered some objection to instead of begging for more. Was she right? Did she have to accept and embrace
the worst she knew of Bellatrix's past in order to give back her future? Why couldn't one rush of purely good feeling be enough? And why, why should a second attempt be any different?

Bellatrix was wrong. She had to be. Hermione wasn't any more corrupted now than she had been when they started. It was a few bites, not an unconditional pardon for a lifetime of torture. It. Hadn't. Worked. Bellatrix's great plan, her great (incredible, mind-blowing, miserable) sexual escapade… It had all been pointless, useless. They were back at square one, throwing about angry words and conflicting ideas that never landed them closer to an answer. And Hermione knew the answer, knew it with as much force as it took to avoid thinking it: She couldn't fix anything. She had broken too much already. That was her only real talent, after all. Snap, crack, devastate! She was nothing but an angry, sullen child bumbling around in a world full of delicate, beautiful magic waiting to be smashed to bits. What she didn't break, Bellatrix surely would. Between them, they could probably destroy the entire planet.

The thoughts racing through her head just made Hermione want to scream, but even though she wasn't kissing her back, Bellatrix's lips were in the way. She wanted to fling something at a wall, but she'd already dropped her wand again, and she had nothing else. She wanted to break things.

Corset strings teased the tips of her fingers like the stem of Eve's apple. Slowly, she stilled. Bellatrix's kisses deepened as the fight went out of her. The jolt of heat which raced through her as her muscles relaxed shocked her. She didn't think she had it in her, that anything resembling that crystalline instant of pleasure from just minutes ago could begin demanding a second round after so many infuriating words and dizzying revelations, but…

Merlin, Bellatrix knew how to use her tongue.

It didn't change the first instinct. Even as her blood rose to the surface of her skin, her fingers slid slowly down through Bella's hair, trailing instant shivers along the back of her neck. The kisses fumbled, breath hitching. For a moment, she allowed the distraction, the still-delicious taste of Bellatrix at her lips, the strange, tingling sweetness of tasting herself there. Hermione kept her touch feather-light, teasing the crest of her shoulders, the raised, invisible dusting of tiny hairs between shoulder-blades….

She went for the ties.

Before she could even get the trailing loops of the laces between two fingers, Bellatrix flinched like a skittish cat. She jerked back, freeing herself from Hermione's straying hands. "Stop it."

Hermione froze at the steel in those two words. "I didn't—"

"I didn't— I wasn't— I would never—"

Hermione flinched at the sudden mockery. Bellatrix's voice had gone high and sharp, a piercing, strident twist on the baby-voice she typically saved for taunting imitations.

"Where've I heard that before, hmm?" Her eyes were wild. "I didn't mean to!"

Quick as a whip, fingers locked around Hermione's right wrist, shoving it to the mattress. Her left fluttered in mid-air, suddenly looking lonely and foolish, to have approached the forbidden ties after everything else she'd failed to achieve this morning. Lowering it slowly, she pulled it down between her breasts.

Bellatrix tracked the movement through narrowed eyes, hooded and hawk-like. Hunting. "Fuck, pet… If I had one drop of my magic I'd…"
These words were raw, low, possibly the least-affected Hermione had ever heard slip past those many-faced, guarded lips. She flinched again as Bellatrix's other hand lowered towards her, but it grabbed something beside her head. A tangled bedsheet of impossible-to-determine color rose between them, catching the night-sea glow and a current of air like a billowing sail. Bringing the corner to her lips, Bellatrix bit down on the fabric. It tore with a quick jerk of head and arm, and in two more harsh movements, she had a long strip of cloth dangling from her fingertips.

Hermione had a riot of nervous electricity behind her ribcage, but she didn't even consider resisting as Bellatrix dragged her right hand up over her head.

"The other hand, pet."

The words freed her, reminded her why she'd just lost the right to have hands. "Please, you really won't let me touch you?" Even as she spoke, she obeyed the command, drawing her own wrists together above her head. "I won't try to take it off again, I swear I won't."

She winced even as she said the words. She knew just how highly Bellatrix valued her promises these days. She closed her eyes, bracing for more mockery, but to her surprise, Bellatrix didn't rise to the bait. Instead, she seemed fully fixated on wrapping the length of sheet around and between Hermione's wrists.

"Mmm, no, you shan't." Her fingers caressed her handiwork, tracing the curve of cloth and skin with care.

Hermione gave a halfhearted tug, unsurprised to find herself thoroughly affixed to the headboard. Snugly enough she couldn't pull away, but with enough give that she could very easily forget, could torture herself twice over trying. She'd never given any particular thought to it, being tied or restrained in bed, but she knew such things were done, and wasn't all that surprised to discover Bellatrix one to do it.

Far more surprising was the feeling of smooth wood sliding between her palms. Bellatrix made sure her wand was as snug in her grasp as her hands were in their bonds. "Careful, pet. If you shoot off sparks, you might bring the roof down." The words were mockingly light, the harsh grin that accompanied them almost a challenge.

Hermione bit back a retort. She didn't appreciate the insinuation about her self-control, not until she realized the thought was almost a comfort. There were few spells that could be done properly without much movement of a wrist, but red sparks were, in fact, one of them. Should she come to regret the trust she'd placed in Bellatrix's goodwill when she offered up her wrists for the taking, she could revoke it in a shower of dust and light. There were no roots here; nothing to actually send the ceiling caving in after a misplaced firework, but she had been handed an instant lever for ruining the mood. Her wand was back in her grasp; safety nestled against her palms.

While danger crouched over her.

Bellatrix rocked back on her heels, studying her. "Mmm." She lightly fingered the bite mark on Hermione's thigh, making her twitch and shiver. "I like you like this." She licked her lips. "The best kind of dirty. Mine." The word was flippantly light, but the easy return to the possessive darkness from mere moments before made Hermione shudder, then jerk as two fingers ran up the length of her slit without warning.

"I'm n-not a thing," Hermione retorted, trying, until it proved impossible with Bellatrix sitting between them, to pull her knees together. She was nowhere near the previous state of need that had her not minding the sentiment behind that word. Strung up for the taking, it felt both more dangerous,
Bellatrix smirked, wiping her fingertips off beside the bite. "Oh but you are. A pretty thing." She rubbed her thumb against Hermione's bottom lip, easily holding her chin steady even as she tried to turn away. "A clever thing." Spider-light, the fingertips wandered back down the path of bites. "And most definitely mine."

Hermione let out a sigh equal parts enjoyment and exasperation. "Why are you always talking like that? I've already agreed to what you wanted. You don't want me to be yours." In trying to mock her own prior neediness, she wound up just sounding needy all over again. She flushed and barreled ahead. "It's the magic that's yours."

A cloud of anger began to gather over Bellatrix's face, her distaste for any flippant remarks about what Hermione had done as clear as ever.

"N-not that I mind," Hermione hastened to add. "But wouldn't it be better to just… let me try again?" It was a halfhearted request. They both could hear it.

"Have something more pressing to get to, hmm?" Bellatrix ran her hand down the length of Hermione's left arm, skimming two finger-widths of skin from the pulse at her wrist to the side of her breast, pulled higher on her chest by the strain of her shoulders. "You'll try as many times as it takes." She flicked a nipple with the back of her nail. "And you'll be even more mine once I have it."

Though the words were harsh, Hermione sensed something more in them than the frantic quest for her magic. Bellatrix's desire slicked her skin, deepened her voice, clouded the air so thick she could taste it on the back of her tongue. Every hair on Hermione's body stood on end to answer its call. It was comforting, in an odd way, to see that in this, at least, Bellatrix hadn't lied to her. Comforting, but confusing, and not a little frightening. For all it seemed that the dominant part of a magicless Bellatrix focused still on what she needed to regain, some part of her was very much invested in fucking Hermione raw, and some part of her seemed to think once it was over, it wouldn't be over at all.

How much of this was show? How much of the fire in Bellatrix's eyes as she looked at her would vanish the minute she'd gotten what she wanted? How quickly would she turn to rage if it became any more apparent that they were doomed to fail?

Hermione was a little sore, a little bruised—her pride as much as her skin—and more than a little vulnerable, in every sense of the word, but she decided the time had passed for complaints and questions. She'd said her two cents. It had gone over as well as always. And thinking about any future beyond the next several minutes at Bellatrix's mercy was only going to make her head ache. And your heart, too.

Letting her sex do the thinking instead seemed like a grand idea. She squirmed in the ties, arching until she was as close to Bellatrix's lips as she could get, then said, "Then what are you waiting for?"

Bellatrix growled out a laugh. The hand between them grasped her nipple, sending a burst of rekindled desire directly between her thighs.

Hermione's eyes all but closed at the sweet torture. The heat under her skin decimated all last thoughts of caution. "That's better," she said hoarsely, knowing she played with fire, knowing Bellatrix wouldn't take kindly to being teased… not wanting to be taken kindly at all.

The hand at her breast jerked higher, pressing under her chin until Hermione's neck was straining backwards, fully exposed.
Her heart took up its panic-flutter again. Unfortunately—no, fortunately, definitely fortunately—it seemed her body was coming to associate that feeling with acute desire. Her hips rocked back—forth—back, shifting restlessly.

One hand still holding her head hostage, Bellatrix sketched the vulnerable lines of Hermione's throat with the other, lingering over the breath ghosting quick and shallow through her windpipe, the blood beating hard and fast to either side, the outline of tight, taut muscle between. She leaned in, dragging her tongue up, over her own fingers, over Hermione's skin, until she reached her ear. "You think because I haven't tied up your tongue you have permission to use it?"

Hermione's breath hitched at the words. She felt the motion cupped in Bellatrix's hand. She bit her lip—hard—to stifle a retort, or maybe a cry. She had never felt so fragile as she did with Bellatrix's hand at her throat. This was not the first time—but this was different.

"Mm-mm, pet." The fingers against her windpipe kept her still as Bellatrix released her chin to drag the full length of her finger down the center of her lips, tugging the bottom far enough it snapped back with a lewd, wet pop. "None of that." The finger continued down, dragging across her pinioned throat, down between their bodies, between her breasts. "I want you quiet," she hissed, circling her navel. "Compliant," she added, sliding straight down into her curls. "And wet."

When that taunting finger slid inside without hesitation, she was.

When it withdrew after only two teasing, curling strokes, Hermione groaned. Hands grabbed her hips, iron-tight.

"I said—"

In a hard, fast motion, Bellatrix shoved Hermione further up the bed, untangling their legs so she could turn her, flip her, manhandle her onto her knees.

"Quiet."

Her wrist ties crossed, much tighter than before, all the give taken by the unexpected twist. Her head slumped against her upper arms, breathing hard against her own skin, tasting sweat as she panted. Hands ran down the curve of her ass, tracing the cords of slim, firm muscle in her hips and thighs. Every one was quivering.

Bellatrix drove inside. Hermione had to bite her arm to choke back a moan. Her eyes slammed shut and her jaw clenched. She knew, now, that Bellatrix wanted her to fail, wanted an excuse to jerk her around again, to hiss another demand, to take away her touch, all in cruel, exquisite punishment for trying to take off that damned corset. Why else would she have chosen this delicious, maddening angle?

But Bellatrix was, as ever, impossible to deny. When she wanted failure, she pursued it like any other prey. Two—yes...oh!—three fingers beat a torturous rhythm inside of her, each thrust driving down and in to that spot she'd found only with curled fingertips before. She bore down with the force of her body; Hermione could feel hips against her ass with every push, cloth dragging against her skin, her sanity coiled up in her belly, tight and hot and screaming but she wouldn't—wouldn't—She would keep quiet till she—till she (please) let...her...(please) let me—

Bellatrix's chest cleaved to her back, corset ribs digging into her spine, soft breasts hot and full under her shoulder blades, curls teasing across her skin like a thousand live-wire kisses, and Bellatrix's teeth sank into her shoulder.
A strangled cry tore free at last, yanked from her throat, and Bellatrix pushed her through it, driving her knees into the mattress, driving her sanity tighter and lower and—a thumb at her clit, nails against a straining, neglected nipple—out of her body completely. Red sparks blazed behind her eyes, red waves dripped down her spine, and time itself dangled out of reach, suspended in bliss.

Bellatrix's hands smoothing gentle circles on her hips and lower back brought her slowly back in sync with the universe. Hermione couldn't breathe. Expecting denial, the pleasure had snuck up out of nowhere and bowled her over like a crosscurrent. Air kept leaving her in little gasps and whimpers she couldn't understand how she still had the air to be making. Merlin, she must be breathing through her cunt, all the fluttering it was doing.

A strangled, broken laugh emerged at the vulgar, uncharacteristic thought. Bellatrix must be rubbing off after all.

As though drawn by her unspoken name, Bellatrix's hand snuck up to gently hold a dangling breast, impersonally, like one might weigh a ripe fruit, thumb gliding as though to check the sheen. "Care to share the funny, pet?"

"Nope!" Hermione gasped as Bellatrix rolled her tender, tired nipple. "And no more, please. I c-can't catch my breath." When Bellatrix didn't seem inclined to stop, Hermione groaned, "We haven't even eaten breakfast!"

Bellatrix grinned, still lazily toying with the tight little ball of flesh and nerves between her fingers. "A perfect, hedonistic day, isn't it?"

Perfect? Hermione wondered. Was that really the right word for this? That Bellatrix would choose it of her infinite options startled her out of an immediate protest. So far, this was a day where Bellatrix had gotten no closer to what she wanted after two rather... strenuous... attempts at the only idea she'd had. The fully forgotten wand between Hermione's palms and a half-hearted outward thrust of nonexistent magic reinforced the failure. The sex was good, but it wasn't working. But Bellatrix had said perfect, and Hermione couldn't bring herself to disagree.

"Until I faint from hunger," she muttered at last. Her voice sounded as limp as she felt.

Bellatrix tugged her head up by grabbing a handful of her curls with the hand not still teasing her nipple. "You think you've earned breakfast?" She pried Hermione with a slow, thorough kiss that made her toes curl, but Hermione got an elbow between them, pushing her away.

"Probably not!" she gasped. "And you... You're... wonderful—" she managed, fighting a dizzy, intoxicated laugh. "—but I'm starving!"

With a long-suffering sigh, Bellatrix released her toy with a final flick—to Hermione's relief and disappointment, both—and vanished from the room with only a single squeak of bedsprings. Hermione found herself utterly alone, stunned by the icy vulnerability that swept over her as she knelt, still firmly affixed to the headboard, tied too high to properly curl her knees in against her stomach and resort to fetal defense. She thought she could untwist herself if she tried but couldn't convince her body to move enough to do so. The stillness rose around her like a tide, waves of otherworldly static, loud and consuming.

The sound of slamming cabinetry echoed into the silence, cutting clean through her rapidly escalating breaths.

"There's no food," Bellatrix announced a moment later from the doorway, matter-of-fact. Before Hermione could complain or offer a quick, clothed trip into town, a faint wrinkling sound filled the
room. "Feel blessed, pet," she muttered, stepping into view. As she held a bite of something hard and brown up to Hermione's lips, reflex had her open without question.

Sweetly flavored oats, sugar, honey burst into life on her tongue. Hermione was suddenly ravenous, her stomach growling audibly. "Cereal bar?" she muttered as she chewed, uncaring one lick for manners. Her position was too undignified to give it a moment's thought. "Really?"

Bellatrix smiled, breaking off another piece. She teased it against Hermione's closed lips as she struggled to finish the last bite, finding it ungainly to eat with her arms above her head. She glared. "Feeding one's lover can be such a sensual experience, wouldn't you agree?" she drawled as Hermione lipped the next bit into her mouth, too hungry to turn her glare into fighting words. As her thumb brushed against Hermione's bottom lip, she felt the scrape of sugar. Bellatrix sucked the thumb into her own mouth, smiling, and Hermione shivered.

She took the next bite more slowly, without protest, unable to withdraw her stare from Bellatrix's dark eyes. Fingers lingered on her chin, a casual reminder of their place at her throat. The last bite came too quickly, and then it was gone. Hermione sighed.

"Better?" Bellatrix asked.

"Yes," Hermione answered honestly. There were a few holes inside of her right now, but at least the one with the hard-edged, teething ring of hunger had been filled. "Thank you."

Bellatrix settled back against the pillow with a grunt. Wrinkling came again. Hermione huffed at being left dangling while Bellatrix went about her own sorry excuse of a meal, but nearly choked on the sound as Bellatrix's unoccupied hand snuck into her hair, toying with her curls, nails teasing the base of her neck. The casual intimacy stuck her with a sudden pain far sharper than a bite. She looked over, staring, wide-eyed, at the half-reclined demon, breasts all but popping out of that godforsaken corset, curls a mess, teeth ripping off an inch of oats and honey, her absurd rendition of a breakfast in bed. She was sexuality itself, overflowing, uncontainable, and she was eating a bloody cereal bar.

By Merlin, she wanted her.

"Let me touch you," she whispered.

Bellatrix finished her last bite, dropping the wrapper casually beside the bed. "No."

Hermione groaned. "Oh, come on. Please? Please, just—just let me—"

"No."

"Why can't I just—"

"No!" Bellatrix snarled. The moment shattered. They sat in silence.

It took Hermione a few minutes to realize she was brooding. A few minutes levity over a cereal bar had only served to reinforce the distance she felt between them now, a distance she'd felt even with Bellatrix's fingers inside of her. It felt off, brought back that suffocating feeling of wrongness she had every time she tried and failed to fix what she'd done. Struggling to gather the feeling into a proper thought instead of the half-formed begging she'd come up with earlier, Hermione didn't fight the stinging gulps of air she needed to take between words.

"I—I don't—" she began, ignoring the anger in Bellatrix's eyes. "I don't feel connected." The word
left in a rush more exhale than sound. "I don't feel connected to you," she repeated, more firmly. "I don't feel you. There's— It's like… white noise. A… a wall of it." Or an ocean, the whole ocean, an ocean I've never even seen except that it's here, it's all around us, and I'm drowning in it. "Please, I—I know you..." She swallowed back a pained laugh. "You've made me come half out of my skin twice already but if I can't touch you I feel like… I just feel like..." She struggled against the breath now threatening to choke her. It's a warm ocean, warm and crimson at the surface, blue beneath... "Do I disgust you?" she whispered. "Is that it? Is it really that, after all this? Is this about— Am I still just—" A pound of flesh and impure blood? "Is that how you want me to feel, Bella? Because I do. So help me I do. I can't. I can't get past that. And that's an awful feeling." She clenched her hands tight around her wand, feeling her blood pulse against the restraint, looking anywhere but at the woman beside her. "Do I?"

After a long silence, Bellatrix reached out and dragged her chin towards her. "What?" The flash of anger had faded. She looked exasperated, confused, and a little put out by the long string of half-coherent words, but not upset.

Hermione licked a bit of sticky honey from the corner of her lips and carefully crafted a single question. "Do I disgust you? Maybe not my blood, maybe not even what I stand for, but..."

"No." With the word, Bellatrix's expression blanked.

Hermione waited for something else to form, searching for a sign. When none came, she tugged gently at her hands. "No?"

Dark eyes zeroed in on the small movement, the vibrations of a fly in a web. Death-pale fingers crept slowly back up the curve of Hermione's forearms, stroking lightly at the red-rubbed ring where skin met cloth. Reluctantly, she pinched the tie between thumb and pointer finger, tugging it free. "No."

Loosed, Hermione reached out to stroke the curve of Bellatrix's face, wanting to map the strange emptiness in her stare with her fingertips. Bellatrix flinched away.

Hermione let her hand fall. "You do," she whispered. Now that she'd said it, put words to it, it had gotten worse. Before, at least she'd been allowed that much: the safe skin on her lips and cheekbones, the back of her neck, places to grasp and cling and claw. Now, she couldn't touch her at all.

Bellatrix's eyes skittered over her face like rainboots on ice.

"You can't even look at me." Hermione shivered, pulling her wrists in close, squeezing her fingers around them, rubbing away the circulation strain of the silk, rubbing it back into place. "This is never going to work. I'm sorry I even—"

"Pet—"

"Bella." The less-than-gentle dismissal in the name sounded far harsher on Hermione's lips. She squeezed them tightly shut, not liking the taste of mockery on her own tongue. "Sorry. I—Do you know what this feels like?" She squeezed tighter, clutching her right wrist in her left hand, her skin heavy and unwieldy after the delicate prison of Bellatrix's ties. "Of course you don't." This time, she let out the pained laugh. In its wake, she added "You made me want you."

Their eyes locked over her choked words, and now that Hermione had won the stare, she had to fight the urge to look away.

"You won. And I just..." She switched hands, rubbing, seeing, in a flash, herself standing where
Bellatrix had in the forest, clawing at painless scars in the face of an all-consuming, distant storm. "...I still want you. You're the most..." She remembered Bellatrix's own words. Fear. Draw. "...terrifyingly beautiful person I've ever known and you just... you..." She felt heat rising on her cheeks and wanted to slap herself. She was naked, in bed, and two hours deep into ten a.m. sex with Bellatrix Lestrange, with Bellatrix Black, and still, the thought of saying the word "orgasm" aloud made her blush. "You... Um... You changed my world a little bit, just then. But you— Knowing you can't even stand to let me... for me to even touch you...? I can't bring you that? I can't give you..."

Her plea ended in a squeaky "Hey!" when Bellatrix flicked a thumbnail over her nipple.

"Talk less, pet."

Hermione blinked through a quick intake of breath, sufficiently silenced.

"Give a witch a thrice-damned minute. I haven't— I don't..." She let out a huff, then drew air back into her lungs, blinking twice, starting over. "No one touches me. I never— Not in— Well fuck, pet, must have been a few dozen years since... that. Touch me, you lose a hand, Mudblood or otherwise."


"You can." The reply was silted. She shook her head. "If you must. Just don't expect for me to... I don't... I don't like it."

The temptation to blurt out "What?" was almost overwhelming, but Hermione realized, very quickly, she already knew. Not the answer she'd get, if she pushed, but the crux of the thing. She'd heard it in Bellatrix's stories, seen it in her memories, felt it from inside of her. Pleasure was weakness. She could give it, thrust it upon another without hesitation, again and again, but to take it, to allow someone else to ply her to weakness was... unthinkable. Or at least more trust than she had to spare.

"Alright then," Hermione said, squaring her jaw. "I won't... I wouldn't want to do anything you're not... comfortable with. But if I could only..."

She reached out her hand, slowly, making sure Bellatrix could see it coming the entire way. An offering, not a demand.

Bellatrix sighed, a resigned sound, and her eyes narrowed to slits, but when Hermione ran two fingers across a cheekbone and down the corner of her jaw, she didn't flinch away.
Chapter 38

Hermione sat up.

As her touch wandered across Bellatrix's lips, they pursed slightly, her eyes narrowing.

"What are you thinking?" she asked softly, not wanting to startle her.

"I'm… considering."

The words lipped at her fingertips. "Anything in particular?" She traced down the center of Bellatrix's throat, index and middle finger parting to follow the tendons to either collarbone.

"You. How I ended up here. Mostly you." The words were short, clipped, almost without inflection, but Hermione startled, glancing up to meet her eyes. They were equally inscrutable.

"Considering who I am?" Hermione asked, cautious. Her fingers had stilled in the hollow of Bellatrix's throat. She could feel a heartbeat, thin and fast. What I am?

"Considering what I want to do with you." A slow, deadly smile lifted the corner of her mouth. "Especially considering who you are."

Hermione swallowed, glancing down again, letting her hand settle more fully against Bellatrix's chest. There wasn't a part of that statement she felt safe pressing, no question she felt prepared for an answer to. "Is this alright?" she asked instead.

Bellatrix didn't answer. "I remember, now, when I first wanted you."

Hermione froze.

"After I tortured you, threatened you, tried to burn you right out of our lives… You came creeping up the stairs, entitled as could be, begging for a little lesson on healing."

Hermione was tempted to joke you do like me begging, but Bellatrix words felt too heavy for her to break their fall. She remembered the day all too clearly, the messy way Bellatrix's taunting instructional moment had blended in to her first time. It was an uneasy memory, steeped in physical pleasure and corrupted, now, by a betrayal that hadn't yet happened.

"I imagined it, just for a blink. Everything I could teach you. How easy it would have been to make you want me, in that moment. All new and scared and brimming with the sort of infatuation that could so easily be… redirected." She licked her lips, eyes distant, then blinked and picked up Hermione's hand. She led her to the single black cloth tie that held the half-robe closed over the corset, keeping her arms sheathed in cross-laced sleeves. "You're much more…" She trailed off, encouraging Hermione to undo the string with a squeeze of her wrist. "Now."

"More what?" Hermione whispered as she did.

Bellatrix shrugged free of the sleeves, letting the second layer at her back and sides pool about her waist. There was suddenly much more skin: full, pale arms to explore, lean lines of startling strength and dangerous trackmarks of gleaming darkness that always brought a lump to Hermione's throat. "More… difficult. More self-important," she added with something like a chuckle. "But mostly just… more."
Hermione's fingers stilled at the bend of her elbow, then continued, tracing slowly across her Crucius scars, following the start of one into the meet of another until she reached the grim overhatching fully obscuring the veins of her wrist. "Thank you?" She made it a question in the hopes it would make Bellatrix less likely to balk, but the warmth she felt at the words was very much present, very much genuine. This all felt very surreal, like sometime in the midst of her little explosion she'd knocked herself out and slipped into a dream, but Bellatrix's skin was very much warm, very much real, so her words must be real, too.

Bellatrix was staring down when she looked up, watching Hermione's fingertips at her scars. "You keep forcing me back into my own head," she muttered, a little bit angry, a little bit bemused. "Thought I'd lost track of it, sometimes, what with everyone else I keep in there."

Bellatrix shook her head and Hermione remembered to breathe, remembered to move, remembered she'd been given permission, however limited, to touch the skin on display. She dragged her thumb in circles, taking in the texture of the lines, a brittle, edgeless softness more vulnerable than skin.

"But you don't break. Everything I throw at you just… poof." Her fingers twitched as Hermione cautiously traded hands, studying the less-seen, less-dark scars from the Imperius Curse. "You'd've been a challenge." She shook her head. "Even then."

Bellatrix sounded disgusted at her own confession, but Hermione felt thrilled. It was half nonsense, no compliment like she'd ever heard one, but the cryptic, personal words made her twice as giddy as any grudging "pretty" or "smart" she'd gotten before. She knew better than to answer with a "thank you." That would only earn a defensive retreat behind insults and, quite possibly, the little bit of clothing she'd given up. Instead, one hand resting very softly against each of Bellatrix's wrists, she leaned in for a quick, gentle kiss.

Bellatrix deepened it without hesitation, all smooth, eager tongue and warm, demanding lips, but still softer than most—urgency without teeth. Hermione's head was going all melty again, her eyes had long since closed, and she all but forgot her mission until she felt her own hands crawling up Bellatrix's back, the hot-slick sheathe of leather still bricked up between them. "Will you let me…"

Hermione whispered against her lips, running her hand along the top of the corset, under her arm, until she lingered just beside the laces. To her surprise, this time, Bellatrix just smirked and shook her head. "You're going about it all wrong."

Hermione's brows drew together.

Bellatrix chuckled. "I did it up by hand. It's loose enough you only need to undo these." She reclaimed Hermione's fingers, running them across three clasps dotting the corset's front—one just below her breasts, one just above her navel, and one lower, where the bottom V nestled into her skirt.

"Oh." Hermione fingered the first: black-painted metal invisible in the green haze. She flushed, a little embarrassed over how much time she'd spent batting at threads like a kitten with a ball of twine. "I've had no experience with corsets, you know."

"Pull the sides in together and it'll pop right off," Bellatrix said dryly, then her voice slid into a higher, teasing drawl. "The sort of servant my sister hires, really… Never even helped her mistress out of her corset."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Once again, wrong century."
Bellatrix let out a dramatic, long-suffering sigh. At the same moment, Hermione figured out how to grab the thing right. She found herself clutching an armful of ribbing and drinking in an eyeful of pale, flawless, naked-from-the-waist-up Bellatrix Black. She gulped, blinked, then groaned. "Merlin, you shouldn't be legal."

Bellatrix's answering laugh was utterly shameless.

She was more full-figured than… anyone else Hermione had been to bed with; all smooth, mesmerizing curves patterned with tiny reddened ridges and dimples where the corset had left its mark. She wanted to touch each one before it disappeared, but forced herself to move slowly, crawling forward to drape the corset over the end of the bed before returning her hands to Bellatrix's soft, waiting skin.

Closer, now, she could see flawless was an imperfect assessment. She drank her in, inch by inch, with eyes alone. The scars on her arms were the newest, darkest, but they were not alone. Faint, shimmery lines marred two tracks on her left shoulder, a starburst under her right breast, a fraying nebula low on her stomach. Against her skin, tea-candle pale, the scars gleamed like white gold, gilding her with old pain. Her fingers lingered beside the first, then slowly slid from one raised ridge to the next, moving up across her shoulder against the grain, feeling the faint resistance of flesh that had been torn from end to beginning, the rippled self-stitching of human skin.

Bellatrix had gone very still.

Slowly, Hermione leaned in, pressing her lips between the two lines. She lingered, laying another kiss over her collarbone, then rocked back on her heels again, letting her fingers trail down between her breasts until she could circle the outer edges of the radiating circle beneath. It was deeper than the ones on her shoulder, like something had imploded inside of her and dragged the skin around it down and in. Magic had done this.

She saw Bellatrix's stomach contract when she slid towards the middle of the scar and stilled. "Does this hurt?"

Glancing up, she watched Bellatrix slowly tilt her head. "It's… sensitive," she confessed, but when Hermione went to draw back, her hand snapped closed around her wrist, stilling her a centimeter from her skin. "I didn't say I mind."

There was something in her eyes, then. Something Hermione couldn't look away from. She let her hand extend again, exploring the ridges and dents by touch alone, spreading out all five fingers to see how far she could feel the damage. Bellatrix looked away, breathing slow and deep through her nose —controlled, but barely.

Her thumb found the edge of the lowest scar before her fingers had reached the outermost edges of the last. She looked down again, feeling a swell of quick, hot anger roll through her, unexpected and demanding. At its deepest point, this scar was three fingers wide, tapering to a rounded crescent over her right hip and a thin, sharp point just past her navel. It looked like someone had ripped her open and poured hot, unfinished flesh back in, leaving an inch all around cloudy and starburnt. She could feel Bellatrix's eyes on her as she traced its length with shaking hands. Had she been the one under inspection, this would have been a ticklish spot; she couldn't have kept still. Bellatrix didn't so much as shiver.

"You can't feel this at all," she said.

It wasn't a question, and Bellatrix didn't answer.
When she'd finished taking measure of the last edges of puckered skin, she bent, kissing just above it, in
the veil of pinched edging below her last rib, feeling it ripple against her lips. She let herself slide
higher, spreading her palm over her side, guiding her lips back to the circle of the one she'd left
unkissed.

Bellatrix's hand slid into her hair, holding her still. Hermione could feel her breathing faster beneath
her, ribs rising and falling in short, shallow waves. Taking a chance, Hermione slid her tongue along
the outer ring of scar tissue. Bellatrix's breathing stopped. Her nails tightened against Hermione's
sculp. Exhaling, slow and shaky, she pressed her closer.

Moving on instinct, Hermione laved the ridges with the flat of her tongue, tasting salt, exploring an
unfamiliar landscape of volcanic skin, hot and hard and forever changed by the passage of molten
power. Bellatrix made a strangled sound in the back of her throat and shuddered. Her grip went slack
as Hermione continued to move her tongue, letting Hermione slide higher, run her lips over every
texture of the crater in her flesh. When she felt the soft give of a breast against her nose, she couldn't
stop herself from tasting it, sucking her own faint mark to the surface. She made another, higher, then
felt one wine-red nipple shrink against her tongue.

"Oh," Bellatrix said, voice low, raw. "Mm-hmm."

She didn't have to rip or tear to shape this skin.

She curled her tongue again, and Bellatrix whined in the back of her throat, pressing her breast
against Hermione's mouth. Hermione realized, then, that she wanted to do a lot more of this. She
wanted to map every place on Bellatrix's body to the sound she could earn from kissing it, wanted to
memorize the texture of every one of her scars, wanted to taste her… taste her everywhere…

If her danger bells were pealing, now, she couldn't hear them over the beat of Bellatrix's heart next to
her ear.

She began to suck, lips pressed tight, and Bellatrix groaned and grabbed her hair again, guiding her
up into a hard, messy kiss. Her mind blanked at the feeling of skin pressed to skin, breasts against
breasts. Bellatrix's breaths seared through her as she gasped against her lips. Her blood raced, every
inch of her skin tight with anticipation. She kissed down Bellatrix's throat, faster now, harder,
brushed her hands down and over her breasts, feeling her nipples—hard and ready—against her
palms. Bellatrix arched into her with a growl, grabbing her ass hard enough to bruise. Hermione
gasped, dizzy with a punch-drunk urge to laugh. *I don't like it,* she almost wanted to tease. *Bollocks
you don't.*

Instead, she stole down to the nipple she hadn't tasted, daring to graze it with her teeth before sucking
it in between her lips. Nails dug deeper, low enough in the crease of her thigh that Hermione could
feel the tugging in her clit. She shivered and moaned into the skin under her mouth, slipping down
the curve of her breast, mouthing lower, kissing lower, allowing herself one last detour across the
starburst scar that had Bellatrix panting, hissing—

Her arms came up around Hermione's waist, pulling her along as she tipped them backwards. Before
Hermione could do more than gasp, she'd reversed their positions, rolling over on top of her, eyes
wild.

"Wha—"

Bellatrix's hands molded to her sides, seared up to her breasts, grabbed her by the shoulders and
turned her again, her hands branding her skin like hot steel, will deserting her as she was laid prone,
face down in the sheets at the foot of the bed, impossible to fight, impossible to resist. She heard
Bellatrix moan behind her, felt her breasts pressing into her back as she ground down against Hermione's thigh, her own hot and hard between them. Hands gripped her wrists again, holding tight against the mattress, far enough above her head that she could feel Bellatrix's abandoned corset and the footboard beneath it grazing against her knuckles. Teeth raked down the back of her shoulder and sank into skin stretched thin over bone.

As Bellatrix panted against her, Hermione felt her go limp. She seemed to be gathering herself, breathing slowing, hips stilling, hands unclenching from her wrists to rub up and down her arms. "I want you," she breathed into Hermione's hair. "I want more."

Hermione trembled, a jolt of desire stabbing through her at the words. She heard herself say "Oh" very quietly, heard her blood pounding through her skull. "Oh, but I thought—"

"I can feel you," Bellatrix rasped. She ground her hips slowly, yanked her skirt up past her thighs so she could press Hermione's wetness against her bare skin. When Hermione immediately let out a sharp, high whimper, she hissed, "You want this."

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, pressing backwards. "I want you, too."

Bellatrix laughed. "You want this more."

It was silly, childish, and Hermione couldn't help responding in kind. "You, you've done something to me," she whined. "I can't help it."

She laughed again. "Why should you?" Sliding her palm flat between Hermione's body and the sheets, she teased her with a finger across her clit. "When I want you. Just like this. Again, and again, and…"

"Ohh," Hermione sighed, straining against the onslaught of low, heady words and thought of how close she had just come to touching her everywhere, to seeing all of her, to tasting her—

Just the thought made her hips twitch, drove her further into Bellatrix's hands. "Damn you," she gasped. Her skin felt slick with desire. "Oh, please."

"Yes," Bellatrix breathed. "Yes."

"But— I want to— I still want—" She felt swollen, heavy, like her legs would never hold her again. The pressure of Bellatrix's thigh between her own threatened to overwhelm her. Even while part of wanted to whine— My turn!—the rest of her was demanding selfishness, demanding another release. "I can't win," she whimpered.

"No," Bellatrix laughed.

"I can't fight you."

"No," Bellatrix said with dark glee. "You can't." The hand around her waist caressed her clit again, three fingers settling into slow, heavy circles that made Hermione's hips strain and sway to follow their rhythm, fighting the bracing pressure of her thigh. Her lips began a blazing path up the ridges of her spine, chuckling in muffled pleasure when Hermione buried her face in the mess of sheets with a sharp cry.

Bellatrix's voice slid over her, low and smooth and soothing, as unruffled as though Hermione had never touched her, fully back in control. "Hush, little Mudblood. You're mine, now."
She came twice like that, on her stomach, on her knees, the first quick and wrenching, the second slow and almost worshipful, Bellatrix's fingers driving pulses of pleasure all the way up her spine and out her lips in slow, raw gasps of yes, yes, yes. And when Bellatrix flipped her over, shoved her up against the footboard, yanked her knees over her shoulders and dove in, one hand protecting the thin, delicate skin stretched over her tailbone from breaking itself open against the wood behind her, Hermione came like life itself was spilling out of her over the bedsheets, drained and undone.

"Do it," Bellatrix growled. "Now. Do it."

Somehow, even though a haze of bliss like death, Hermione knew what she meant, knew what she wanted. She reached blindly for her wand, too spent to push for any more connection than this. Bellatrix had it waiting, dangling from the tips of her sticky, shiny fingers. She dropped it on Hermione's chest, clattering—harsh and real—against her breastbone. It yanked her back to earth.

Gripping it tight, she reached for Bellatrix with her hand and her mind and her magic, wanting, more than anything, to dive into her, fall into her, kiss her scars with her magic as surely as she'd kissed them with her lips. Wanting—Reaching—

Nothing. She could see nothing. She felt like she'd kissed a brick wall, startled, for a second, by the instinct to rub her lips like she'd bruised them on something solid.

"I'm… sorry."

Bellatrix looked stunned. Then, a thundercloud descended over her face. "You will be if you do not try again."
"I did!" Hermione gasped. "I am!" She clung to her wand, pushed colorless magic through it until she felt like her body had run out of water pressure and her skin had been scoured with sand. "I'm sorry!"

Hermione watched the rage building in Bellatrix's eyes, saw her hands begin to shake, her lips contort into a snarl. It broke all at once. "Useless!" Bellatrix screamed, reaching behind her, finding only a pillow, flinging it halfway across the room. "Defective!" she spat. Her voice dropped gutter-low, her eyes gleaming with taunting, fanatical cruelty that made her face seem hollow, made it seem as though she no longer saw the room around her, but something beyond. "You dare defy me?" she hissed. "You dare—"

"I'm sorry!" Hermione cried again. She piled apology on top of apology, first in gasps and sobs, then screams, working herself up past the point of coherence while Bellatrix just stared in a way that made her skin crawl. It isn't my fault! I tried! I'm trying!

Bellatrix's fingers twitched against the sheets, found another pillow, and looked poised to rip it in half. Unthinking, Hermione followed Bellatrix's instinct to throw things, flung her wand against the headboard in a crack of green and purple sparks. "I don't know what to do!"

Her impotent rage seemed to provoke something in Bellatrix, something dark and furious that hadn't been buried by apologies. She dropped the pillow and spat insults Hermione had almost forgotten, filthy, unworthy, pathetic, and Hermione realized they were both speaking at once, mangling their words, her own apologies giving way to defensive anger as Bellatrix spun into accusations, hissing bruising, incomprehensible words like temptations and lies. Hermione knelt, naked and spent and boiling over with an unholy mess of feelings she couldn't untangle, words that wouldn't come together, tears stinging at the corners of her eyes as she said words she never would have wanted to at any other time—you mad, life-ruining torturer!

And Bellatrix stood in her fury, jerking herself off the bed, tripping on her skirts and—finally—kicked free, fully unclothed in a majesty of wrath, pale skin trembling with rage, pacing away.

But she was back in a second, back at the side of the bed. And Hermione was rising to meet her, maybe with hands, maybe with fists, but Bellatrix was pushing her back into the sheets. Take it, her eyes seemed to say. Want it, her teeth hissed. Give, give, give—her fingers as kind as claws, Until you give it back! And still she smelled of juniper, sharp beneath the scent of sex now all mixed up with Hermione's own scent, everything rich, impure, and violent. She was so strong, so determined, Hermione thought the orgasm would break her, so fast and hard it hurt, but she wasn't saying no, she was still saying yes, and please, and yours, because the one after was different, slamming through her, the sharp bite of nails digging into her thigh distracting from the duller throb of sore, overused muscles inside of her just enough for the pleasure to pierce through exhaustion as spots of blackness danced all over the ceiling.

Hermione knew, then, as Bellatrix continued to grasp at her like the edge of a cliff, staring at her with need so painful she shook in the face of it, that she couldn't take another. She would drown in green light and the unaccountable agony of this failure unless she fixed this mess. And this would not do that. She could see with a clarity that came only when she was empty, when she'd flung herself up against an invisible wall enough times that she finally understood why she was trapped and bruised and aching all over.

With a grunt of effort, she hauled Bellatrix up by her shoulder, crushing their lips together in something that was nothing at all like a kiss. She clawed at her back until she had them locked together, both sitting upright, legs tangled, knees at all the wrong angles.

"You're wrong!" she gasped against Bellatrix's skin, dragging her teeth down her shoulder. She
craned her neck, pulled a nipple between her lips, laved it with the flat of her tongue, panting around it while Bellatrix's fingers knotted in her hair, tugging hard, but tugging her nowhere. "It's you!" she whispered, and pulled the scar into her mouth before she could protest, giving Bellatrix the harsh, instinctual pleasure she didn't seem capable of pulling away from. Bellatrix let out a cry that was almost a scream; her hands didn't seem to know whether they wanted to yank Hermione away, or force her closer. It was Hermione who let go, staring down at her navel, holding herself back long enough to insist, "It's you."

She dug her nails into the top of Bellatrix's hips, holding her close as she slid her forehead across her chest to take the other breast in her mouth. She hummed with the nipple between her teeth, breathing through her nose, struggling to make her shattered thoughts crystalize the way they had in that last moment of annihilating pleasure. "You threw me out," she whispered. She pulled back, running her hands up Bellatrix's sides quickly, roughly, to take over where her mouth could no longer be. "You threw me out! Before, every single time I try this with you, you're—you're just as enraged as I am terrified, you're as furious as I am sorry, and— And now look at us! I'm here! I'm giving you everything you asked for and you won't—" She had to gasp in air between words, digging her nails into the sides of Bellatrix's breasts. "—even—" She choked on air... "—let me—" ...breathed in again... "—touch you!" ...and pulled back far enough to stare at her, begging for her to understand. "You have to let me in!" Realizing she was almost sobbing, Hermione shook her head, sucking air deep into her lungs before breathing out, softer, "You have to let me heal you."

Bellatrix's eyes were dark and wide. She squirmed under Hermione's touch, under her words, then cursed, loud and furious. "Fuck," she hissed. "Oh, for fuck's sake!" She yanked Hermione up to her lips, kissed her in a hard press of closed mouths, then pushed at her again, like she wanted to shove her away, or possibly shove her down between her legs.

So Hermione chose the latter, closing her eyes as she caught the rise of Bellatrix's stomach with her lips, grazed the plane below her navel with her teeth, breathing so fast her head was spinning. When she felt the scratch of warm curls against her cheek, she didn't open her eyes, not needing to see, not needing to think. She wanted this. She slid her hands up the outsides of Bellatrix's hips, slid her cheek lower, and sank her teeth into the thick muscle of her inner thigh.

Bellatrix howled. Her hips bucked, another set of curses spilling from between her teeth. Her hands in Hermione's curls threatened to pop her skull out of her skin, but Hermione didn't let up until Bellatrix ran out of air, until her hands were clawing at her scalp instead of squeezing it in a vice, until Hermione tasted the sharp tang of copper on the inside of her teeth. Finally, she drew back, opened her eyes, and leaned in.

She licked slow, steady, instinctively following the pulse of Bellatrix's hands clenching in her hair, the harsh, piercing gasps of breath, rewarding the smaller sounds between curses with the curl of her tongue over her clit. She was full and ready, tasted like salt and skin and desire, and Hermione wanted so, so much. She wanted to give that to her—the easy thing, pleasure; and the harder thing, magic, too. But Bellatrix had to let her.

When the nails slowly gave up their demanding grip, giving way so Bellatrix could wrap her fingers around her own breast, Hermione dared to stray, pressing softer, gentler kisses over the red welt her teeth had left, over the unmarked other thigh, then back over her sex itself—kisses, just kisses, and the strangled sound that clawed its way up the back of Bellatrix's throat was the best response she could have imagined.

"What are you doing to me," Bellatrix groaned in a frozen moment. Then her nails tightened again, spine bowing as she sought to press more of herself against Hermione's mouth, asking, pleading, even, for Hermione to keep going.
So she did, circling the ridges of the bite over and over again with one thumb as the other pressed against her lower stomach, nestled in the valley between her hip bones, gliding lightly back and forth in time with the tongue tracing circles between her legs. She could feel the throb of blood under her lips, feel the frantic flutter of her orgasm straining to break free as her tongue brushed over Bellatrix’s clit. Over and over, again and again. "Oh, you can’t," Bellatrix groaned as her hips strained upwards, and Hermione hummed You can against her, granting permission for nothing she understood, but granting it gladly. Because this? This would be hers, now. This, if only this, would happen at her command. It built under her hands, her lips, quivering energy moving faster and higher and harder than she could chase it until Bellatrix went still. She fell back against the pillows with a gasp, fingers pressing Hermione hard against her, biting her own forearm as she closed her eyes and sobbed out her orgasm.

Hermione didn’t pull away. With her cheek still pressed against her left thigh, she watched a single drop of blood trickle down from the point where her canine had been in the other. A little giddy, the word mine danced around in her head, and she thought she suddenly understood why Bellatrix liked it so much. She marveled at the beauty of her, struck by a startling delicacy seen nowhere else around this utter force of nature of a witch. She licked her lips, tasting her, brushing flesh on the way, drawing out a tiny sound of something like protest, something like contentment. She realized with a jolt she still wanted to touch her, wanted to touch her so much it hurt, so much she could think of nothing else. She kissed away the blood before it could stain the sheets, kissed higher, licked, gently, keeping her every motion soft, not building towards anything, just… staying, warm and present, against Bellatrix’s sex.

It took her a long time to understand why Bella’s arm had moved from covering her mouth to her covering her eyes: she was blinking back tears.

Hermione stillled when they locked eyes, and Bellatrix let out a ragged laugh. "I’m broken, pet," she gasped out. "Don’t you know it by now?" She breathed in, harsh and shaky. "Ruined. Over."

Hermione sat up and slowly lowered herself back down beside her. She kept quiet but slid the fingers of one hand into Bellatrix’s hair, stroking the curls at the nape of her neck as she propped herself on one elbow. It was an open pose, a listening one, and Bellatrix seemed only able to stare at it for a few seconds before a groan spilled out. "You just had to, didn’t you?"

Hermione tensed at the seemingly rhetorical question, then gradually relaxed again. "Was I terrible?" she asked, hoping to steer them somewhere lighter than the moments that had led them here.

"Huh. Fuck. No," Bellatrix said, though she sounded stilted, uncertain.

"You really dislike it that much?"

This time, the pause lingered. "No," she admitted at last.

Hermione had a feeling she’d only managed the conversation thus far because the picture before her—Bellatrix, naked and striking and bleeding a little and teary-eyed after sex—was so surreal she’d gone right out of her body, and whatever was left talking in her place obviously had a better grip of things than she did, so she let it say exactly what it wanted. "Then why shouldn’t you have it."

Bellatrix laughed, then. A pained, tired sound eerily on the edge of fresh tears. "There are things you give up,“ she said softly, "when you become someone like me."

Hermione’s fingers stillled in Bellatrix’s curls, resting behind her ear where she could feel her pulse. "I thought the goal of being someone like you was to have everything," she said.
Bellatrix offered another bark of low, dark laughter. "Oh, pet."

Hermione, deciding to live dangerously, ran one finger down her nose. "I know. I'm only teasing. No one has everything." Sometimes I think the someones like you least of all. "But why not this? Why give up this? When this is so…" She sighed, the blissful lethargy weighing at her every limb finishing the thought, unspoken. She had never felt so well and truly and thoroughly *fucked.*

Bellatrix shook her head. "I don't expect you to understand, girl." The sudden sharpness in her voice drove Hermione's hands back to her own pillow. At the reaction, her tone softened, much to Hermione's surprise. "I chose this, do you understand? When I was very, very young."

Hermione stretched out tentative fingers again as Bellatrix looked away, encouraging her words with a soft, meandering trail brushing up and down from her shoulder to the bend of her elbow.

"I had more than myself to mind. Hogwarts," — she spat the name — "was the eye of a storm. I could have a fling for each day of the week and still be the perfect daughter when I came home for holiday. That never lasts. The real world is always waiting. Mine meant choosing between the power to protect… the things that mattered. Or turning *traitor* for a bit of this." She waved her arm over the length of Hermione's body where it rested beside her own.

Even if Hermione hadn't already known exactly what—or, rather, who—Bellatrix had been protecting, known from her own half-spilled stories, known from Narcissa's quiet gratitude, known from the way Andromeda couldn't fully hate her even after the loss of her own daughter at her sister's hand, Bellatrix's next words would have made it abundantly clear.

"In the end, not even I could protect them from their own *stupid* choices."

Hermione's hand reached her shoulder again, and Bellatrix dropped her own atop it, pressing her tight against her skin. Her words had gone angry again, but Hermione knew this wasn't an anger directed at her. This was an anger thick with regret. An old anger, the oldest, the heaviest kind any one witch could hold, the anger at the ones who'd made you and left you the mess you had to live in. It was an anger impossible to give up, even when it stemmed from the most well-intentioned of guardians, the most responsible, reasonable of parents. Hermione knew it well. Even among the best of families, there always came some new agony impossible to find the right blame for; that was the pain of living.

And, for all the few short years it had lasted, Hermione knew she'd had it very, very good. For Bellatrix… for someone whose family had dedicated themselves day after day to nothing but making more misery… Hermione could only imagine an anger that deep. She had some idea, more every day, why pure-blood fanaticism had such power. Bundle up obligatory love with delusions of grandeur greater than any one mere lifetime of cruelty and, well…

This.

The result was right here. One sister beside her, wrapped up so tightly in pain and anger only she'd had the power to make, unable to let it go without giving up the meaning that had made it worth bearing for so long. And out there… one sister who'd lived half her life as the vision of high society perfection while locked out of her own mind, and one sister turned traitor for freedom. For it was freedom between Bellatrix's hand and her skin, Hermione knew. *This* was that; not sex, not passion, not someone warm beside you in the middle of the late morning. *This* was more. This was... the opposite of hell: of pain and fire and regret.

And this wasn't something she could come at like she'd barged into Narcissa's office with a house-elf's poem and a spell of righteous anger. This likely wasn't something Hermione could fix at all. But
she could listen. And she could offer… anything she could. She'd already given her forgiveness—what were a few attempts on her life, after all; a few moments of violence, a few misunderstandings, a lot of cruel words… Hermione wanted to laugh that these things felt small, now. Besides forgiveness, she'd given her trust, too. A lot of it, considering where they were. And Bellatrix had given a bit of her own. Just now, yes, and a few times before. That felt bigger.

"They don't need protecting anymore," she said at last. "You've helped them both get everything they wanted." Stillness stretched, and Hermione could feel Bellatrix's pulse in the wrist pressed to her hand. "You can have… more," she whispered.

Bellatrix's eyes fell closed as though the weight of the world clung to her long, dark lashes. "At what cost."

Hermione shivered, suddenly cold. She knew why that hadn't been a question. She knew the answer. They both did. At the cost of her magic. She suddenly wanted to laugh again, an awful, biting laugh, a laugh to mock herself for thinking, even for a moment, that Bellatrix would choose something like this.

"When it's done, I'll go," she said quietly, fighting to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

Bellatrix rolled towards her, looking down at her with a shadow of that insufferable smile on her face, the one that, sometime in the past month, had become more… endearing. She ran a finger down the curve of Hermione's jaw. "Oh, pet. What have we done to you."

Hermione's eyes widened. She recoiled, shrinking back in on herself into the sheets. "I'm okay," she said, voice wavering. "Really. I know why— I understand why we're here."

"No, no. You're not. You're stuck somewhere in your own head." Unexpectedly, she pulled Hermione into her arms. "You don't get to talk about healing and pretend you haven't been hurt."

Hermione felt herself choking on the lack of anger in those words, in that gesture, and realized she was about to start crying. One of Bellatrix's hands went into her hair, the other pressed tight against her back, stroking, soothing. Hermione clung to her, burying her face against her throat, wanting to say something, anything, but all that came out was a strangled sob.

Bellatrix shushed her. "Hush, pet. This isn't the end. We're two of the damn smartest witches in the world." Hermione cried harder through a pained burst of laughter. She realized, as Bellatrix's nails dug a little unkindly into her back, that Bellatrix's breath was uneven, too. "We're close to something. I can feel it."

She felt lips against the top of her head. Bellatrix's breath was fast and ragged through her nose, and Hermione felt one tear of hot, helpless anger fall into her curls.

Just as Hermione felt like she might actually get a grip on herself, breathing in juniper and salt like a tonic for her soul, she felt something else, too. A thread of truth in Bellatrix's words like a fine, golden string. She turned her face until she was staring at the underside of Bellatrix's jaw, the pale, translucent skin of her throat, the scars on her shoulder gleaming like distant streetlights at the end of a dark alley, and the golden thread slowly stretched into a golden door.

"You see it," Bellatrix said, voice soft, trance-like. "You have to open it."

"No," Hermione whispered, suddenly more sure of anything than she'd been in her life. "We do."

She watched as, without question, Bellatrix's fingers quested beneath the one pillow they had left and slowly withdrew the curved length of her wand. Hermione found her own beside her, up against the
headboard where she'd flung it, and pulled it up between her breasts, never taking her eyes off the pulse of blood beneath Bellatrix's skin or the light building there.

"Now, then?" Bellatrix whispered.

At Hermione's tiny nod, she closed her eyes, and she pulled Hermione in.

Hermione took in the wreckage, unafraid. She carried no weapons and no winter. She carried not even her skin. A black field stretched before her, the earth as fragile as glass. Overhead, the lone crow wheeled and dove beneath an unforgiving sun. Its beak opened wide, screaming without sound.

Hermione reached out with unseen fingers, questing through the scope of the place for a speck of green, a sapling, a seed, any trace of the vines that had once filled this many-acre void. She found nothing but a distant row of fence posts. Even if she had, there was no soil, nowhere for new growth to root. She felt a distant tugging, a pull to return to more forgiving pastures, but she refused its call, flinging herself up into the sky.

Racing towards the only sign of life in this barren, desolate place, she chased the crow on its currents of air. It dodged her, far more at home in these empty skies than she. But she was nothing, so she could be everything, here, and she spread herself thin above it, a kite, a net, driving them slowly down to earth. They stared at each other once they landed. It cocked its head, beak parting as though to give a warble of curiosity, but nothing emerged. Hermione found herself lost in rich, red-clay eyes, unnaturally beautiful and strange, and she reached out a finger—which was not a finger at all—and slowly stroked down the contour feathers at its throat.

When she withdrew, the crow shrieked.

It flung out its wings, racing back into the skies, loosing high, angry caws and great bell-like tones that reverberated through every part of Hermione's non-being. At last, it landed in a graceless heap, rattling in the back of its throat as it bent its head over the center of the garden and closed its eyes.

Clay tears bled down its beak, crawling across the char like a thousand tawny pill bugs loosed from under a stone, scrabbling, scrambling, spreading to fill every flat and furrow long after the crow retook to the skies. It wheeled, dove—feathers shed behind it, falling over the clay in a blanket of rich, dark loam.

Hermione laughed in joy, the sound echoing around her in a topsy-turvy shower of golden light, running back up into the clouds until it stained the sun as warm and welcoming as her happiness.

The crow whirled in midair, flinging itself towards the ground again. Hermione gasped sparks as the distance closed between its neck and the soil—

Fifteen meters…

Ten…

Five…

Its beak pierced the ground in an explosion of silver light. Argentate tendrils burst free, flinging the bird back into the sky even as they swelled and grew, clawing into the topsoil and then up... over... everywhere. Hermione felt herself caught up in the maelstrom, carried in a thousand pieces of buzzing magic between a thousand vines of power, spread across the field until she, too, was a growing thing, spilling herself green and throwing out leaves to better drink in the sunlight, sprouting thorns to wield against the threat of a distant frost, shrouding the earth in a living tomb.
And everything was still.

She lazed, dizzy with inhumanity, a many-limbed creature of bliss and swords and light. She'd stay
here… forever… This was where she belonged. This…

She felt the tug in every part of her, every disparate speck between the vines. No, no, she thought. *I like it here.*

But it was a thought, and it did not belong. She resisted for a moment longer, then allowed herself to
fly, to crystallize back into one non-entity at the edge of the garden, staring out as the crow cawed its
goodbye…

*Goodbye…*

Then there were nails in the tug, nails in her back, she had a back, a spine, two arms, two legs, two
eyes…

And Bellatrix, staring down at her, kissing her forehead, her cheeks, her lips, the backs of her eyes…

Because her eyes were closing, and Hermione was going to sleep for a while.
"Swear it ought to be right here."

A woman's voice drifted by Hermione's ear, muffled and low. It took another hushed murmur before she began blinking sleep out of her eyes.

"They must be around somewhere."

Narcissa? It must be. Who else would be wandering about in their woods at… whatever ridiculous hour this was. She had no idea how long she'd been out, but her still-sleepy mind provided the best answer it could. She rose, half rolling across the lump of Bellatrix still tangled up in her limbs, still sleeping like a rock.

"Accio Clothes!" she muttered in the doorway, muffling an "Oof!" as a mass of fabric socked her in the gut. As she tugged on denim, she realized she'd called up the ones from yesterday, probably closest to the door where she'd left them in a tired heap. Oops. Ah well.

Still doing up her fly, she stumbled towards the door, muttering, "You'd better have an excellent reason to be back at this time of—"

As she yanked the door wide, she yelped, stumbling backwards so fast she slammed hip-first into the table.

If her words hadn't been enough to get the attention of the four faces just outside their door, the scrape and clatter of her fall would have done the rest. She recognized two of them immediately: the dark-haired woman she'd last seen at the gate of Black Manor alongside this very same Auror, the bane of her existence, Ronald Weasley. The second pair, an older man and woman, were unfamiliar and hooded. They stood so close to her that Hermione had caught the woman's cloak on the point of her wand as she windmilled back through the doorway, half dragging her inside. "No, no," she heard herself saying as though from very far away. "No, you can't be here! You just can't."

This time, no one offered words of warning, no civilized command to freeze. Four sets of sparks flew towards her, illuminating the grim-faced figures behind the wands. Only the table saved her. One spell kneecapped a front leg and the whole thing toppled over on top of her to create a rapidly splintering shield. Hermione scrambled backwards, shoving herself through the door to Bellatrix's bedroom with her heels scrabbling against the floorboards until her hands could pull her across the threshold.

"Bella-trix!" she gasped, but of course, Bellatrix was wide awake after all that racket, feet planted firm two inches behind her. She'd managed most of her clothes, the corset re-laced tight, tighter than it had been since they'd gotten here, bare legs covered by a thin outer robe that had only made it onto one shoulder, wand at the ready, eyes sparking fury.

The Aurors slowed as they stepped into the first room. "You let them in?" Bellatrix hissed.

Hermione wasn't interested in apologizing. She scrambled to her feet, wand raised in a trembling fist as the four cloaked forms spread out in a semicircle, each eyeing Bellatrix with a tight jaw and a hint of fear.

"We can all leave here alive," the familiar, younger woman offered, not unkindly. "If you'll just—"

Ron didn't wait for her to finish. He fired off another volley of red, roaring "Stupefy!" at a truly
Easily dodging, Bellatrix whirled and laughed, snapping her wand out from her waist like it had been wrapped around her. In place of sparks or light, a whip unfurled from its tip, long and sleek and deadly, looping itself around his throat in three black coils before he could mouth another spell. He clawed at it, eyes bugging wide as it strangled him, cheeks near as red as his hair. With a jerk of her wrist, he flew off his feet and slammed into the ground with a croak of pain.

When the second man fired off a stunner, the whip vanished as quick as it had come. Bellatrix's wand lashed the air in a crisp arc and all four went sprawling, feet ripped out from under them. She howled with laughter, rolling her shoulders back, prowling across the threshold of the bedroom in three sauntering strides. Two more flicks of her wrist traced a whip-quick X in the air. Each point seemed to grab hold of a person—the four slammed into the crippled table at the center of their half circle, arms crashing into legs as though drawn by magnets, until all laid in a tangled heap of robes and yells and wood.

Two hadn't gotten off so much as a single spell.

All appeared dazed, groaning, and Hermione eyed their wand arms from a nervous distance. As she watched Bellatrix pursue her stunned prey, she felt frozen by a mix of awe and fear. Bellatrix was back. As deadly as ever.

"Bella—" she whispered, too soft to be heard. She cleared her throat. "Bellatrix, we don't have to hurt them."

Ronald Weasley's eyes struggled to lock onto hers. Hermione looked away.

Bellatrix dug her bare toes into his ribs, pressing her heel down on the wrist beneath until he gasped and unclenched his fist, wand rolling free. Bellatrix snapped it with a glance and a twitch of her fingers, then dug her heel down harder for good measure. Ron let out a bellow of pain. None of the four seemed able to pull away from each other, and Hermione found herself marveling, distantly, at the spell, convinced some combination of stunning and sticking was at work, but unable to imagine how Bellatrix could have cast it without something very much like Hermione's own practice of unbound magic-blending, the very thing Bellatrix had so often dismissed as mongrel spellwork, as beneath her.

Offering the second man a kick in the ribs that had him retching air, Bellatrix turned away from Ron and his young companion. She reached instead for the older woman whose face still hid in the shadow of a hood. As she flicked it back with the tip of her wand, she let out a high, furious shriek. "You!"

Glaring up at her, the woman spat in Bellatrix's direction, blood spattering the floor from her split lip. She had blood on her teeth, murder in her eyes, and a close-cropped cap of iron-gray curls topping her pallid, heavy-jowled face.

In another instant, Bellatrix's wand was at her throat, "Crucio!" spilling from her lips with the easy grace of an old lover's kiss.

Then she gaped in pain, eyes wide.

Hermione knew, in a horrible instant, all that had happened since she woke. She couldn't see Bellatrix's wrist, but she could see the hand that reached for it, recognized the animal agony in the depths of Bellatrix's dark stare. Everything flew together from scattered corners of the chaos. She had done it. She'd fixed Bellatrix's magic, fixed the damage she'd inflicted trying to save her from her excessive volume.
own punishment.

And the Ministry's magic right along with it.

The alarm would have sounded. The trace would have led them straight to this door, right on top of them and unseeing until Hermione let them in. And the bindings that lashed her wrists and back would have closed around her again. No Unforgiveable Curses. No more running. No more freedom than before.

Bellatrix's iron control fractured at the unexpected burst of agony, and her hold on the four Aurors flickered. Ron and his partner began to squirm, but it was the woman who'd nearly been on the end of Bellatrix's curse that freed herself first, wand lifting in a pale, short-fingered hand, hate gleaming in her blue, scowl-lined eyes.

As her lips began to form a spell, Hermione felt something in the air, something familiar, magic that usually tasted like charred skin on her tongue. This felt different, sickly, brimming between the malice in that woman's stare and the gathering magic waiting to spill from the tip of her wand. It screamed pain in a way she'd felt only once before in the presence of one dead, evil man: Lucius Malfoy. She knew—with the certainty she only ever experienced halfway into panic, when the world seemed to slow around her, eddies of power reaching out, demanding she make a choice—that whatever spell that woman hoped to cast was going to mean pain for Bellatrix, possibly even death.

With no further thought, she dove into her own blood, ripping through her veins, grasping every bit of power she could find, and cast it out over the room.

The hideaway froze in a wash of yellow-white light, everything gleaming like the sun through a net of fishing line. Hermione saw it only for a blink. The moment her eyes closed, she saw fields again, plains of green-fresh vines, already twice as tall as she'd left them, clambering gleefully over unexpected beanpoles and half-buried trellises and the rich, dark shadows of ancient trees, roots poking out of the ground at jaunty angles suggestive of them having got up from somewhere else and walked here. There was the crow, perched on one of many identical bleached-wood posts, staring at her with those eerie red-clay eyes. It let out a broken caw so loud it rattled bones Hermione didn't have, claws flexing into the wooden—

Post. Fencepost.

Hermione stumbled closer, the distance closing in a blur of air. She stared down at strands of oozing, oily barbed wire, flickering and pulsing like the heart of a deep, open wound. The crow hopped onto her shoulder, a shoulder she hadn't had a moment ago, and screamed into her ear. Hermione felt more solid, more person-shaped for every minute she spent here. Unlike last time, when she'd been one with the magic she freed, she now felt a deep sense of responsibility, the urge to take up a trowel and get to weeding, to weave herself a sunbonnet from the long grasses beside her and get down on her knees in the dirt and…

She feared, with sudden clarity, that she could get stuck here, could forget how to unweave her magic from Bellatrix's, could become another piece of the scenery as surely as this foreign boundary marker. She didn't belong here, and neither did this fence.

She reached out with hands that were not yet hands, pulling up wooden stakes like invasive sprigs of balsam, ripping them from the rich, dark soil until only wounds of clay remained. The posts disintegrated in burst after burst of yellow-white sparks which drifted up and away, constellating the daytime sky with dandelion-fluff stars. Freed from their moorings, the black barbs burned in the sunlight, bubbling against the soil as vines crawled into the gaps, clambering down the next hillside, up the one after that, unhindered, out of sight.
As the last post crumbled to dustdrifts in her hands, Hermione shot up along with it, the crow at her side, soaring up into the sun, into—

Wait! she cried, remembering words said so long ago they were only a shadow in the back of her mind. You could change her. Alter her magic right at the source. The Ministry would know what she had done here. Removing their fences wouldn't be enough. There was only way to stop the Trace.

Floating, drifting, Hermione stared out over the spreading fields of vine wilds, green and glowing, growing without her, without walls, in the perfect, haunted harmony of this place. The thought of changing a thing here pained her. What right did she have? What would happen if she did?

The crow circled her, cawing as though to ask her why she lingered, as though to ask if she would stay.

Hermione stared down at her fingers, glowing the half-formed gold of things on their way. The earth below, seen between the pinpoints of power that shaped her, looked as insubstantial as the dust she'd made. Any second, and she would be dashed to pieces by the breeze.

Perhaps that was how it should be.

Hermione closed her eyes, drew in a deep breath, and blew. She felt the tips of her fingers spiraling away, unwinding as she had when she'd been carried apart by the vines' rebirth. She was both the breeze and the dandelion, the power and the wish. When she felt only a thin thread leading down and away from her wrist, she let herself breath in again, opening her eyes. Specks of gold drifted on the eddies of her emptied lungs, carried as far across the fields as she could see. Where the landed, tiny crimson flowers burst to life between thorns like drops of blood, and the sharp, sweet scent of fairy roses bore her up into the clouds.

She slammed back into the hideaway in a panic, not yet in her body. The netting of her magic felt stretched and bruised and three times heavier than it should; she felt the weight of a hundred fenceposts in spiderweb-thin arms—

So she let go, dropping them in a heap atop the four frozen witches and wizards who awaited her return to the living, the invisible weight falling with a very un-magic-like clang.

The sound rippled through the scene like a shock, the white haze rippled, vanished, and Hermione had just enough thought to place her incorporeal hand against the tip of the woman's wand before everything whirled to life again.

"Crucio!" burst from the Auror's lips, a sharp, brittle imitation of the same word on Bellatrix's tongue. As it crashed into her magic, Hermione felt the spell stab somewhere inside of her, stopped cold by her invisible touch. Then both she and the spell were flung back the way they had come, crushing her back into her body, falling to her knees, leaving the witch screaming and writhing on the floor under the power of her own curse until her wand dropped against the floorboards, severing the connection.

Her eyes rolled back up into her head as she collapsed, out cold.

For an instant of blind confusion, Bellatrix stared down at her unconscious foe, then turned accusing, knowing eyes on Hermione. "What did you—"

Hermione could feel every heartbeat pounding in her head like a hammer, pulse-bruised and shaky and two minutes from fainting dead away, so she stumbled forward with the last of her strength,
grabbing Bellatrix's wrist as tight as she could. "No time!"

The still-conscious, younger witch was moving, staggering to her feet. The unknown man had almost gotten his breath under control, had scrambled up on hands and knees. Ron had both halves of his wand in his hand, groaning something that sounded curiously like "Oh, not again," but Hermione didn't stop to listen.

"Get us out of here," she said, dry-mouthed but insistent, raising her wand at a pace that would have shamed her at any other time.

Bellatrix grabbed tight around her waist, nails digging through her shirt. Yelling incoherently, the man jerked up his arm, so Hermione scrambled for the strength to cast a last stunning spell his way. Just as the word left her mouth, Bellatrix hefted her sideways, spinning them, and Hermione watched in horror as red sparks flew uncontrolled from the tip of her wand and struck the kitchen ceiling.

A roaring quake of blue fire consumed the room. Hermione flung out her arms in a panic, watching her fingers already curling back in on themselves, already being dragged away, but the flames came up against nothing, an invisible wall she felt sprouting from her chest like another limb. Six pairs of eyes stared, stunned, as blue smoke billowed over her barrier, flooding where the fire couldn't go, and the world pinched to the strangling nothing of Apparition.

Diagon was quiet. It was the odd hour, Hermione realized, just after lunchtime. They'd landed on the curb of a dark alley in silence, and neither of them had said a word since. Rubbing at one bare ankle with her other bare foot, Hermione had undertaken a full conversation in her head, knowing it was more satisfying than the one she'd get if she started it aloud.

"They won't follow us here. Don't thank me, but I think I've finally gotten them off your tail for good."

"How?" asked her imaginary Bellatrix with thoroughly un-Bellatrix-like interest. "They aren't dead. There's no chance that teensy little explosion would have been enough to kill four big, tough Aurors."

"Well I know that, of course I do," Hermione's far more optimistic counterpart countered. "They'll be fine. But I got it all out of you. The trace, the spell restrictions, probably even the part that said you couldn't use your magic to hurt me, not that that worries me… And, I buried you in flowers. No one looking will see the thorns."

"Why, thank you, pet." Not even imaginary-Bellatrix would be so obliging as to use her name. "That is good news. And while on the subject of thanks, I am so very grateful for getting my magic back in the first place, for having it whole again, for keeping me out of Azkaban for the umpteenth time in a row…"

Hermione shook her head at her own pity party. The end was just silliness. She wasn't expecting any thanks. As nice as it was to imagine, she couldn't even think it in Bellatrix's voice. But there was a niggling panic under the nonsense, a real fear. A reassurance that she hadn't just condemned four people to a fiery death… that she would have appreciated. Her head hurt from the shaking, like her brain had been rattled loose. It was the first ache, she noticed, of many. Exhaustion swamped her all at once.

Finally casting her gaze to her left, she saw Bellatrix's eyes were wide. She looked as though she'd been stunned, save the twitchy, restless twirling of her wand in her hand, the little green sparks bursting out of its end, floating down to extinguish in the gutter muck. Across the street stood a brick
wall plastered with a row of advertisements, and Hermione wasn't surprised to spy Bellatrix's face on a handful of them. *Undesirable No. One.* Bellatrix, however, didn't seem to see them at all. Her stare ended in midair, intent only on her own thoughts, whatever those might be.

With growing concern that Bellatrix's aimless sparkler display might set some passing garbage on fire, Hermione prompted gently, "What are you going to do now?" Bellatrix's face was slow to turn her way, gaze sharpening blink by blink. "You've got your magic. And your freedom. I—I'm sorry I didn't think of it sooner, and I'm sorry the hideaway was... well..." She swallowed. "It is out, now, though. There's shouldn't be any way the Ministry can follow you. You... you can go. Anywhere."

"So eager to be rid of me, are we?"

Bellatrix's snide reply bit, but Hermione thought she heard a touch of offense beneath the sarcasm. That she'd even made a question out of it... Hermione stared. She couldn't make it make sense. Bellatrix had gotten what she wanted, Hermione had given her the all-clear and... And here she still was, standing beside her, both of them barefoot on a dusty, dirty street. For the first time, Hermione's tried to make her scattered, half-formed vision of the future... have Bellatrix in it.

"No," she admitted, "I'm not."

"Then we had best see what we're up against."

Ignoring Hermione's help of protest—"I'm not wearing shoes!"—Bellatrix grabbed hold of Hermione's arm and plowed across the street. She didn't seem to care what she walked in, feet spashing up spots of brown water from the puddles in the road all over Hermione's naked toes. "We're in *Diagon,*" Hermione spluttered. She tried her best to dodge the worst of the gravel and muck. "You can't just go running around any which way!" Hermione glanced quickly down the street in either direction, making sure no one was looking towards them. "Are you out of your mind?"

Bellatrix chuckled. "Yes."

Ignoring Hermione's squeak of exasperation, Bellatrix turned to study a wanted poster at eye-level. Fuming, Hermione grabbed another off the wall so hard she ripped it. "They're *still* calling me a kidnapping victim." She used it to wipe mud off the cuffs of her jeans, grumbling, "I wonder if anybody believes it."

Bellatrix tugged off the one she'd scanned and handed it over. "This one here is newer. You've been given a promotion."

*Dangerous Unknown,* Hermione read. Ooh, lovely. Now they thought she had *unpredictable powers.*

Frowning and scanning higher, Hermione read the posters just above their heads. *Undesirable No. One. Undesirable No. One. Undesirable No. One.* There might be nothing of the Ministry left inside of Bellatrix, but she was certainly still under its skin. Hermione hadn't noticed her nails digging crescents through the flier in her hand until Bellatrix tugged it free and dropped it in the gutter.

Watching as a water stain spread over Bellatrix's manically screaming mouth, the same photo they'd used when she escaped from Azkaban, Hermione felt herself relax a little. Even if someone passed, they would be hard pressed to recognize the witch today. "They're not all wrong," she offered. "I do have unpredictable powers."

Bellatrix snorted.
After a minute of silence, Hermione wrapped an arm around her waist, bracing herself to ask the question she'd been avoiding. "What now?"

"We destroy them."

Hermione blanched. "Woah, um, hang on a second, you—"

"What'd you think, pet? That I'd just settle into another hut in the woods and vanish forever? Oh, no-no-no! The Ministry took everything from me. I intend to see that they pay for it. One drop of blood at a time."

Hermione's head was shaking, sending the stabbing pain at her temples bouncing from one side of her skull to the other. "You can't—"

"I need this," Bellatrix hissed. "I've waited. So long. So, so long, pet. I need a cause. I need chaos. Revenge. I need war." Her wand vibrated in her fist, still bleeding sparks like a toddler who hadn't yet learned to control her own power. "This is my time. This is where I thrive. Besides," she added, voice gone suddenly soft, cajoling. "Things... are... brewing!"

She trailed her wand across the row of posters. "Free Stan!" began to smoke. Little charred holes bloomed to life across the words "Has someone in your family been wrongfully incarcerated? Have they been given the Kiss? You may be entitled up to 5,000 galleons!" Just beside Hermione's ear, "UNSEAT SHACKLEBOLT" burst into green flame. "If not me... it'll just be someone else. And there's not a wizard alive as good at it as I am."

"You can't start another war, Bella!" Hermione pleaded, jumping back as the blazing parchment flaked away from the wall and drifted down into the street soup.

Bellatrix laughed, dark and cruel, grinding the steaming ash into the muck with the heel of her boot. "Watch me."

"Bellatrix!" Hermione yelped, grabbing her hand. "Bella, no."

Furious eyes spun to face her. "Don't 'Bella' me, pet. I don't owe you."

Hermione spluttered uselessly, unwilling to reach for any threat she might make, unwilling to beg when she didn't know what to ask for.

"What?" Bellatrix snapped. "What would you have of me, hmm? We can't live like this! You think the Ministry will give up just because they've lost their leash on my magic? Are you still that naïve? They won't stop till I've been Kissed by every Dementor in Azkaban! Is that what you want?"

"We could hide again! We could ask—"

"If you say the name of my sister I will rip your tongue from your mouth."

Hermione flinched like she'd been struck.

"Pray tell what we'd do, pet. We both near enough went mad in that forest. Did you plan to take up wizard chess? Get another job with your face plastered on every wall in city? Simper before the Wizengamot until they believe you're innocent again? I don't have that luxury."

Hermione stared down at the pavers, suitable chastised. After a long silence, she finally said, "You're right." She scuffed one foot against the sidewalk, wincing at the feeling of grit between her toes. "But... there are other options. There always are."
"Another hovel in the woods?"

"There's always the Muggle world."

"What?" Bellatrix squawked.

"I mean… Well, you know. Not here, obviously. They'll be crawling all over Muggle London before long but… somewhere. We could make a life," she finished quietly.

Hermione could have sworn she heard Bellatrix's teeth grinding. "No." She looked up just in time to catch rolled eyes.

"Don't we owe it to ourselves? At least a chance? I… I've never been anywhere. I've never traveled. I live in a country that's one big island and I've never even seen the ocean! All I know is cold, rainy, grey… The rest I've only read about. There's… there's mountains and deserts and… and safaris and things? I don't know, it's not like I have a plan or anything, but… people say you can't help but learn things from the world, you know? Maybe we'd figure it out as we went. Everything… else. Would it really be the end of the world to give something different a chance?"

Lips pursed, Bellatrix stared at her in silence for a long time. Finally, she shook her head. "It would not." Before Hermione could get her hopes up, she added, "I'd prefer the world's end."

Hermione's sighed. "You don't mean that."

Bellatrix rolled her eyes again. "Let's find a place to stay tonight."

It wasn't the reply she wanted, but it was gentler than the talk of war. "I'm taking all that as a maybe," she said, crossing her arms.

"What happened to 'no means no,' hmm?"

Hermione, a vision of blue oceans and white-capped mountains and peaceful days still dancing behind her eyes, stuck out her tongue.

To her astonishment, Bellatrix laughed.

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this," Hermione muttered, yanking up the neckline of her dress for the tenth time in the last minute.

"As I recall, there was very little talking involved. A few indignant squeaks, a lot of blushing, a lot of squirming."

When the best Hermione could muster in retort was another squeak, she resorted to fuming in silence.

When Bellatrix had offered to fix them up something to wear, something less conspicuous than Hermione's twice-worn Muggle jeans and her own half-set of robes, Hermione had eagerly agreed. She wanted shoes, possibly more than she'd ever wanted anything in her life. When the result was Bellatrix looking as dark and imposing and iconic as ever in a stunning, black statement piece while Hermione looked as though she'd been clothed straight from the catalog of *Mistress Cordova's Costumes and Charms for Every Carnal Occasion* in a too-short, too-tight, too-low-cut set of green, clinging, near-transparent evening-robes, she'd been "squeaking" out a lot of regret.

At least she was clean. Bellatrix had cast a cleansing charm on the both of them that Hermione was
entirely envious of: She didn't just look clean, but she felt clean, clean like she'd just stepped out a long, leisurely bath with scented bubbles and a mild exfoliant and some truly dedicated assistant scrubbing the little pebbles out from between her toes…

She'd also lost the contents of her pockets all over the sidewalk in the process, which was the only reason they hadn't gotten a move on yet. She'd given up stowing her wand anywhere in this getup, but found herself also holding the folded newspaper she'd picked up… Was that only yesterday?

Bellatrix was tapping her foot impatiently. "Can we leave the garbage where it belongs?"

Purely on principle, Hermione refused to drop it at her command. "I'm not a litterer!" she said huffily. "Besides, I haven't finished reading it!"

Bellatrix snatched it out of her fingers—"For heaven's sake."—and stuffed it down the front of her own dress. Hermione, blushing, realized how much that bit of her own anatomy had been on display while she groped around for dropped items. She summoned a bit of pale, transfiguatory pink magic around her undignified neckline, coaxing it a few inches higher up her chest.

One look and a twitch of Bellatrix's fingers set it right back where it was.

"I thought the goal was inconspicuous," Hermione muttered.

Bellatrix draped an arm around her waist. "Nothing conspicuous about a pretty young thing showing off her…" A hand slipped lower until she could pinch the exposed skin of Hermione's upper thigh, drawing another undignified squeak."…assets."

Furiously pink but unwilling to engage in a battle of magics and wills with Bellatrix over something as silly as the fashion of choice for fleeing the law, Hermione shuffled lower until she had Bellatrix's hand back on the safer skin of her hip. "Well? We'd best get a move on."

Of course, the minute Hermione was itching to go, Bellatrix's playful mood turned uncooperative. She slid her other hand to Hermione's other hip, pulling her in between her legs to kiss her in the middle of the sidewalk. After a muffled mmph! of surprise, she gave in with little protest. If Bellatrix wanted to kiss her, now, that must be a good sign, right? And it was definitely a good… thing… a feel-good thing… a slap-happy, hands clenching in midair, too-short dress riding up against Bellatrix's legs thing.

When the kisses strayed down her jaw, the hands turned her slowly to the side, Hermione might not have even noticed the change. But the sight of herself in Bellatrix's arms reflected in the dark glass of an empty storefront to their left posed sufficient distraction. She stilled with Bellatrix's mouth on her skin, the flush in her cheeks, the just-kissed fullness of her lips, the just-kissed fullness of her lips, but even the short, stupid, conspicuous dress wasn't… indecent. Quite flattering, actually. In fact, Hermione couldn't think of a time she'd looked this good besides… Well, not since Narcissa had taken her dress shopping for their dates.

At the intrusive thought, Hermione stiffened again. "Going," she said, pushing Bellatrix's hands down and squirming away. "We're on the run." She pushed down the skirt as far as it would go and stomped off to the right. "That means we have to move."

She made it all of ten paces before she felt something wrap around her waist. Blinked and staggering, she found herself whirling in a full circle then half around again. Once she faced Bellatrix, she saw the whip already recoiling back towards her. "Wrong way, pet," she said lightly.
Hermione flushed all over again, thoroughly indignant (and also thoroughly dizzy) over being spun into place like a top. "That is the opposite of inconspicuous!"

Bellatrix grinned and crooked a finger. "Then don't make me use it."

Hermione stormed off in the opposite direction, distantly relieved to hear Bellatrix fall in behind her, whistling innocently. It wasn't until an instinctive step down the next, wider street and the second embarrassing summons at the twitch of her whip which ensued that Hermione gave in and walked beside her, not wanting to make any more wrong turns. She wanted to ask where they were going, but then she would have to give up the silent treatment she'd become quite attached to in the last two blocks, so she walked and waited while Bellatrix whistled and baited, keeping her claws curled possessively about Hermione's hip, snagging the waistband now and then in a way that felt accidental, but the way it made Hermione's neckline dip that little bit lower had Hermione suspicious and jumpy.

And warm. It was a very warm day, wasn't it? A perfectly reasonable temperature to be pink-cheeked, flushed, overly aware of her thighs brushing together…

When they'd been walking in a straight line for enough blocks that Hermione had lost track, recognizing the outermost edge of the Diagon in all its bustle of distractions and passers-by, she dared to edge ahead again. She didn't want to look this flushed around all these people, nor did she think the added indiscretion of two witches in each other's arms was helping them fly under the radar.

She'd had half a block of blissful freedom before Bellatrix's wand-whip wrapped around her waist a third time, as gentle as a kiss, and spun her in the opposite direction. Muggle London? she mused, startled, as she reoriented herself. When the wand tugged her close again, Hermione flung out a thought she hoped would be enough distraction for her to sneak her cleavage back into hiding again before they got there. "You do use unbound magic."

Bellatrix froze in her tracks.

"I never realized because it's so different from mine. But the way you move." She couldn't keep a hint of admiration out of her voice. "You draw an arc in the air and everyone standing in its path tips over. You sketch an X and pull four points towards the center. You unfurl your whip and… it's there. Snap. Magic does exactly what you tell it to do with your body. Really, it's... Well, it's beautiful."

For the first time in a long time, Hermione mulled over all she knew of Bellatrix's magic. Andromeda had once called her the most talented witch in the world—it had seemed an offhand, familiar exaggeration at the time, but having seen her face down four Aurors (and a cadre of Death Eaters led by Lucius Malfoy besides), having been thrown about a room and flung into a memory without a spoken word, having experienced the eerie, living power of the objects she could imbue with her charms—seeds that grew into thorned guardians, a single scrap of parchment with two words of ink, visit me, the compulsion that had started... all of this, whatever this was...

Bellatrix had brought to life the kind of magic one just didn't see anymore. Human transformation into mythical beast. Curses to squeeze every drop of life from a wide swath of land. And then the kind of magic that could stop a curse that strong, could bring her sister back from the brink of death. This was an incredibly powerful, incredibly unpredictable witch, and it had been all too easy to forget in a world the size of a tiny hideaway and the magicless shell inside it.

Bellatrix had her magic back. Things were going to change, now. Hermione knew it in her bones.
"You are mistaken."

The words brooked no argument. Of course, Hermione had expected no less, and she was fully prepared to argue all the same. "It's not a bad thing! You're much better at it than I am. I'd swear, watching you, you don't even have to think." She sighed. "I'm always thinking."

Barely tolerant murder darkened Bellatrix's stare. Hermione knew she was babbling, but, for inconspicuousness's sake, anger seemed preferable to the sexual teasing she'd been putting up with… and getting thoroughly distracted by.

"She said that was what I had to work on most. It got in the way. Dueling." She shrugged. "I do this thing with colors… I know it's become a crutch, but I suppose I never thought I'd need to really… fight anyone."

"Colors," Bellatrix drawled.

Hermione opened her mouth to explain, but found a finger shushing her instead.

"That was not a question. I don't want to know." The hand fell away and Bellatrix continued on. Hermione had to hurry to keep up. She could hear her muttering under her breath, punctuating every second step with a word. "Mongrel magic. Child's play."

Her mood only seemed to descend from there. Hermione's relief over being freed from her wand-whip game quickly turned nervous when she caught mutterings about dirtiness and impurity. She hadn't meant to invite this side of Bellatrix out again, and she never had quite gotten the hand of putting it back when she did.

Just as they crossed into Muggle London—Hermione recognized the back way they were taking, the alley that seemed to mirror itself forever when non-magic denizens of the city wandered in, walking until they tired of passing between heaps of increasingly foul-smelling rubbish and turned back the way they'd come—she had a thought. She hesitated to say it, hesitated so violently, in fact, that she stopped walking altogether. Bellatrix turned back with a huff of exasperation that died at the look on Hermione's face.

"What?"

Hermione shook her head. "N-nothing."

"What," Bellatrix snapped.

"You won't find it interesting."

Bellatrix arched an eyebrow. "Do not try my patience right now, pet. Spit it out."

In that moment, Hermione wished desperately that Bellatrix had given her dress pockets to shove her hands into. "Um. You can do it. Not just… whatever you've been doing, but… raw magic. I know you said you wouldn't, I know you refused to learn, but…" She whispered her next words so quickly and quietly she doubted Bellatrix could hear. "I think you may have done it before."

Bellatrix had gone very, very still. Lingering anger vanished as a look of unintentional greed flickered across her face, but it was gone as quickly as it had come. "Now why would I want to do that?"

The question was all the more eerie for its sudden innocence. Before Hermione could consider what she might have done, Bellatrix was off again.
"Do keep up. We're nearly there."

Nearly there turned out to be the first five-star hotel they passed. By the time Hermione realized they had been walking because Bellatrix couldn't Apparate them anywhere she'd never been, Bellatrix had the man at the front desk fully under her control. Hermione protested the use of the Imperius curse, really, she did, but when Bellatrix turned away from demanding the penthouse suite free of charge to spear Hermione with a grin and a muttered, "Had to make sure I'm back, pet," she let go of judgement. She had just gotten her curses back, after all. Imperius was the most mild she could have chosen. And besides, maybe as long as she was focused on hotel suites and front-desk men in little pinstriped hats and drop-jawed bellhops with luggage carts, she would leave things like revenge and war alone for a little while longer.

Besides, it was a smart choice, the hotel. Anonymous. Invisible. Bella, with her magic back, was much better at this whole on the run thing than Hermione had been. Compared to her own frantic popping in-and-out of every place she'd ever been and every person she'd ever known, it would be almost impossible to find them here.

Once she saw their rooms, her last thought of protest died. It wasn't so much that there were two bedrooms, a ten-seat dining room, a grand staircase and a private lift, a den, sitting room, dining room, mirror-paneled walls, leather-lined walnut furnishings, and more she couldn't begin to take in at a glance… but there were beds. King-sized, dust free, plush-peach-comforter-covered beds.

The moment their escort left them alone, Hermione flopped backwards into the nearest one with a blissful groan, staring, unseeing, through the floor-to-ceiling window that looked out over London. Bright afternoon sun bleached grey rooftops blindingly white. Hermione's sense of time was ruined. "I'm never running again."

Bellatrix snorted. "We walked."

"Alright, I'll rephrase. I'm never moving again."

At that, Bellatrix laughed outright. "And if I had other plans?"

Hermione shook her head violently back and forth, curls frizzing against the damask duvet cover. "No more plans. Your plans are terrible."

"Excuse me?" There was more indignation in the question than anger.

"Yesterday, I woke up sitting on a hardwood floor, remember?"

"However could I forget."

"Then we had sex for six straight hours! And then I ran around in your—" Waving her hands in the air while lying on her back took too much effort, so Hermione resorted to sort of waggling her feet for emphasis. "—magic fields like a… like some sort of metaphysical gardener, which… and let me make this perfectly clear… magical digging and de-fencing? Is just as much work as the real thing. Then we napped for, what, two hours? Less? And you made us tramp across half the city just to find a hotel! I'm done. I'm done in. You can keep your plans to your— Hey! Hands too! ...Ooooh."

Bellatrix had snuck up beside her mid-rant. Her hand settled possessively low on Hermione's stomach—and flooded her whole body with blissful relief.

"I—I'm not entirely sure healing is made for that," Hermione breathed, not lifting a finger to stop her.
"There must be… some reason… a witch needs to sleep?"

Bellatrix’s answer was a chuckle. The sound rippled down the connection between them, and Hermione felt the intent of the healing spell *shift*. Warm became warmer, bliss heated towards desire. "Learn now and don’t forget it," Bellatrix purred. "My plans always work."

Hermione groaned. "Oh, I hate your plans. Really, I do." Then she reached up, grabbed the back of Bellatrix’s neck, and pulled her down into the sheets.

Her kiss broke Bellatrix’s concentration. The warmth faded, but Bellatrix didn’t break the kiss.

Just when Hermione had decided kissing was almost as good as healing for making her forget her exhaustion, Bellatrix drew back and muttered something she couldn’t hear. A silvery-blue light dripped from the tip of her wand. Hermione could feel it sinking into her skin, cool and calming, coating the inside of her throat like a lozenge.

"What was that?"

Bellatrix offered her most lethal smile. "Honesty charm."

"W-what?" Hermione said, bristling.

Bellatrix plied her two of her slowest, most thorough kisses. "Don’t worry," she breathed once Hermione had forgotten how to. "It only lasts a little while."

Before Hermione could turn her rising indignation into a protest, Bellatrix took her face in her hands, the heels of her palms resting gently against her throat. She could feel the side of her wand nudging just behind her ear. "How does it feel?" she asked.

Just as Hermione’s lips parted to offer a non-answer, warmth began to radiate once again from Bellatrix’s fingers, and her answer changed in an instant. "Oh," she whispered. "Good."

The hand holding the wand began to stray. It found the nail marks on Hermione’s upper arms first, filling each tiny tear with teasing, erasing light. Hermione’s eyes fluttered closed. "So good?" she said, voice breathless, the words gliding up her throat more easily than air. "S-so good I can’t keep my eyes open." It might have felt silly, saying it when it was already obvious, but there wasn’t room for silly while Bellatrix was healing her. She was too full of warmth, all warmth, only warmth, not growing but building, gathering under her skin. "So good I—Oh, I could live here forever. And… and warm like, like sleeping under three blankets in the middle of the winter, I—" Bellatrix’s fingertips found her first, deepest bite, and the temperature rose, beating into her skin like the hot pulses of a dying star. "Oh! If you keep doing that—" Hermione’s voice had gone hoarse, aimless, but she could feel the slick of silver-blue still ruling her tongue. "—I’m going to forget my own name."

Bellatrix smiled. "Isn’t this fun?"

A laugh bubbled up over the wash of heat. "Yes," Hermione gasped. Her touch promised ecstasies without consequence; her eyes promised even the consequence could be craved. "Yes," Hermione laughed, letting her head press back into the sheets... letting the light fill her up and pour out of the top of her head… letting herself forget.

By the time Hermione could form a thought again, she was giddy and drunk with the healing, her dress was gone, and she felt like she was living in a brand-new body and bones, a few remaining teeth-bruises Bellatrix had left to linger aside.
Bellatrix sprawled beside her, hand and wand draped possessively across her naked thighs. "Are you going to betray me?"

Until her tongue spoke without her, Hermione didn't understand. "No," slipped between her lips with the same easy presumption it had spilled her wants during sex, and Hermione realized her honesty was still not her own.

"Will you try to stop me?"

"No." Hermione didn't like how easily that answer came. When a slower, more difficult, "Unless…" crept out after it, she was relieved. "Unless you're going to hurt someone. Someone innocent or… Someone who doesn't… deserve…"

The spell was still at work, Hermione realized, but she could feel it weakening. These questions were not as simple as describing the feeling of Bellatrix's hands on her skin. Her tongue could only know her thoughts as well as she did, and Hermione… didn't. She didn't know when she might try to stop Bellatrix. What did the person look like who did deserve her wrath? Lucius had, Hermione knew that much, but what of people whose evil she didn't know? Would she try to stop war for the sake of stopping war? What would Bellatrix's war look like? She had no Death Eaters, no immortal figurehead, no great prophecies, no higher cause...

Bellatrix squeezed her thigh, stilling her thoughts. "Why haven't you left?"

Hermione's heart stalled. She felt the slick of silver-blue inside her crack into a thousand crystals of ice. As they melted away, she asked, "Why haven't you?"

Silence met silence in the space between them. It grew, stretched, and broke with a rustle of sheets. Bellatrix kicked the duvet out from under their bodies and drew it back up on top.

"You're right," she said. "Healing doesn't make up for sleep."
She woke to a window of darkness and a wash of wand-lit skin under her cheek. Tucked against Bellatrix's side, chin on her breast, forehead on her shoulder, she peered up to find Bellatrix reading, a crumpled newspaper floating in front of her while her hand held the ball of soft light at the tip of her wand a few inches away. Her other hand lazed in Hermione's curls, tempting her back towards sleep.

Instead, Hermione blinked three times to bring the page into focus. It took a few minutes to find context; it was the *Prophet* that had journeyed from Diagon to the hideout and back again, worse for the wear in her jeans' pocket and Bellatrix's cleavage. She recognized the *Free Stan!* Article, caught the last few lines on the page just in time to watch Bellatrix follow the readmore she'd abandoned. Her eyes drifted lazily to a block quote midway down:

"We know who all was in the inner circle. We know every last power player there were, thanks to the likes of the good Lady Malfoy. Now the Mister Malfoy's been taken out o' the picture, there's all of one of 'em left. Bellatrix Black — and she's on the loose, in't she? While them's like Stan rot in Azkaban! Whose justice? Not our justice!"

"Reading your fanmail?" she murmured sleepily.

Bellatrix flinched. Slowly, her chin turned towards Hermione. The paper folded gently to a close. She set it on the dresser and lifted one finger to tease under Hermione's chin. "Something like that."

Feeling relieved that sleep seemed to have returned their illusory, easy intimacy, she curled closer: a comfortable cat being petted in the sun. Just as her eyes began to slip shut again, the point of a wand bopped her on the tip of her nose.

"Show me."

"Hmmph?" Hermione muttered, indignant with sleep.
"Raw magic. Show me. Tell me what I have to do."

Instantly awake, Hermione tried to will herself back into unconsciousness. She failed. "I thought you didn't want—"

"I've changed my mind."

Hermione was already shaking her head. "I wasn't offering to… When I said I thought you could… I didn't mean me."

Bellatrix twirled her wand in a slow circle, leaving a thin trail of fire in its wake. The flames hovered exactly where she left them until they faded away all at once like a camera flash. Though their surroundings were untouched, the air smelled scorched, like benzine and brimstone. "Who else?"

Hermione opened her mouth, weighed the only two witches names she could add to the list of her own, and closed it again. She could picture neither the esteemed headmistress of Hogwarts nor Andromeda willingly offering Bellatrix that power again. Andromeda had gotten everything she wanted when they fled—or, nearly—and had no reason to welcome Bellatrix back again. Minerva McGonagall had been wildly understanding over many of the other strange things Hermione and the Black family had thrown her way, but this would be a stretch. No, she needed a different angle. "I'm no good at it," she offered instead. "I doubt I need to remind you just how much of a failure…"

She trailed off, watching Bellatrix catch her thread of fire between two fingertips, carry it to her lips, and exhale, sending light dancing through the air in a cloud of tiny, sizzling specks. When she replied, her voice was haughty. "Magic does not fail for me."

Hermione snorted indelicately. "Well. As much as your perfection thrills me, it's not contagious."

"I'll teach you the honesty charm."

Hermione stilled. Her throat clenched. Merlin. How badly did Bellatrix want this? Why now? How far was Bellatrix willing to take her trust to get it? How far was she?

"You'd let me put it on you?"

"You'll still like it my way, best."

Of that, Hermione had no doubt. Spouting easy poetics about how good Bellatrix could make her feel with sex and magic had been an infinitely easier hour than any comparable span of honesty she'd gotten from this deadly witch with her long, troubled past. But those moments were important, too. She would wait until she got an answer.

It didn't take long. "Yes," Bellatrix added with a sigh. "Someday. I will let you put it on me."

Hermione bit her lip. "I want your cleansing charm, too."

Bellatrix laughed. "That old thing? Why?"

Hermione blushed. "It didn't just make us look clean; I felt clean."

Leaning over her, Bellatrix stared deeply into her eyes. "Pet, if you teach me this, you can have any spell of mine you want."

Hermione's flush darkened. "I don't know how much I can teach you." Her voice had gotten quiet again. "Please remember it took me three months of trying to do it on purpose once."
Bellatrix snorted and rolled back beside her. "As though I'd forget."

Hermione ignored the interruption. She wanted to power through this before she chickened out. "I can tell you what I tried the right way, though. My one lesson with Headmistress McGonagall. She... Well, there were a few failed attempts at dueling my way into it, then she took me back in my memories. To the first time I'd done it. On accident."


Hermione shrugged. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. Did you ever consider... The day you saved Narcissa from your curse. How do you think you did that?"

It was Bellatrix's turn to go very, very still. Hermione recognized the warning for what it was, the need to tread carefully around certain dark days, certain memories that always teetered on the edge of an abyss.

"I grabbed her before she was gone," said Bellatrix at last.

"Yes!" Hermione said. "What did that feel like? What did you see?"

Bellatrix's eyes closed, and Hermione could see her hands trembling. For a moment, she thought this would be the end of the discussion, that she would get nothing more than a demand for a better, less nosy way to learn the strange power.

Voice clipped, Bellatrix finally answered. "Her."

Hermione understood at once. Yes, her. The same way Hermione had seen her, Bellatrix, when she stood in her fields. She was right! Bellatrix had used raw magic, had seen whatever Narcissa Black had looked like in the very core of what made her a witch, and had used it to drag her back from the brink of death. A part of her wanted to press for details, to steal the portrait of Narcissa's hidden youth from her memories, but she didn't ask. She had seen as much as Narcissa had allowed. With Bellatrix, she had seen even more.

"Do you think..." Digging deep for the trust to say what had to come next, Hermione swallowed thickly. "Do you think you could find me the same way?"

Bellatrix jolted fully upright beside her. "Dying?" she growled, and Hermione was struck dumb by the force of fury in her voice.

"N-no," she gasped out. "I didn't mean... My magic. Only that. Find my magic the way you did your sister's," she finished, words rushed and breathless.

Slowly, Bellatrix subsided, leaning back against the headboard, spine still rigid. Her wand took up its flame-tipped wanderings again, etching the runes of her own incomprehensible thoughts into the air they breathed. "Yes," she said, voice low. "I believe I could."

She turned eyes and wand towards Hermione, ignoring her little startle when the fire settled a few inches from the tip of her nose. In a second, the last of it had faded, leaving only worms of shimmery distortion in Hermione's vision. Wrinkling her nose a bit in concentration, Bellatrix shut her eyes, and Hermione watched in awe as those light trails began to crystalize into something she couldn't quite see. It took a few moments, a few sounds of quiet frustration, before she felt it, like a slowing of her heart or... something else, something that flowed through her like blood, calming, settling, to allow Bellatrix in.

It lasted only the time it took for Bellatrix's eyes to fly back open, but the look on her face was like
someone who had seen a ghost, or a god.

"I never..." she breathed, then shook her head, visibly pulling herself back together. "Not so hard, that," she said, but her voice was still a little shaky, a little weak. Little flecks of gold still danced in the depths of her eyes, like she'd stared into the sun so long she'd swallowed it. Her jaw tightened. "I want to try again. This time, try and stop me."

Hermione frowned. "Why would I do that?"

"Can't you do just one thing in your life without asking 'But why, though?'"

A little hurt by the mockery in her voice, Hermione stuck out her chin and crossed her arms. "Fine."

Of course, she had no idea how to go about trying to stop someone from using raw magic. She conjured a vague image of a wall around herself, remembering the feeling of bashing up against Bellatrix's defenses time and time again, but Bellatrix didn't even blink. Hermione watched in distant amazement as those golden flecks shimmered into a thin film which ascended over Bellatrix's eyes. Her world slowed, pulse stilled, and Bellatrix touched her magic as though her walls were nothing more than paper.

She was frowning upon her return but didn't comment on Hermione's failure. She seemed preoccupied.

Hermione found that curiosity outweighed any lingering hurt and the sliver of jealousy she felt. Sure, Bellatrix had been able to do in one try what she had struggled with for months, but she was Bellatrix. She wasn't afraid of getting it right.

Besides, Hermione had more important things to dwell on. "What did you see?" she asked, voice eager, a little strained. "What does my magic look like? I've seen yours, McGonagall's... Maybe Lucius's, once." She wrinkled her nose. "By accident. But I've never—"

Visibly pulling herself back from her thoughts, Bellatrix looked amused. "What do you think?" She asked as though it should be the most obvious thing in the world.

Hermione chuckled nervously. "A library?"

Bellatrix smirked. "Good guess. Obvious, but no."

Hermione scooched closer again, tucking herself under her chin, looking up at her with her best attempt at wide, innocent eyes. "Tell me? Please?"

Bellatrix laughed. "Pitiful." Her hand slid into Hermione's hair. "No twenty questions this time?"

"I thought my questions annoyed you."

Bellatrix snorted. "Oh, they do." Her nails grazed Hermione's scalp, drawing shivers. "It was very... Muggle."

Hermione frowned. "Muggle what?"

"Little coffee shop. All bright light, tall glass windows... Shaded little nooks for reading, shelves full of snacks, books, little potted plants... At least two felines."

Bellatrix managed to make the whole thing sound like a laundry list, even punctuated the end with a yawn, but Hermione was beaming up at her, fighting the urge to clap her hands with joy. "Oh, that's
better than I ever could have imagined. Thank you."

Bellatrix's hard, triumphant little smile softened. "You are, as ever, pet, full of surprises."


Bellatrix said nothing for a few seconds, toying with Hermione's curls. Her gaze flickered right, towards the windows, or possibly the bedside table, where Hermione's wand sat beside the discarded newspaper. "You'll see him soon," she murmured. Her words were cryptic, stare distant, but her voice was still warm.

That unsettled feeling that had been lurking in Hermione's stomach since they got here rose again. "Bella…"

Before she could fumble out a question, Bellatrix swung her legs over the side of the mattress and stood. "Hungry?" she asked, extending a pale, innocent hand down to her.

Hermione eyed it, eyed its mistress, then took it, allowing the assist up from the mattress. "Yes," she admitted. "Starved."

Bellatrix crossed to the closet in three light, prancing steps. Hermione's gaze followed her legs the whole way. She plucked out two hotel robes, heavy peach terry cloth, and tossed one at Hermione, who caught it half with her arms, half with her face.

As though summoned by Hermione's hunger, a crisp, professional double-knock sounded on the suite's main door. When the prim, Imperiused, hat-wearing man from the front desk marched in with a cart of delicious smells and silver platters, Hermione realized he very much had been.

Ignorant of Hermione's scramble to get into her robe, he began setting dishes on the hulking ebony table in the center of the dining room, but Bellatrix dismissed him with a yawn and a lazy flick of her wrist. She rolled the cart over the living room carpet at wandpoint, stopping only once she'd returned to the main bedroom. After eyeing the surfaces available, she continued out onto the terrace, waving the floor-to-ceiling glass doors open without ever stopping the forward drift of the cart.

"Coming?" she called over her shoulder, and Hermione followed.

Night had all but fallen, the sky a bruised, under-eye blue. The entire balcony was ringed by waist-high lanterns—four-sided boxes bolted to the ground and lit with star-white bulbs—and tiny green hedges trimmed into perfect rectangles the exact height of the lights between. Wanting to poke one, see if it was fake, Hermione drifted towards the nearest plant. It wasn't.

Nearer to the door which led the second bedroom stood an intimate, circular table with four wooden seats, high-backed and slope-armed, like a cross between a lawn chair and a throne. Bellatrix had already settled, sprawled, robe parted indecently, and she kicked out the chair at her side. Obediently, Hermione sat. She had an itching urge to make some prosaic comment about the pleasant summer-night weather, the beautiful view, the lovely food… Instead, she watched Bellatrix, thoroughly transfixed to see her in full control of this strange space, this strange night, their strangely unbroken, unspoken agreement that they were in this together, whatever this was.

The wine warmed her, the food vanished, quick and delicious, and by the time Bellatrix had uncovered a tray of mini dessert tarts, the air seemed to glow with possibility. Hermione's body felt listless, slow and melded to the day of catnaps and sexual currents drifting through every silence, but her mind felt wide awake, charged with an easy, sharp curiosity and the edge of adrenaline. Dinner felt like suspense, like someone sitting behind each of them, exchanging pointed compliments—
Come here often? You look good enough to eat—while the two of them said nothing at all, basking in a dance they were too far along to live the beginning of on their own.

Finally, Hermione leaned forward, shaking off her ghost. "I've forgotten who said it, Andy or Narcissa, but someone told me your Animagus form is a crow. I... Well, I'm curious, I suppose. I've never thought of you as particularly—"

At the comment, Bellatrix's head cocked to one side in a decidedly birdlike manner.

"—avian," Hermione finished with a laugh. The gleam in Bellatrix's eyes reminded her of the words that had accompanied the revelation. Likes shiny things and dead people. That sounded like something Andromeda would have said.

Bellatrix shrugged. "Haven't had the urge to fly since I discovered the Ministry wouldn't let me dive out the window."

Hermione winced at the ambiguous phrasing but elected to imagine the attempt had been made in bird form.

"But yes, I am. I've been other things."

"Things?" Hermione asked, surprised. "Plural?" She'd always thought the cryptic revelation had been solely about the form she'd taken for her first... Her mind toyed with the words "murder" and "hunt" and could settle on neither.

Bellatrix was smiling. "I hold quite a few Wallace Wizowitzki's Wizarding World Records, I'll have you know." She slid on aristocratic snobbery like a tailored glove. "Or, did. I think they revoke those upon conviction for crimes against God and country."

At the droll, off-hand remark, Hermione's lips twitched.

"But once upon a time, one of them was for the most Animagus forms ever held." She waved her fork in a lazy dismissal. "They say it shouldn't happen, that no one should be able to take a different form after the first, but very few start as young as I did." She popped another tart into her mouth, chewed lazily, dashing a bit of jam from the corner of her lips with the tip of her tongue. "The average adult with the time to walk around slobbering over a Mandrake leaf for a month is quite... settled. I, on the other hand, had an oh-so-tumultuous youth. Why, I do believe I gave up an illustrious career as a jungle cat purely because my parents were too approving. Everyone wants a leopard or a jaguar at family Christmas these days. Turning into a bear in the dining room... Now that was a blast."


Bellatrix's grin sharpened. "More along the lines of... green anaconda, scorpion... praying mantis."

This time, Hermione laughed with admiration. Not only was that an impressive array of creatures, but she'd confessed to both a reptile and an insect, albeit a flashier one than Hermione's guesses. She was less than surprised by the arachnid in the mix. There was a strong temptation to ask whether the mantis had been during her marriage, but Hermione had a feeling she'd used most of her free teases up already, and teases that bordered on weightier topics... Those were questions she might have asked in a personal conversation with another sister. Not this one.

Not when this was the lightest, most friendly moment she'd ever shared with Bellatrix Black. Not when she didn't want it to end.
As it was, Bellatrix had continued musing over her dessert. "Perhaps I can convince dear old Wallace to reinstate me, now."

The way Bellatrix said "convince" never failed to make the hairs on the back of Hermione's neck stand at quivering attention. She wasn't willing to sacrifice the levity of the meal just to defend the honor of a records keeper, even one of Wallace Wizowitzki's repute. Instead, she offered, "You could just wait until the statute of limitations is up on crimes against God and country."

Bellatrix laughed, a hint kinder than a cackle. As she picked up her water to take a drink, though, Hermione watched a strange distance grow in her eyes. "I doubt we ever had one. Not for war crimes. Regardless, it's too late for that. My convictions are many, varied, and long since put to the public record. I'd need the royal pardon, and I don't think his Ministerness is so inclined."

The thoughtfulness in Bellatrix's reply made Hermione, who was thoroughly undereducated in matters of the law, nervous all over again.

"At least…” she added, and drained the rest of her wine. "…not yet."

Hermione hadn't been too surprised to end up in bed again. For one thing, they hadn't even put on real clothes. For another, it was finally a reasonable time of night for it. For a third, what else was one to do while on the run with someone you hadn't expected to see past the end of a… mutual arraignment… that seemed to be continuing purely on convenience and good—very good—very, very good—sex?

Bellatrix touched her like she still had something to unearth, something to reclaim, something she needed to be whole. When she breathed Mine against her skin, Hermione believed it, wanted it with everything in her for ten seconds, ten minutes, twenty at a time. Bellatrix let her return the favor like she was a curiosity, her touch a lost language she couldn't quite understand, but she reached for it anyway, buried her head in the curve of Hermione's throat and muttered neither pleas nor endearments, but something like destroy me, something like mad to want this, mad with wanting.

Hermione had discovered an aptitude for a great many things since she'd first met Andromeda on the floor of a Ministry lift. Why should sex with Bellatrix Black not be among them?

After, when she reached to set her wand on the bedside table, Hermione watched the tally marks on her back stretch and glint in the low light, a swathe of oil-ink lines marring the pale, perfect skin. She could see no other scars here. It seemed, despite other injuries and the many, many motives that must have been out there, no one had found the opportunity to stab her in the back.

No one save the Ministry.

At Hermione's cautious touch, Bellatrix settled without facing her, lying on her stomach, head pillowed on her arms. Hermione counted the scars in silence, slowly tracing her finger up and down each one.

"So many."

"Not so many. Considering."

"How many, Bella?" Her tongue took comfort in the name. "How many of these were… before? Before your magic was bound, how many people actually died for these?"

Bellatrix shrugged, a slow, rippling motion that wrinkled the covers beneath them as the muscles in her back flexed, warping the perfect lines across her shoulders. "I don't know. Half. More."
"Merlin's ghost," Hermione breathed.

"That's war, pet. Two of them." She sighed. "I do wish I could say the same of killing I always have of torture, but... it isn't fun. Murder. Never was. For the most part it was always just... a chore. Two words. Green light. Gone. There's no art in it. Rarely any real malice. Tidying loose ends." She turned her chin to face Hermione, offering a wan smile. "I prefer creating them."

"And you can do that?" Hermione whispered. "Kill. Without... you know — what happened to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, with his — with those things he made. I read about them. After. In the Prophet. How do you kill without breaking your...?"

"Soul?" Bellatrix shrugged herself deeper into the pillows. "Muggles seem to have no trouble with it. It is different with us, though. Not sure it really is a soul, as much as it's... some other odd bit of magic we haven't got words for yet, but it..." She trailed off, no longer meeting Hermione's eyes. "Far as I can tell, you can't. Not the Unforgivable way. Make no mistake, pet. I'm near sure mine's shattered just as many times as His. More, even." She laughed. "Merlin knows I did most of his dirty work."

She buried her face in the pillows for a moment, emerged with a bit of pillowcase between her teeth, needling it like one might a blade of grass. Spitting it out, she continued. "You can keep it. The bits and pieces. Soul, magic, Horcrux... You can't keep them inside of you; you don't have to let them go. I feel it, sometimes. A different kind of rattling in my head. It... It's a lot harder to ignore than the stuff you're touching."

Hermione's finger stilled in the middle of the last black line. Somehow, Hermione had a feeling that what Bellatrix was talking about wasn't necessarily any different than what Muggles went through when they killed. That sounded an awful lot like guilt, remorse, even; any of the other painful, heavy emotions that happen when you take a life. She didn't need to say that, though. She was finally beginning to understand that, for Bellatrix, certain truths... weren't on the table. If she had to confront every single thing in her past one by one, every prejudice, every preconceived notion about magic, every time things had slipped out of her control, she would never have time to live. If she could give her little changes—a first foray into raw magic, a magic she had to see was no different between pure-bloods and Muggle-borns; or an incentive, however small, to keep holding on to her pieces of soul — maybe she could live and learn at the same time.

Hermione bent down and pressed a kiss to the oldest scars, the ones at the base of her neck. "This is why you don't want to start everything up again. Not really."

Bellatrix stiffened.

"There are more subtle ways to make chaos, you know," she insisted. "You don't have to wage war to change things you don't care for."

Bellatrix rolled slowly, turning to meet Hermione's eyes. "You do if you don't care for peace."

Leaving her fingers resting on Bellatrix's collarbone, Hermione looked away, upwards, towards the spiderweb-stucco shadows on the ceiling. "There's very little peace in this world as it is."

Bellatrix shrugged. "I've said it before, pet. You can't understand."

"There are things I hate too, you know. But I'm not going to go around murdering people to make them different."

Bellatrix snorted, sending Hermione's fingers skittering towards her shoulder. "What do you have to
Hermione curled her fingers protectively and drew her hand back into her own lap. "I've told you. I hate how the Ministry treats people; I hate how people treat house-elves. But if I decided I needed to kill everyone who did things I hated, I'd wind up wanting to kill myself, too."

She could feel Bellatrix's stare searing into the side of her face. Reluctantly, she lowered her chin to meet it. The careful intent in her gaze was enough to keep Hermione's stare from drifting down to the rest of what had been uncovered in her change of posture. "You've never killed anyone," she said, voice soft but firm. "You can't begin to understand—"

"—I don't know that," Hermione cut in. She shook her head, breaking the overwhelming intensity of the eye contact. "When we ran, when I — when I missed with that spell, when the hideout… I know I stopped the fire for a second, but… When we left… I don't know what happened. For all I know I'll pick up the paper tomorrow and see it: Fire in the Forbidden Forest! Four Dead from the Ministry, and I know I'll just lose — I just don't know! I don't know if I'll ever know and it…" She drew in a shaking, shuddering breath. "Even that's already too much. I never wanted to hurt anyone! In all my life, I… Even with L-Lucius, after everything he'd done, I only ever… fought back. Fought for myself." Fought for her. And her, too. "When you — when your arm, in the forest, after everything — when that woman was going to curse you with a spell you couldn't even say, I was just… Oh, Merlin I was so angry and I wanted them to hurt! I wanted them to never be able to touch us again! And I — I cast that spell…"

It was only when Bellatrix pulled her head down to rest against her chest that Hermione realized she was crying.

"Shh, pet. I know. I know."

They slept again. Hermione couldn't remember the falling of it, but she knew she must have when she woke. Bellatrix was just sliding out of bed, wand up, the clothes from yesterday whirling about her in the half-light of the morning. By the time they'd settled on her body, the dress had become her classic corseted robes again, familiar and imposing.

"Where are you off to?" Hermione murmured, rolling over and tucking the sheets under her arms. She curled her legs inward, wanting to stay safe and warm and blissfully ignore the larger problems for a few minutes longer. Bellatrix, however, was clothed, dark-eyed, and armed.

"Back," she replied. Whirling on the spot, she vanished.

Hermione sat up slowly. That look in her eyes had been there before; she had seen flickers of it in the street, over dinner, even in bed. It reminded her, she only now realized, of Narcissa: an eerie emotional isolation she had never before seen on the volatile, fiery elder sister.

She wrapped the blanket up around her shoulders and sat, as still and unthinking as she could possibly manage, until the space between her breasts was cold, her foot was asleep, and Bellatrix finally popped back into the room.

She landed with an audible thud. Then another, then another.

Hermione yelped. Bellatrix had blood on her chin and an arm in each hand. The arms were attached to two figures slumped on the floor, a man and a woman in Ministry garb sprawled out on the peaches-and-cream hotel rug. Neither one moved.

With a frantic flick of her wand, Hermione summoned her robe. "What did you do?"
"Stunned this one." Bellatrix toed the left-hand wizard until his face flipped up. *Ron.* "Blood traitor," she spat. "And dragged them side-along. He was finally crawling out of the rubble." She looked up at Hermione with a grim smile. "Looks like your little fire bubble did the trick. The smoke put them out like a light, though." She raised her wand, digging its tip into his forehead.

"What are you doing to him?" Hermione cried. Relief over the news that she had not yet been promoted to murderer warred with panicked confusion as Bellatrix turned her wand against Ron's skin like a lever for lifting eyelids. The pupils were rolled back into his head, drool gathering in the corner of his mouth.

"Obliviate!"

For the next several minutes, Hermione struggled to follow what Bellatrix was up to. It seemed mostly a lot of pacing and muttering and wand-waving too close to Ron's dead-fish eyes for comfort, voice too low to hear, but she recognized the memory charm for what it was.

He looked so much younger like this, passed out on a hotel floor with a dumb pout on his chubby, boyish face. What a silly person to have floating around her life, always getting in the way.

When she had finished with Ron, Bellatrix stepped closer, blocking Hermione's view, and laid the tip of her wand against Hermione's lips. "Can't have you spilling all my secrets," she muttered, almost apologetically, and for an instant, Hermione felt her tongue go numb.

In that moment, panic rose and broke over her like she'd turned on a cold shower. "What did you do?" she begged, well beyond expecting an answer.

Living up to Hermione's expectations, Bellatrix said simply, "The only thing I could."

"What thing? What is this?" she demanded. "I don't understand!"

"He's got a simple, loud little mind. Easy enough to trick a thing here, change a thing there…" Very gently, she tugged Hermione's wand out of her hand and set it beside her—in reach, but at a distance to discourage anything hasty. "Now I'm all but dead!"

For the first time since Hermione had fallen into bed with her, Bellatrix sounded well and truly mad. Her eyes were wild; her tongue kept sliding over her bottom lip like she wanted to lick the blood off her chin but couldn't quite reach.

"Why?" Hermione tried to understand. "Even if he thinks… Someone will come looking for a body. They'll never take the word of one—"

Bellatrix's face split into an evil grin. "That's why I brought two."

As though in response to Bellatrix's words, the second Auror stirred. When she rolled onto her side, Hermione realized it was the woman, the older one, the one whose curse had sent Hermione on the warpath through Bellatrix's magic.

"Perfect." Without warning, Bellatrix popped away. Hermione had only fifteen seconds to panic about what she was supposed to do with a half-conscious Auror and an addlebrained Weasley before she whirled back in again, hand wrapped around the neck of a black-glass beaker. Next to it, her other hand curled in a relaxed fist. Between her fingers, Hermione caught a glint of deep, gleaming red.

"Like sweetened, condensed fear in a particularly elegant form." At the cryptic pronouncement, Hermione looked up. Bellatrix licked her lips. "As a smart, oily boy once told me while trying so
desperately to impress, fear is timeless, as old and undying as the awareness of man. Timelessness, more like."

"Oh," Hermione whispered. "That's from the tree."

Bellatrix seemed not to hear. Pocketing the crimson, Bellatrix tugged her wand out of her curls. "Add a spot of fear to magic…” The hand not clutching the beaker fisted in the Ministry woman's hair. Her head lolled. She whimpered, mouthing a protest of blind, stammering panic, but was still unable to pull herself fully into the land of the living. "I can do without her." Bellatrix's hand came away with a few strands of hair. Moaning, her head slumped back down to the carpet.

"Polyjuice," Hermione mumbled, trying not to look at the woman on the floor. She recognized the potion easily enough; could, with some effort, engage her intellectual curiosity to deaden the worst of the panic, but… "I still don't understand."

"Should last me two, three weeks. Plenty of time. Plenty of time." For an instant, she actually met Hermione's eyes. "Polyjuice is a nasty, special little potion, but it doesn't break any rules. Not on its own. Not how you'd see it in a spellbook." While the woman's stare blinked in and out of focus, Bellatrix put the tip of her wand to her temple, drawing out a thread of red light. It reminded Hermione of the extraction of a memory, but when the crimson snapped free of the woman's temple, she went limp with a tiny sound of surprise. "Even the best of us bad ones make mistakes now and then; try to turn into the dead… wind up a corpse… But if you add just the right thing… something there when she's alive, gone when she's dead..." Passing her wand into her mouth, clutching it between her teeth, Bellatrix pulled one red gem from her pocket. With a nod of her head, the red not-memory dripped into it and vanished. "Not easy, mind. Can't add breath to a potion, can't add heartbeats. But, with the right vessel, you very much can add fear." As her fingers opened over the neck of the bottle, Hermione caught a glimpse of red falling from hand to glass. "Hollyblood drinks it down like liquor." The beaker fizzed faintly, filling the air around its mouth with a sinister red haze. She licked her lips. "One part fear, one little hair—" Bellatrix's slim fingers let the offending length fall and stoppered the end of the bottle. "—and you've made yourself a time capsule." With a wave of her wand, it vanished. "You can be the one you stoppered up, right at the moment you made it."

The words dripped into Hermione's brain like pulp through an oversaturated sieve. By the time she realized what Bellatrix planned to do, she was too late.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Hermione screamed. She couldn't help it. She jerked backwards, slamming her shoulder on the headboard as the woman's form went limp in a flash of green light.

Bellatrix rolled her over with her foot and bent to calmly close her wide, unseeing eyes. "You can be a dead person. Unpleasant, but possible—so long as you work well with terror while the scum is still alive."

Her wand was already moving again, coasting over the skin of the dead woman's arms, leaving a mass of blue-black burns and the stench of charred flesh in its wake. She trailed the disfigurement with the easy artistry of someone who understood fire, leaving blue blood-blisters and scorch marks across one side of her face, taking all of her hair in a puff of sulfurous grey, eating away one entire shoulder, fusing her robes to the skin of her back until it was one grotesque, cauterized wound.

Hermione began to hyperventilate. With the dead woman's hand in hers, Bellatrix glanced up. Her gaze softened, which only made Hermione's panic soar up another thirty heartbeats per minute.

"Here, pet. Listen."
Don't look seemed implied, but Hermione found it impossible to look away. Every inch of her was screaming with the gut-churning wrongness of this, like she had gone to give birth to a child and out had come a vulture, ripping through her with full-grown talons, piercing her stomach with its bulbous beak, its wrinkly, depilated head hissing and yapping as it feasted on her entrails. She had done this.

"Let us say…" Bellatrix began, voice light and lilting. "Someone's gone and locked you up in a dungeon somewhere. Stone walls, skeletons dangling every which way... and two great big iron doors." She summoned a sickly yellow light to the tip of her wand that flickered like a dying flame. "The skeletons start chattering at you. You don't want to listen, at first—you're not mad after all. But you're here, they're here… and they claim they know the way out. One of those two ugly metal doors will take you off to a life of quiet luxury, they say." She held her wand with its eerie goldenrod flame against the dead witch's left thumb. "The other will take you to your execution."

While feathered barbs continued to stab the lining of Hermione's stomach, threatening to pop her like a balloon, she grudgingly began to listen. The cadence of Bellatrix's voice was that of someone sharing a riddle. Instinct demanded she solve it.

"Down there with you, you've got two other breathing people, people with skin on their bones. Your skeleton friends ever so kindly inform you that one of the two will always tell you the truth, but the other will always lie. You haven't the slightest clue which is which, but the two of them have been down here together since the dawn of time, and they know each other, and they know about the truth telling and the lies."

By then, the flame had eaten at each of the fingers on the left hand and moved on to the right, leaving behind pale, waxy-looking skin that, if Hermione had to hazard a guess, would no longer possess fingerprints.

"You've been gifted the opportunity to ask one question—any one question—but only to one of the two, and you'll have no way of knowing whether you're asking the compulsive liar or the goddess of truth herself." Spearing Hermione with her wild-eyed stare, flecks of skin-char sticking to the sweat on her forehead like freckles—or the start of pinion-feathers—Bellatrix dropped the second hand. "What do you ask?"

Wrapping her arms around her stomach, begging herself to hold together, Hermione ran the words backwards through her brain in a cold sort of shock. Two doors, one question. Trust the liar, and she'd die. But trust the lie…

"I'd ask, 'What would the other one say if I asked which door leads to safety?''" Her voice was quiet. "Then, the liar would lie, and tell me the truth-teller would point me to the door where I'd die. But if I had asked the truth-teller, she'd tell me the truth, that the liar would point me to the same door. So, no matter who I've chosen to talk to, if I pick the door I wasn't told, I'll be free."

Bellatrix grimaced, cutting a thin line into her forearm with the tip of her wand. Hermione barely flinched. "That's just what Cissy would answer, you know." Without warning, she stabbed the tip of her wand down into the body's chest, just up and to the left, a burst of some odd magic clearing the way for the tip to penetrate deep into the figure's still heart. The blood on her forearm began to drip down the length of the wood. Hermione gasped as a pulse of greenish light set the heart beating again. "Relies on a world where riddles have answers. Relies on things you can't know. Relies on things you should've known better than to listen to. Why should you trust some chatty dead men who obviously didn't make it out in the first place? Why should you trust your captor, whoever set you in there, to have made a fair game? Why should you trust me?" She laughed through her teeth, a thick rain of laughter that stung like shards of glass. "I say, kill one," she hissed. "Doesn't much matter which. Throw her body through a door. Show the world what you think of their—" She wrenched
her arm, digging the wand deeper into the pulsing heart glowing inside the otherwise sill corpse. "—primitive—" The heartbeats quickened. "—justice—" With a sickening slurp, Bellatrix ripped the wand back out again, and the heart stilled. "—system," she spat, flipping blood onto the carpet with a shake of her wrist.

Staring at the carnage and the wild fury in Bellatrix's eyes, Hermione felt the vulture subsiding. She forced words through a dry throat. "Who was she?"


At the confession, Hermione grew even quieter. She considered throwing up, purging herself of claws and feathers. She considered going to her, touching the blood on her skin with her hands. Instead she just… sat. She sank deeper and deeper into the middle of the big, beautiful, impersonal bed, feeling heartsick and sick to her stomach.

"Couldn't convince that one—" She nudged the still lump-like Ron with her toes. "—that he did this on his own, but if it was her…" She smiled. "And she's… fled…"

The air felt temperatureless on her skin. Her eyes and lips felt detached from her head: not crying, not screaming, just numb. Maybe not present at all.

"Now I'm dead," Bellatrix finished, Delphic and inarguable.

Hermione scooted forward, the sheets chafing her knees like charcoal in a bed of ash. She reached out. "Don't do this," she whispered.

Bellatrix shook her head, curls swaying, a curtain of snakes. She leaned down, pressed a kiss to the back of Hermione's knuckles, then let go. "Till next time, pet."

She vanished.
Hermione waited.

Bellatrix did not return.

Ron woke with a deeply unappealing snort. Hoping he would just disappear, Hermione ignored him. He stumbled to his feet, looked around himself in empty-eyed confusion, stared down at the corpse on the floor, and muttered, "Bloody hell. The last of the inner circle is dead." Then he fell over again.

Hermione stared at him, indecisive. Unfeeling. He got back up with a groan. Slowly backing away from the body, he bumped into the bed, stumbled, and grabbed Hermione's leg.

Jarred out of her own trance, Hermione choked on a scream. "Get off me!"

Ron noticed her for the first time. Staring, he let go and scratched his head. "Sorry. Er. You alright?"

She kicked away, scrambling backwards in the sheets.

He held out his hands towards her like a wounded animal. "C'mon, I'll get you out of here."

"No!" she gasped. "I'm not going anywhere!"

He frowned. "You're safe." He looked down at his wand. "She's dead."

"She's not!" Hermione could scarcely recognize her own voice, reed-thin and high and hysterical.

"We… killed her?" The furrow between his eyes deepened, then relaxed. "Iuristor got 'er. I saved you. I got us out. This is a… I know this place. This is a safe place." He sounded dazed, drifty, like everything he said floated to the surface of his brain just in time to fall out of his mouth.

"No!" Hermione cried, frantically shaking her head. "No, you—You've never been here! You need to leave, I— I need to wait, you need to—"

"You'll be fine, now," Ron pressed, reaching towards her.

"Leave me alone!" Hermione scrambled for her wand. "She's not dead! She's not!"

"Sorry 'bout this."

She never reached it.

"What's he done to her? That… that bumbling lout of a boy shouldn't've been allowed anywhere near a wand after what he—"

"She'll be just fine, ma'am. See? She's already coming around."

"Hermione! Oh—"

A hand grabbed Hermione's shoulder. It hurt. In fact, just about everything hurt. The first voice was familiar. Her mum sounded ready to commit murder. The second voice, Hermione saw once she managed to crack open an eye, belonged to a nurse. She blinked twice, taking in the white curtain around half her bed, the cuffs around her wrists, and the distantly familiar St. Mungo's ceiling.
"Hermione? Dear, can you hear me?"

Hermione swallowed, throat parched. When she tried to speak, her voice cracked, and the nurse held something cold against her lips. Ice, she realized. Dodging as much as her stiff, sore neck would allow, she sucked it until it melted away. She felt like a desert. A bruised desert. A camel who had rolled head-over-heel down a sand dune. She'd never seen a sand dune. Suddenly, she never wanted to. "More?" she whispered.

This time, the nurse held a cup of water for her. Once she'd finished it off, she tried to sit up. The cuffs ran into vertical bars less than a foot up the railing. She tugged at them listlessly, frowning. "What happened?"

"You're alright now. Everything's being taken care of." Her mum's voice was pinched with desperate positivity. She patted Hermione's hand in a fluttery way, unable to meet her eyes.

The nurse offered a gentle explanation. "You're in the hospital, Ms. Granger. You've been through an ordeal. Don't worry if things are hazy for a while. The man who rescued you was a bit worse for the wear himself, after taking on…" She hesitated over the name. "Bellatrix Lestrange."

Hermione stiffened. Hearing that name, the wrong name, a dead name, said in the exact same tone of haunted fear that people still used to speak of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named made her lungs seize up, her eyes sting. Her mum fluttered at her hand again. "There there," she soothed, sounding far more like she was speaking to herself. "She's gone now. She can't hurt you."

"When he brought you in, he said you'd been hysterical, or near abouts, afraid she was coming back for you. I'm afraid his stunner packed a little more punch than he meant it to."

*What an understatement*, Hermione thought, feeling as though she'd been stampeded by a herd of hippogriffs at the bottom of her imaginary sand dune.

"He said to let him know when you woke up. Shall I fetch him?"

*Please don't*, Hermione wanted to say, but the nurse was already up and gone, humming to herself as she strode away down the aisle between two rows of otherwise empty cots.

Hermione and her mum stared at each other in silence. Hermione started crying.

"Oh, shh, it's alright." Her hand patted Hermione's forearm. "It's all going to be fine." She bumped the restraints. "They'll take these off soon enough."

Hermione stared down at the cuffs again, barely seeing them. "She's alive," she whispered. "I have to—"

"He said you'd say that. Honey, remember what the nurse said? You've been through an ordeal. You're confused. That… woman— She nearly killed you."

The nurse was halfway back down the aisle. A step behind followed Ron, shoulders hunched, hands deep in the pockets of his Auror's robes. Her mother followed her stare.

"This young man saved your life," she said, loud enough for all three to hear her.

Ron came to a halt beside her cot and rubbed the side of his head. "Eh, something like that. Though I am sorry for the… er…” He waved vaguely at Hermione. "Didn't mean to nail you so hard. Something was real off with me."
You'd been brainwashed, Hermione wanted to say, but her tongue wouldn't obey her.

He rubbed at his arm. "Look, I just gave my testimony. I told them you'd been… not yourself. But what you saw? That all really happened. She right blew up that place you were hiding with the lot of us in it. If I hadn't've grabbed you… If Iuristor hadn't forced her back into the fire while I got us out…"

"Who?" Hermione whispered.

"Huh?"

"Iuristor?" Hermione grasped frantically at the name.

"Oh, yeah, Aurelia Iuristor. That's the Auror that got her, in the end."

"Can… Could I see her?"

Ron shrugged, then shook his head and gave her a pat on the arm much like her mother's. Hermione flinched, wishing, for the first time since she'd woken, that the cuffs had been taken off. "Doubt it. She up and vanished right after we— We're… uh… not exactly supposed to kill anybody. Not without a war on. I think they'd make an exception for this one, but far as I can tell she's gone for good. Probably for the best. She was pretty old for, you know—" His chest puffed up, and Hermione felt a pulse of disgust. "—dark wizard hunting. Been saying for months she was just hanging on to finish the hunt." Ron shrugged. "Personal grudge or what have you. I was the one who got you out, anyhow." His proud little smile said he expected thanks, and it turned into a frown when none was forthcoming. "Look, all you need to know is it's done. You're off the hook. I saw you in there. She had you dead terrified." He shifted, shuffling his feet. "I know the feeling. We'll all sleep safer, now she's the dead one. Oi!"

He waved at a male orderly who had just entered through the far door.

"Could we get some keys here?"

As they waited, he turned back to Hermione, suddenly shifty-eyed. She could tell he had a question but couldn't find it anywhere in herself to make it easier for him to ask.

"Look…" He began, rubbing his elbow. "I've just got one question." His ears had turned pink. If Hermione had any more energy, she would have rolled her eyes. She could see her mum messing with some official-looking instruments on a tray beside them, pretending not to listen. "All that stuff. Um. You remember I saw you… that tea spot, with Andy— er, Andromeda? Then there was that whole mess, in the papers… Narcissa. Narcissa Malfoy." He said the name like he couldn't believe anyone would ever willingly associate with anyone attached to it. "And I just don't get how you—"

"Black," Hermione cut in. "Her name is Narcissa Black."

The ice in her tone would have done the woman whose name she'd invoked justice, and Ron stammered to a halt in the face of it.

"Y-yes, er, well…"

Her hard, angry stare did the rest. Whatever he'd intended to ask, whatever insinuation he'd have added, however he would have made some inevitable, bumbling transition into asking why she had rejected his advances, attacked him, and run away so many times… Hermione would give no excuses. She was unashamed.
The same could not be said of her mother. At the chilly silence between the two, she inserted herself once more into the conversation, showering Ron with the profusion of gratitude Hermione never would.

Not listening, wishing she were somewhere else, anywhere else, Hermione felt herself fading. Before anyone could come to unlock her, she'd fallen asleep again.

Two weeks later, Hermione stood outside the gates of Black Manor, almost as shaky as she'd been upon her first arrival.

"Nothing?" she asked quietly when Andromeda opened the door.

"Nothing."

She held a cloth-covered bird cage in one hand and a cat carrier in the other. With her sleeves pushed up to the elbows, Hermione could see a mess of scratches running up and down her forearms. "Catch him yourself, did you?"

Andromeda let out a strained laugh. "Someone had to. That beast is remarkably resistant to magic."

Hermione smiled, bending down to peer inside. "That's my Crookshanks," she cooed.

Andromeda made no move to relinquish the cages. Hermione had written ahead, sending a letter with her mum's owl that she hoped to come by and pick up her animals, and Andromeda had sent back her welcome and a time. Now, they stood in silence for a good minute. Neither knew what to say.

"Nothing?" It was Andromeda who asked this time, and Hermione shook her head. She felt tears coming on again and sniffed, struggling to hold them back.

Nothing.

She'd done a lot of nothing since she left the hospital, then a lot of yelling at her mum, then a lot of barging into places she didn't belong at the Ministry, begging for news of the mysterious Aurelia Iuristor, desperate to prove to herself Bellatrix was still alive. But Iuristor never manifested—not at the Ministry, not at the Manor, not in Mould-on-the-Wold, not anywhere. After a week of silence, Hermione was beginning to believe Bellatrix was as good as dead to her, if she hadn't ended up the real thing. She'd done too much crying since then, and she knew she was about to do it again.

Andromeda let go of the cages. Swaying gently, they hovered in the air beside her as she reached out, pulling an unprotesting Hermione into her arms. "She's out there," Andromeda whispered fiercely into her hair. "She's always going to have the last laugh."

The words were a little bitter, a little raw. As Hermione shuddered in her arms, she breathed in Andromeda's scent—the scent of an old manor, old magics, and a warm, late-summer day—and was thrown forcefully back into a broken Ministry lift on a terrible, awful day, when she'd first discovered the kindness of this stranger, when she'd first learned how Bellatrix Black had come laughing out of the final battle of the war, unscathed, to upend everyone's lives. A sad laugh of her own broke through the tears, and Andromeda allowed her to pull back to arms-length, sniffling. "She always will, won't she?"

Andromeda wiped at the corners of her own eyes with one finger as Hermione took up the handles of the cages. "You know you're always welcome here," she offered, hesitant but sincere.
"Thank you." Hermione worked to tuck the birdcage under one arm so she could dig out her wand. Once she had it, she looked back up into Andromeda's eyes. "I do."

She started back up the driveway, less shaky than before.

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Venze returned to Virginica Trum's cottage two nights later, her message— _Where are you?_ —still clutched in his talons.

Hermione was out of tears.

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By late autumn, she rarely passed a wanted poster on her way in to work. The papers still had too much to say about her, but she had all but stopped hearing whispers cut short when she came in in the mornings. Very few people still crossed to the opposite side of the hall when she walked by. Even fewer still seemed to think they had to tread on eggshells every time she was near.

The work was a godsend. Headmistress McGonagall had been just as welcoming as in Hermione's most optimistic daydreams, though things had changed a bit in her months away. Her project had sprouted wings and flown the coop; Modesty Davies, Order of Merlin, Third Class and McGonagall's former associate, had quit her position as the Muggle Studies Professor and moved into the Ministry. She'd been granted her own hallway on Level Four, in the "Being" wing of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

Despite protestations, Hermione had been given an office right beside her. She had her name on a little bronze plaque set into the wood. Below it: _Deputy Director of Elvish History and Welfare_. Despite her concern over how, exactly, she had gotten here, Hermione felt a little thrill every time she passed by.

It seemed there was some benefit in becoming an overnight sensation after surviving a kidnapping by the world's most notorious Death Eater and rescue at the hands of a war-hero superstar. The publicity swirling around her had been messy at best, but the Ministry seemed to have decided to make some sort of success story out of her. Unearthing her past as part of their cleaning staff during the war was just icing on the cake. Look at the transformation, look at the poetry: We've put her to work helping the house-elves.

Hermione decided, very intentionally, she wouldn't care about any of that. She dove into her work with single-minded determination. She'd interviewed every last elf in servitude at the Ministry in her first month. By the second, she had an intern named Brently—_An intern_, her! —who spent his every minute in the archives digging for tidbits of ancient elven history for Hermione to devour. Modesty was an inspiration, a whirlwind of round, ruddy cheeks and short blonde curls and happy, patterned robes who firmly disallowed Hermione to call her anything but her first name. She thought Hermione's discovery was the biggest thing since the cure for dragon pox and never hesitated to say it aloud to anyone listening.

If Hermione could only stop acting mad at the least convenient occasions, things would be… good.

Things _were_ good.

Sure, she had gone so many months being called nothing but 'Pet' that she had actually gotten slow answering to her own name, and it wasn't as though there were an abundance of Hermiones to pick up her slack, but always having to be called twice to get her attention wasn't the end of the world.

Sure, one stack of transcriptions dropped off with Modesty met with a profusely grateful, "Bless you,
Hermione—someday, someone's going to love you to death," had made her throat go horrifyingly tight and embarrassingly dry, but at least Modesty wasn't one to comment when her associates fled the room without goodbyes.

Alright, sure. Things weren't perfect.

She was okay. Better than. Maybe the best she'd ever been. The things she didn't have couldn't matter. They never had before; no reason to start now.

She had a salary. She made friends. Soon, she had an apartment. An open little brick place in Muggle London just on the right side of the wall to avoid the cameras and quick-quotes quills. The side of the city where people did silly things like rush around with newspapers over their heads when they couldn't just pop home in the ever-present yet somehow still unexpected rain; where cars parked in front of the loading dock and racked up so many little yellow tickets the whole building began to reek before the truck could get to the rubbish bins, but it was hers. It was home. Some days, she would get in so tired she dropped her keys three times before giving in and charming open the lock, but tired from throwing herself fully into something she wanted to do. Tired but accomplished. Tired in a normal, human way.

Then, on a good day—it was always on a good day, when she walked the whole way home, when she wandered—she would see one. Maybe on the backside of a lamppost, maybe in a window where the worst sunset glare had kept it hidden, maybe on the inside of a trash can lid, but one or two of old wanted posters had escaped the purge. Bellatrix's face would stare at her with that gaping, shrieking maw, and Hermione would empty all over again, watching her soul drain into the ink like the cold, leeching lure of a Dementor's kiss.

She kept one—just one—folded in two in a shoebox in the very back corner of her closet.

_Lovesick_ her brain loved to scold her, to taunt her, when she never dared think the first half of the word alone.

She had gotten very good at telling her brain to _shut it._

Nine times out of ten, it worked. The other times came at night, dreams she wished she could forget when she woke, dreams that left her gasping and shaking and reaching for things that weren't there.

Her next-door neighbor knocked once at three in the morning, wrapped in a thick red bathrobe far too warm for the unairconditioned night. "That's an unholy racket," said the round, red woman with round, red hair. "Everything alright, luv?"

"Oh, fine, fine," Hermione stammered, her dream crystallizing in her mind. Behind her eyes, Bellatrix screamed, first in pain, then in anger, shouting "You did this! You did this to me!" And Hermione had sobbed back, hitting her chest, kicking her like an angry child— "How could I have done this to you? You haven't let me do a thing!" —and definitely kicking her bedboard against the wall.

_Lovesick_, her brain taunted again.

"Sick in the head," Hermione muttered under her breath, remembering only once the words had already been said that she still had a midnight guest.

Her cherry-cheery neighbor no longer looked so neighborly and concerned. Or, if she did, it was for Hermione's sanity.

"Just talking to myself!" she blurted. An explanation for her outburst now? For her midnight brawls
with her sheets and walls?

Yes, Hermione thought as the woman backed away. *If I could only stop acting mad, everything would be just peachy.*

"I sure hope this Thuffts fellow wants to fund Elf research."

Hermione sighed. She liked Brently. Really, she did, but he had a terrible habit of talking about the news out loud whenever he came in in the morning. Being informed was wonderful. Being updated as to the status of their Minister's record-high unpopularity and the horse-race to unseat him every day at 8:45 sharp, however, was endlessly unamusing. When the unseating of Shacklebolt had happened, Hermione had dared to imagine that might be the end of things, but the new Minister seemed just as capable of drawing Brently's attention and ire.

"Don't get me wrong. I wanted a change as much as the next bloke, but I'd also like to keep my Level Four hall desk, and our new Minister seems like a bit of a kook."

She could hear him shuffling around in the hallway, unpeeling his winter layers with soft thuds and the occasional spatter of snowmelt. She'd told him they could figure out a way to get a second desk into her less-than-spacious office, but he'd argued he spent half his time in the basement anyway, and besides, someone of her newfound importance needed a front-desk-fellow to wave in her never-ending parade of nonexistent visitors. To be honest, she preferred the hallway solution, even if Modesty did manage to trip over him at least two times a week, always with a loud exclamation of "Brently! Dear me!"

It wasn't Hermione's fault that not everyone had her talent for walking down a crowded hallway with her nose in a book and her toes unstubbed.

"Brently? Do you have Corner's *Third Treatise on Elves, Fairies, and Fire?*"

Hermione frowned when sudden silence met her request. She stopped shuffling books and glanced at her calendar. "Brently?" Had he gone to the basement already? She couldn't fault the initiative, but she really needed that book. "I can't seem to find it any—"

"Y-you have a visitor?"

Hermione looked up, frown deepening. Brently's tall, dense frame was blocking her doorway. He had his back to her, one hand holding the door jam in a death grip. His arm was shaking.

"Boo."

Brently fled.

Hermione froze. One word, one quick, quiet scare—

She knew that voice as well as her own.

"You can't be here."

Yet here she was, right there in the hallway, like a photograph from the day she'd left. Her curls were a few inches longer, the heels on her boots few inches higher, but otherwise unchanged.

Undisguised.

"How are you here?" Hermione whispered. She was shaking. She could feel her fingers crushing the
corner of her calendar between them but couldn't make herself let go.

Bellatrix grinned. "Miss me?" She prowled closer, crossing the threshold into Hermione's office, the office Hermione could still barely think of as her own, despite her name on the door, the plaque Bellatrix was trailing a single finger over as she stepped in. "Remember that statute of limitations?"

"What?" The word was little more than a breath of confusion.

"It's up."

As Bellatrix closed the distance between her and the desk, Hermione shook her head. There was very little distance. It never had been a very large office. Now, it felt positively shrunken. "How—"

"New Minister, new policy. Thinks the climate of perpetual witch-hunt, please do forgive the pun, has stretched law enforcement and—" She aimlessly waved a hand. "—budgetary concerns too far." She popped a hip over the edge of Hermione's desk to sit on it, leaning down so she could play with a strand of Hermione's hair while she spoke. "The Aurors are an overstuffed mess with an inflated sense of self-importance. Cultivating a culture of fear searching for a few buggers no one's even sure weren't just Imperiused all along is a waste, crimes against pure-bloods are at a record high, the economy is in shambles, the Galleon hasn't been this weak against the pound in a generation, all the stuff the politicals just live to pretend to care about." She giggled delightedly. "Don't I sound just like them?" The grin on her face could only be described as shit-eating.

"You did this," Hermione said. She knew she should be feeling… appalled? Relieved? Scared? Instead, her body was still shaking, but she felt strangely numb. "You did something. How did you—"

"What, did you think it'd be hard? Hard for an infamous Death Eater to find a sympathizer in the government? Look at who Britain has put in power in my lifetime alone. Then look the Ministry. Self-serving moneybags. Doddering old fools only concerned with their family legacy. War hawks and traitors. The Death Eaters are hardly the worst of the lot. And that’s before you start looking at their drinking buddies. You think there’s a power-hungry wizard out there who’d let a coffee meeting with Bellatrix Lestrange slip through his grubby little fingers?"

No, Hermione realized. She didn’t.

"Oh, pet…"

"You don't get to call me—"

"Because, let me be perfectly clear, you're working beside a lot more ex-Death Eaters than you know."

Reeling, Hermione changed tactics. "You killed someone," she whispered. Her voice gathered strength. "You faked your own death! That isn't war crimes; that was just months ago! You'll be locked—"

"Let's just say one Ronald Bilius Weasley is getting in all sorts of trouble for telling everyone I was dead." Widened eyes played with the mockery of innocence in her voice. "Poor boy had revenge fantasies, wanted to be the one to kill me himself, even use his own coworker and his oh-so-conveniently broken wand to cover it up! Thing is, just like his mother…"

"...he couldn't do it," Hermione breathed, catching on to the story, stunned and horrified by the brilliant plan beginning to sketch itself into clarity.
"All they had to do was dig a little deeper under his official story and voila! There it was, the whole gruesome affair, laid out in his thick skull like a catastrophe in three acts playing in the West End." She took up a dramatic pout. "Me, doe-eyed and tragic at the point of his wand. Him, spouting two very incriminating words. One flash of a lackluster Killing Curse, one embarrassed, poorly-aimed stunner, one tragic explosion, one Aurelia Iuristor, dead in the resulting fire, and one poor, deeply troubled Ronald Weasley, a little bit cracked in the war, unable to admit his failure, needing to reclaim the glory of his one triumphant moment in the spotlight of the Boy Who Lived… without any of the consequences of having been the one to bring about my end. He had a corpse at hand, and even if it wasn't the right one…"

"You put that in his head. Everything you did to that body. You made him think…” Hermione trailed off, at a loss for words.

Bellatrix, however, was still going strong. "Of course not. I, just like all the other big baddies in Britain, have been laying low and proving my good intentions, just minding my own business and keeping out of the way."

"I doubt that very much."

Bellatrix laughed. "Yes, well. I don't need you to believe me. You're minding a desk. The man minding Britain believes whatever I tell him to. That's all that matters."

"We elected someone who just… let you… is letting you get away with—"

"—Oh, the new Minister hasn't got a clue, not yet. I did my work with care. It's the ones whispering in his ears that have secured my ninth life. Yes, yes," she said, sounding utterly carefree. "I got a bit… flashy, during the war, in my prime, but you should know by now…” Her fingers dropped Hermione's hair and trailed down her cheek. Hermione jerked back in her chair, having forgotten just how close Bellatrix was, having forgotten there was a woman attached to the words. "...I work just as well behind the scenes. Move a few people here, plant an idea there — Britain's turned against wizard prisons! Britain doesn't like the Aurors! There aren't even any Death Eaters left! Why, with one little wiggle of his quill, I'm a free witch!" She cackled, full-bodied and brim-full with triumph. "Be proud, pet. You gave me half of my plan."

Hermione remembered wandlight, a crumpled newspaper, a Minister meeting his end, a resistance brewing…

"Once the world finds out, which should be right… about…” She snapped her fingers. "…now…”

While Hermione sat, still stunned, a great many things happened all at once. A pasty-faced Brently rounded the corner, finger pointed directly at Bellatrix. A woman in a green, fur-trimmed skirt-suit and glaringly red spectacles skidded along a half-pace behind him, practically pressed up against his rear in her twitching eagerness to— Beside her head, a large, floating camera went off with a brilliant flash of white light. —capture this surreal moment. Before the air could clear from the camera's puff of green-tinted smoke, Bellatrix kicked Hermione's office door closed with the flat of her foot, never even leaving the top of the desk.

"...it will ensure his downfall," she finished, as though none of the last twenty seconds had happened at all. "I'd set the vote of no confidence for… oh… Tuesday. Give it the weekend to stew. Let that little beetle turn the news cycle sour and bring public opinion right along with it, but have it done before anyone get to rioting in the streets. Thuffs' will be the shortest tenure as Minister since Mondolius Morden grabbed the shears of the Fates from the Department of Ministries for his ribbon cutting."
Bellatrix sounded positively gleeful.

"Why, though?" Hermione asked. "Why put him in office just to throw him out again? And why her?" Hermione added, gaining steam. "Why did you need to become that… that Ministry woman, if all you were going to do was tell some toady to save you from prison?"

As Hermione's voice rose, Bellatrix made a face. "I don't want Thuffs in office. What an uninspired, angry little man. I just needed him to get rid of Kingsley and do something stupid. He was a sacrifice. As for my dear, darling, departed Aurelia..." Bellatrix offered another wicked smile. "I had to ferret out my enemies, of course. Nothing better than wearing the skin of an old foe who'd just become a hero on the run to see who would open their doors to my murderess." Her eyes went cold. "They shalln't be a problem any longer."

The hint of relief Hermione had felt at seeing Bellatrix was swallowed by a burst of numbing cold. Hermione flashed back to the hotel bedroom, the body, bearing witness to the crime Bellatrix had claimed she didn't even want to commit.

"Would they have killed you?"

"Hmm?"

"Did—These people, these enemies. Did they make an attempt on your life?"

"They won't, now."

Hermione tried to say something else. She couldn't. She couldn't think what to say. She was suffocating.

"Ta-da," Bellatrix finished softly, spreading her hands in a graceful glide and bringing them back together to cup Hermione's cheeks. "My plans, as ever, are without flaw."

Bellatrix's penetrating stare seemed to be pulling the lights around Hermione's office into their depths, darkening the air. Her fingers against Hermione's skin suddenly felt heavier, thick with an invitation Hermione had not intended to extend.

"I...I..."

With a loud screech of displeased metal, the door handle jiggled. Both witches turned to stare. Hermione really had been meaning to take some oil to that, or at least a wand, but she never had any reason to close her door anyway…

The handle turned.

"Your door doesn't lock?" asked Bellatrix with disgust.

With a surprisingly growl-like huff, Hermione stood, knocking over her rudimentary desk chair as she stumbled around it, the desk, and Bellatrix alike, slamming her back against the never-closed door hard enough that the green-heeled foot just sneaking through the six-inch gap withdrew with a rodent-like squeal.

Both hands pressed flat to the door behind her, Hermione breathed in, counting to ten, then out again, getting all the way to three before she burst. "Why are you here!"

Bellatrix cocked her head. "You don't have a towel, do you? She's just going to crawl under the door."
At the nonsense still emerging from Bellatrix's mouth, Hermione felt herself beginning to tremble with anger. "Explain yourself. Now."

Bellatrix summoned Hermione's rain-cloak from between the back of her chair and the floor. A second flick of her wand sent it squirming around Hermione's feet, plugging itself into the crack between the floorboards and the bottom of the door. If Hermione wasn't mistaken, she thought she could hear a second tinier, shriller squeal of rage.

"She really is a beetle," Bellatrix asserted with a shrug. "I wasn't being facetious. Had to live with her for seven years while she tried to figure out how I'd become an Animagus. The day we graduated, I finally helped her out. She's useful, the bug-eyed harpy. Every now and then. But very, very bad for one's privacy."

Hermione did not care about the reporter Bellatrix had lured to her doorstep. She didn’t care about beetles. She might have, on a different day, cared about Bellatrix's Hogwarts roommates, but this was not that day. Today, after half a year of silence, half a year of wondering if she'd ever be able to feel like a normal human being again after everything she'd been through with the witch now before her, Hermione wanted answers, or she wanted to be left to her normalcy. Alone.

"Look, if you just came to brag, well, mission accomplished. You can leave now."

Eying her appraisingly, Bellatrix picked up her paperweight, a little brass cauldron that doubled as an inkwell and had been an office warming gift from Modesty. "You've gotten bossy since they gave you a desk." She exchanged the paperweight for the embroidery-wrapped quill beside it, a birthday gift from Modesty. It was hard to believe she'd had only one birthday since she met Bellatrix Black. "I like it."

The temptation to see if she could growl as angrily as Bellatrix could was growing by the second, but Bellatrix seemed to see the murder in her eyes. She set down the quill in the cauldron. "I did this for you," she said. "Tried to do it for me, first, but I just wasn't inspired. I tried to make a list of people to bring to ruin, places I might seek out a figurehead, petty conflicts to stoke into violence..." She sighed, sliding down from the desk. "It's dull." She stepped closer, stroking Hermione's cheek, her touch somewhere between a caress and a scrape. Her nails had gotten long again. "I've seen where power is," she murmured. All of a sudden, her quiet seemed to shimmer with anger, and Hermione shrank a little against the wall. Her finger drew a sharp line down from Hermione's chin, stopping between her breasts. "You have it. For all your dirty blood, for all your fumbling attempts to get under my skin..." She inhaled, deep and slow. "You've done it."

Hermione had lost her grip on anger. She was shaking.

"It's like you were made for me," Bellatrix breathed. "Made for me to destroy myself." She laughed. "Oh, how I hate you for it."

"Then leave," Hermione said, trying to convince herself her throat wasn't tight, her eyes weren't stinging. "Just go."


"Oh," said Hermione.

"Indeed," said Bellatrix, smiling with sharp, white teeth. "I have to have you." The words were matter-of-fact, almost apologetic. "But if I'd run off with you you'd have won anyway. Because I'd have lost everything else. I lose... poorly." She flattened her hand against Hermione's chest. "I do
not play house. I do not cower among sheep. I do not hide." Her hand slid down Hermione's stomach, moved to cup her waist. "I sit gladly only at the right hand of power," she breathed against Hermione's skin. "I will bask in yours," she whispered, kissing the shell of her ear. "While I have them lapping out of my palm."

It took Hermione too long to push her away. "No."

Bellatrix laughed, catching her wrists in a very firm grip. "No?" She pulled the backs of Hermione's hands up against the wood of the door. "You don't want a grand, spacious office? A bottomless purse for your little elf studies? A nice, big desk—" She squeezed Hermione's wrists tighter. "—for me to fuck you over?"

"No!" Hermione cried out. "I don't want your... your twisted, scheming, nasty plans anywhere near this!" She yanked her hands free, burying them under her arms. "I'm doing something good, here! I've been fine without you!"

To Hermione's complete and utter shock, a look of pain flickered across Bellatrix's face. She gulped, scrambling to gather up the shards of her own anger. "You're better off without me," she managed. "Playing politics. I... I'm all wrong for that." She kicked her heel back against the door. Thud. Thud. Thud. "We're back where we always were, Bellatrix. You don't want me. You want... something." She shook her head. "And somehow I've gotten all mixed up in it. But it's not... It's not this."

Bellatrix's stare had grown keen again as Hermione fell back on her tried and true: You won't ask me to want it if I can just convince you you don't want it in the first place.

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"That's not enough!" Hermione gasped. She clamped her lips together, furious for letting those needy, revealing words sneak through between her swords. All of a sudden, she wanted to cry. "You left! You left me there, half naked in the middle of a bed in the middle of London with a dead body and Ronald f-fucking Weasley!" That her voice broke mid-curse failed to surprise. "You left me and went after... this! You want to... to run the Ministry into the ground, to make everyone cower in fear knowing you can't be defeated, that no one can touch you? Well, enjoy it! Enjoy your chaos! I'm sure you've got the rest planned, yes? Who's next? Who's my intern going to tell me is running the building come Tuesday, hmm? A secret Death Eater? Someone who wants to punish the elves who've been brave enough to talk to me? Someone who'll fire every Mudblood in the building? Fantastic! Congratulations, you've done it! If every Auror two floors up doesn't barge in here in five minutes to—to kill you, then you've won!" Hermione clamped her eyes shut, fighting angry, impotent tears. "But you don't get to win me," she gasped, fighting down her breath, struggling to keep her words clear. "None of this is about me. You don't want me. I don't belong in—in your world."

That Bellatrix had stayed silent through all of her words was enough to make Hermione crack open her eyes. She found her close but not touching, her eyes glowing with a fierce, internal light. "I'll make you a new world."

Hermione shook her head numbly. Bellatrix caught her face between her palms, stilling her slowly, then guiding her chin up and down again, a child's bargain for a yes.

"Whatever world you want," she said. "You want me to put Weasley in office? I'll do it."

A single burst of laughter left her in a sob. Bellatrix reached for her, but she batted her hands away.
Bellatrix relented with a sigh. "Why can't I want you?" Her eyes slid down from Hermione's face, lingering over her lips, her waist, her hips. Everything was all-but-hidden in her work robes, still her eyes glided back up slowly, so slowly, making promises of everything Hermione wasn't letting her do with her hands. "I love destruction," she whispered.

Hermione's skin flushed all over: cheeks, throat, wrists. Made for me to destroy myself. The words rang in her ears until she could hear nothing else. She could hear herself all over again. Lovesick. Sick in the head, never willing to let the word out on its own. Was it better or worse, that Bellatrix could say the four letters, so long as they weren't tethered to a person, or a name?

Slowly, Bellatrix's voice signaled through the noise. "But this has never been about your—" She put a finger against the corner of her own lips, tilting her head into it. "—insecurity. Every time you beg me not to want you…” She laughed, as though she could dismiss the whole idea as a jest. "No, this is about trust." She drewled the word, sliding into that perfect, dismissive, aristocratic drone Hermione had come to recognize as something of a shield, a defensive mockery or her own origin story, wrapped around her like a leather belt, poised to snap out as a weapon. "I broke it, I know," she sighed. "Terrible of me, really. And just when you were starting to believe every other word that mad Death Eater said, hmm?" she finished merrily.

"You're not—" Hermione started, then stopped, stunned at what she'd been about to say. You're not a Death Eater. Had she ever thought something so naïve? When had she decided Bellatrix was… something else, anything else but that?

A long, long time ago, that sneaky, infuriating part of her brain whispered, gentle and low, like she could sneak it into her own thoughts if she tried hard enough.

"We're both a little mad," she said instead, painfully pleased to earn a short, real laugh. She looked at her, then. Really looked. Past the trappings of bygone days, past the intentional display of temptation, past the thin, red-painted lips and darkened, invitation eyes. There was darkness below them, too. The lines in the corners looked deeper. Her paleness bordered on death. When was the last time she'd slept? Where had she been, between whispers and machinations? Was anyone making her breakfast, plying her with pumpkin bread, reminding her to step out of her cave once in a while? How many cereal bars could one eat before meeting a cardboard-box deprivation-end?

I miss cooking for you. I miss our mornings together, the best and worst of them. I miss your sinister, singular beauty.

"I… I do trust you, you know." She couldn't not say that much. "But, Bella, I—"

"Don't we owe it to ourselves?"

Hermione fell silent, instantly recognizing her own words on Bellatrix's lips.

"At least a chance?" she cajoled.

Feeling that awful, dangerous, no-good tug behind her ribs, Hermione admitted softly, "I never think you're listening to me."

Bellatrix shook her head. Hermione could hear the silly, pet in the motion, but Bella didn't say it. Instead, she answered, sincerity laced with mock-indignation, "I've kept the lot of it." Her voice gentled. "I like when you say things. I like the things you say."

"Then listen to me now," Hermione pressed, reaching for a strength and conviction she didn't feel. "You can't keep killing people. You can't. Promise me that. Promise you'll stop. I won't stay… I
won't be… I won't do this if you…" She couldn't say it. She had to admit the truth. "If I'm just going
to lose you again. You know given one excuse they'll lock you away. You know it's true."

Bellatrix studied her. "Who said I've been killing anyone?"

Hermione blinked. "But, you just said—"

"I've told you. I don't enjoy killing, anyway." She ran a finger down Hermione's nose before she
could pull away. "You gave me a different sort of off switch." She blinked, her eyes went shimmery,
golden-filmed, and Hermione felt a tug at the center of her being, a tease, a pull. "I've just been…
flipping it."

"Their magic?" Hermione breathed. Somewhere, distantly, she realized she should probably be
terrified. She had given Bellatrix an indiscriminate power over other wizards and witches that hadn't
been seen in the history of magic-kind. And, unlike her, Bellatrix was not afraid to put it to use. "But
that's—"

"Torture?" Bellatrix cut in, sounding delighted. "Oh pet, I know. And in that, I can promise you.
They would have done far worse to me."

That shouldn't have been better; Hermione should have been terrified, horrified, and yet she wasn't.
She was instead, indescribably, unconscionably relieved. Relieved that the answer was at least
something other than death. It was cruelty, it was inhumane, but it was a torture Bellatrix had lived
herself, had survived until she had paid enough penance that the two of them had been able to undo
it. It could be undone. If mistakes had been made, if Bellatrix had robbed of power some who were
underserving of her ire, someone would set it right again. Perhaps one day, she would understand
enough about her own magic to be the one to do it, and if not, there was always a certain
headmistress of a certain prestigious wizarding school who she now worked rather closely with, who
had a better sense of proper justice and conscience than Hermione did any day, and who owed her a
few favors, after all of this.

"It's a heady thing, this magic of yours," Bellatrix added, almost an afterthought.

Hermione shivered again. "It isn't mine."

"Ah, but it is." Hermione felt it again, that tug inside her, and felt her chest begin to fill with warmth.
"How do you think I got it like that?" She snapped her fingers. "Why do you think you couldn't
even try keep me out? How do you think I've kept an eye on you? I can feel you. You're still there."

Hermione gaped, comprehension dawning. Fingers unspooling in the wind. Little red flowers sewn
across a field of vines. In her haste to disguise Bellatrix's magic without changing it, without
destroying anything, she'd seeded it with her own. And she'd known. She'd felt it, a bit of herself
missing, an ache that wasn't all in her chest or her head, a stretched-thin line like water running out of
a pitcher which Bellatrix's presence had filled again, all at once, the moment she'd walked in the
door. "I, I could undo that," she whispered. "Now that you aren't hiding, I— I never meant to…
There's no need…"

"Don't you dare," Bellatrix breathed, eyes suddenly hard as nails. Hermione stiffened. "I want you
there," she murmured, and there it was again, like a hand stroking over a part of her body she didn't
have, warm fingers playing over her magic. "Yes, I'll be keeping that."

"Oh," Hermione said. The tension was leaving her body as quickly as it had come. She didn't much
want to argue anymore. It seemed there were some… unforeseen benefits… to doing stupid things
like leaving a bit of your magic inside another person. It was all… very nice, really. Like curling up
in front of a fire, except the fire seemed to be curling up around her.

"But enough of that, yes?" Bellatrix murmured, eyes still a little bit golden, but very, very dark underneath.

All Hermione's thoughts would do was echo. Yes. Enough. Enough.

This time, when she leaned in, Hermione did lean back, but not very far. The door was right there, after all, and Hermione realized she didn't want a bigger office. Small spaces were perfect. Perfect excuses, perfect permissions, the perfect way to lose a hunt without losing her dignity.

Bellatrix twined her fingers in Hermione's hair — "God, pet. I've wanted…" — and kissed her.

Hermione felt her entire body rising into her, falling into lips and juniper and—yes, ash, the safe part of fire, all the wilds of a forest wrapped in her arms, tasting like danger, feeling like home.

"Yes," Bellatrix kept whispering between kisses. Yes, yes, yes breathed against her lips, into her mouth. Hermione's warning bells sang it back to her: yes, yes, you've been dying without this!

When they parted, Hermione did her best to look very serious, very composed, despite every bit of her skin and her magic being awake and alight and practically singing. It must have worked, because Bellatrix looked instantly nervous, concerned, searching Hermione's eyes. "What is it?"

Hermione crossed her arms. "Don't you dare make Ron Minister of Magic."

"Oh. That." Bellatrix smirked. "He was never on my shortlist."

Hermione stuck out her chin. "And if I want to be Minister?"

After a frozen moment, Bellatrix threw back her head and laughed. She reached out, spun Hermione into her arms, spun them down against her desk, and kissed her until she was afraid her head would pop right off, her skin would set her research up in flames.

"Give me… fifteen years," Bellatrix hissed against her cheek, hot breath at the corner of her lips. "Fifteen years, pet, and it's yours."

Laughing to the point of tears, Hermione pulled her into another kiss.

She almost believed her, too.

The new amnesty policy was just as unpopular as Bellatrix predicted. Thuffts was out on the scheduled Tuesday, and Bellatrix sat in the center of the Wizengamot for seven straight days of hearings, playing the strings of their own unretractable new law like a finely tuned fiddle leading a funeral march.

Hermione was called to testify. She stared at Bellatrix through every question, every word, and said only what she had said before, when they'd called her confused, whispered about trauma, gazed at her with pity in their eyes: She had not been held against her will, and she did not fear for her life. Narcissa sent only a written statement: I was not there. Andromeda would not look at Bellatrix during her own testimony, but hers was the most moving all the same. "She obeyed the terms of your sentence until it nearly killed her. Then she saved all our lives."

In the end, it mattered little what they said. Bellatrix, a tier of her own among the other third-rate Death Eaters who had come crawling out of the woodwork to celebrate their sudden clemency, had
already been pardoned. A wringing of hands over posthumous miscalculations aside, there was nothing they could do.

New posters went up across the city—

**WANTED**

*Bellatrix Black*

*The People's Undesirable No. One*

It seemed no one had found a new picture to use, either. Regardless of Bellatrix's careful incapacitation of her most formidable former enemies, new ones sprouted to life overnight. Quickly, a vigilante organization christened themselves Weasley's Angels and set about trying to see her dead. *God's Justice!* claimed their rallying cry to cold-blooded murder. *For the Ministry has none!*

The Weasley in question sat in a locked wing in St. Mungo's. He was to undergo treatment, therapy, and be released without charges brought against him, but he would not serve the Aurors again. Hermione wondered if, when the day came, he would decide to begin leading his ready-made army of angels.

Luckily, the both of them had gotten very, very good at laying low. Her apartment proved small and impractical, but Bellatrix was able finagle the deed to one of the smaller, countryside Black family properties from Narcissa with little protest. It was a place designed for protecting secrets and vacations away from the public eye, the perfect place for Bellatrix to make her machinations and manipulations of a dizzyingly ruined political sphere as no one else could, and it came with a long, sloping backyard that ran down an acre of green-brown grassy hillside before dropping off into a rocky cliff overlooking the sea.

The grass soon became a garden.

Hermione did her best to keep away from it all. The papers, the noise, the drama. Everyone had seen that Bellatrix's first destination upon her return to the living had been Hermione's door, but no one much knew what to make of it, and no one who mattered had asked. Modesty's only request was that a bit more care be taken with the top of her desk and the irreplaceable records kept upon it. Brently just begged for no other unannounced visitors taller than his waist.

With her name on everyone's lips, Bellatrix found it more challenging to play the games she wanted, to steer herself into particular echelons of power, but she assured Hermione it was far simpler than it had been to win the right hand of the Dark Lord—just much slower. It wasn't difficult to make chaos in bureaucracy, but directing the fires she set to burn only where she wanted had proved… less easy. Luckily, she didn't seem to mind making a larger mess than she'd planned. She had always been good at the politics of war; she would soon be unstoppable at the war of politics. Feared, reviled, but unstoppable.

As long as she kept it out of the Level Four Being wing, Hermione could pretend she never caught a whiff of smoke. There's was an uneasy peace, a peace only kept through a careful allowance of chaos, a tight budget of war, but Hermione had given up searching inside herself for anger or indignation. Bellatrix had earned a little destruction. If anyone deserved it, it was the black-cloaked, tall-hatted, arrow-nosed Ministry men who made enough of a mess of the world on their own, and who finally had someone watching who would make them pay for it through their teeth.

They had only one visitor to their half-made home. The headmistress of Hogwarts arrived unannounced on a Wednesday morning, exchanged a few friendly, work-related words with
Hermione over tea, then politely insisted Bellatrix join her for a word in another room.

Bellatrix returned alone in a thundercloud of grumbles and scowls. At Hermione's interrogation, she admitted, "She knows more than she should." While Hermione tried to wheedle out what it might be that she knew and why that would be a problem, Bellatrix clammed up, tight-lipped and prickly. Finally, almost two hours later, when Hermione's exasperation was turning into real worry, Bellatrix announced, "I don't appreciate her insinuation that I would ever put you in danger."

And that had been that.

While they existed in separate spheres of work and within their little bubble of secrecy, everything felt, Hermione realized, much like a honeymoon. They had a beautiful space to leave their mark on, a space that still seemed, to her, more like a place for a long vacation (or a job keeping house) than a home. Where were the winding back-alleyways and water-stained bathroom ceilings, the people wandering by at three a.m., calling drunken greetings to strangers and friends alike? Where were the dirt-filled roof-rafters and underwater-blue lights, the perpetual deprivation of sunshine? Where was the struggle?

It was only in strange minutes alone, looking at her own happiness as though from a great distance, that she questioned it. Otherwise, she admitted, the honeymoon surrealness of it all was, well, wonderful. With somewhere else to take out her temper and painful-playful tricks, Bellatrix's teasing had Hermione on edge at home in only the most delicious ways. It was silly things, mostly. Her particular favorite seemed to be turning Hermione's clothes invisible when she least expected it. She could still feel the jeans on her legs, the blouse rolled up around her elbows, her work-robes swishing around her ankles… And Bellatrix quickly became appallingly adept at sneaking it up on her, witching her while she was lying on her stomach reading in bed, while she was washing dishes and gazing out the window towards the cold, gray sea, while she was practicing dueling (and suddenly found herself performing much better against a distracted Bellatrix than she ever did otherwise) … With a well-timed spell, Hermione might go twenty minutes before Bellatrix's inevitably straying eyes would give up the game.

There were less playful things, too. Bellatrix was learning to do things with her magic… to do things in her magic, that would have Hermione gasping, begging, and screaming for hours.

Sometimes, she even let Hermione return the favor.

Yes. Things were wonderful.

It took half of spring for the Angels to find her at home. Hermione watched the wards glitter and glow, a muffled firework display through a golden haze of safety. Hermione asked Bellatrix to wait, told her she'd sent Venze to fetch the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol, but they never came. Unlike the rest of the world, their government knew exactly who lived in every secluded bubble on the periphery of their world. They knew exactly who they would not come to save.

So they went themselves, two witches against an avenging army of round-cheeked youths and stubby-chinned men with the singular desire to see Bellatrix dead, and if Bellatrix killed any of them, she didn't let Hermione see it.

She knew sending them home alive would be the end of her relative peace. It was one thing to have the world see Bellatrix in her office; it was another thing for the world to see her in Bellatrix's summerhouse. Sure enough, the paparazzi joined Weasley's Angels on their second day of siege, and Hermione worked from home while Bellatrix had her fun, sneaking vines through the wards to trip them, upend them, head-over-heels, while little tendrils took over the camera buttons, turning lenses to click and flash above their owners flailing on the ground.
Two days after the last of them had been sent packing, a tired owl arrived with a letter for Hermione. She recognized the bird at once, having seen him bearing the deed for the house, and found herself taking it from him with a warm curiosity that surprised her. At some level, Hermione had thought she might always greet signs of Narcissa with shaky hands and a hollow nervousness in the pit of her stomach. Instead, it seemed some wounds really had healed with time.

My dear Hermione,

Revolution has swept you to the center of the world. I would visit, but oh, it's so nice to be out of orbit. I think, somehow, you would be lonely here. When I realized you were still at her side, I was dizzy with relief. Don't be afraid of this, wherever it goes. My sister will survive it, and she'll be sure you do, too.

I'm happy for you. You didn't let the world make you hard, and you haven't forgotten how to trust.

Those words echoed in Hermione's head like a long-forgotten dream, something she hadn't heard in a way she could remember, but something that had become part of her all the same.

Bella, if you're reading this over her shoulder, keep her safe.

"Are you reading this over my shoulder?" Hermione asked softly.

"No," Bellatrix huffed, but Hermione felt the breath against the side of her neck, perfectly aligned for silent peeping.

All my heart to the both of you,

Narcissa.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

We've reached the end, so I'm breaking a personal note-at-the-bottom rule for goodbyes. I'd rather say my piece, then leave you with the story. It's been quite an adventure. This fic went through a lot in six years - six years of writing styles, six years of character growth, six years of being scribbled everywhere from class notes to the backs of grocery lists and recorded in cringe-worthy audio memos on fourteen hour solo road trips - and it never would have gone past chapter one without some incredible people. I'm quitting before I begin trying to actually thank each of them by name, but for a few eleventh-hour dedications -

To Preciceclu, for starting it,
To Kraken, for finishing it,
To Boss, for subscribing and printing it out even though you'll never read it (it's all for the best),
To Gruff and the Plant Plant, for putting up with the bulk of the rants,
To Nin, Levertov, and Millay; for posthumous inspiration,
To superfluouskeys, greyella, beforeyouspeak, and pocketsfullofart; for the living, breathing kind,
To my readers over at the dot net, for coming along on the initial journey,
And to those of you just reading it for the first time…

I hope you all find your mad, perfect place in life, and the people who fit in it.

All my heart,
Zarrene / Menz

"It's been eight years, Bella. We should go."

Bellatrix continued to glower at the fancy roll of parchment in Hermione's hands. "It's too dangerous."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "When has that ever stopped you before? We went back to the Manor five years ago for your favorite mint plant, for Merlin's sake. This is your sister's wedding."

Bellatrix's scowl deepened. "The invitation didn't even come from her. She doesn't want me there."

Reluctantly, Hermione nodded. "True. I recognized Narcissa's owl, but you and Andy are going to have to talk again someday." She set down the invitation and slid around the table until she could bump into Bella's side. "You know how much it would mean to Narcissa if you were the one to reach out."

"No."

Hermione slid an arm around the grumpy witch's waist, leaning in to press quick, cajoling kisses up the column of her neck. "Pretty please?"
Bellatrix grumbled.

"I won't even complain when you make all sorts of inappropriate comments about us…" Hermione added, her secret weapon.

Bellatrix's grumble turned into a growl. "And when Andy decides to hex me into oblivion? Will you complain then?"

"No," Hermione said with a giggle. "Though if you disfigure her on her wedding day in response, I might have a harsh word or two."

A reluctant smile flickered about Bella's lips. "What about a bit of a polyjuice game?"

Hermione shook her head. "No need. The entire guest list can be trusted; Narcissa promised."

Bellatrix's smile widened. "Oh, don't ruin my fun. One hair, and I bet I could trick that spoiled little Hogwarts teach into marrying me instead."

Hermione offered her most affected pout, a habit she had definitely acquired from the woman across from her. "I don't sleep with married witches, you know. That particular prank would put a few dents in the plans I had in mind for after the wedding."

She reached out and stole the mug of tea from its resting place between Bella's elbows. "Whoever would go sneaking about with me to find the most dangerous, daring places to desecrate after dark?"

"Narcissa, probably."

Hermione choked on Bellatrix's tea. While years of tense cohabitation had tuned their sharp banter to near perfection, Bellatrix still had the occasional ability to utterly silence her younger companion. This time, her spluttering attempt to find a repartee was cut short by the startlingly weighty expression on Bella's face.

"What?" Hermione finally stammered, setting down the cup.

When Bella merely shrugged and couldn't seem to meet her eyes, Hermione drew in a deep breath. "Is that what this is about? I—I mean— neither of us have seen her in years! You're not really thinking— you can't possibly be worried about—"

Bellatrix picked up her wand from the windowsill beside her, dragging the tip across the wood of the table in a nervous gesture Hermione hadn't seen in years, fine scorch-marks trailing in intricate, looping curls over a thousand similar grooves left in her same well-worn corner. "Can't I? You were never supposed to wind up with me, you know."

"What on earth are you talking about?" Hermione spluttered.

"I just—" Bellatrix blew out an errant flame in exasperation. "This is me we're talking about! If not for… timing… your bloody magic… Why me, hmm? You and Cissa were—are—a match made in heaven. Your, your books and your art and your pretty things. Even the other one, engaged or not. Andy would never have… she never hurt you."

"Not like I did. She would have been… safe. The first time I saw her necking with you like she hadn't aged a day since Hogwarts I knew… I knew you could fill the holes in each other's lives." Bella snorted then, a self-depreciating sound that made the hairs on the back of Hermione's neck stand on end. "Somehow though… you're here. With me. It was never supposed to end up like this. You know it. I know it. They know it."

Hermione stared at the figure sitting beside her, dark, wild curls draped over one shoulder and rioting
against the pale dawn gleaming in the window behind her, red lips still slow with sleep and faintly swollen with morning kisses, eyes at half-mast with a strange, fierce insecurity Hermione had never seen before in all their years together. "I think I was always going to end up with you," she whispered.

As though drawn against their will, Bellatrix's eyes rose to meet her own.

"Andy… needed to be needed. She wanted someone who needed her more than I ever would. Narcissa never needed anyone at all." She let her voice fade, unsure how even a Bellatrix this wary and introspective would react to where her thoughts were leading her.

Bella's eyes fluttered closed, as though bracing against the coming words, but before Hermione could find the ones she wanted, a breath of a half-formed thought ghosted from Bellatrix's lips. "I need you."

Hermione was glad Bella's eyes were closed, then, because she would not have appreciated the warm, knowing smile dancing on her lips. Those words filled her up as she drew in a shuddering breath, feeling something bright and shining—warmer than the heat of sex, warmer than the heat of healing, the heat of summer—clawing its way through her chest. "Mmhmm," she whispered.

"I hate it, you know," Bella added, opening her eyes with a hint of her earlier bite. "But it's true. If I have to have a reason to… to care about being free… you're not the worst one I can imagine."

Hermione laughed, finally feeling the conversation had returned to familiar enough waters that she could brave another sip of Bella's long-cold tea. "That's all I'd ever ask for," she said after she swallowed. "See? That's it. That's why I was always going to end up with you. You don't make it easy, but… you make it worthwhile."

"So. Not another professor after all?" Hermione asked, greeting Andromeda by the reception table. It had been a beautiful, intimate service, a touch of white, a splash of color, a small gathering of people, and the incredibly striking woman standing beside the middle Black at the altar. "When I heard you were marrying in the Hogwarts family, I somehow thought it would be an academic."

"Never guessed it would be the Quidditch coach we stole from Durmstrang?" Andy offered with a smile. "I'm so glad to see you, Hermione. I wasn't sure you were going to be here."

Hermione answered with a smile of her own. "I wasn't sure, either. That one—" She jerked her head towards Bellatrix's spot against the wall. "—isn't the easiest to coax anywhere, and you did threaten her with a restraining order when we came for her plants, but here we are."

Andromeda took one glance at Bellatrix, then looked away, shaking her head. "Let me introduce you to Sanna. I think you'll like her."

She placed a hand between Hermione's shoulder blades and ushered her between the tables towards her new wife. Sanna Bolratther-Black was a striking figure: tall, with close-cropped auburn hair and sharp, high cheekbones softened by an abundance of freckles. She wore large, artistically curved glasses that Hermione wasn't sure anyone else could have pulled off, but perched on her narrow nose, they merely leant an air of respectability to her somewhat roguish bearing and the untidy array of hair that peeked over their rims.

The two greeted each other with a quick kiss. "Sanna, I wanted you to meet—"

"Hermione Granger." Andromeda's wife said her name with a smile and a faint Scandinavian accent. "I do still see the posters now and again."
Hermione chuckled nervously. "Every time I think we've pulled the last of them down, I see a new one. Farther down the numbers these days. What is it…? The People's Undesirable Number Three Hundred and Four? Anyway, it's lovely to meet you."

She extended a hand, and Sanna shook it. Her grip was firm, calloused. She opened her mouth, but Andromeda interrupted. "You invited Relyn Colt?"

Both Hermione and Sanna followed the direction of Andromeda's gaze. She had spotted someone across the way, a young woman with long, blond hair and dress robes cut low enough to border on licentious, if not true indecency, chatting with two older wizards Hermione didn't know. One of them handed her a piece of parchment, and she seemed to be signing it.

"Did you even read the guest list, dear?" said Sanna with placating smile.

"She had a crush on you!" Andromeda spluttered. "She's an insufferable flirt, she—"

"—Had a crush on both of us, Professor Black."

Hermione had never seen Andromeda quite so tongue-tied. "She… I…"

"She's not our student anymore, you know."

"Are you trying to talk me into a threesome on our wedding night?"

Hermione's eyes widened, and she choked on the squeak she was doing her best to swallow.

Sanna laughed. "Not at all, dear."

"With the captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team?"

"Ex-captain."

"Who was in Gryffindor?"

"I don't play House favorites."

"Who was our student?"

"Just for one year."

"Two!"

"Oh, one and a half. She left to join the Harpies not long after Ginevra."

"Wedding night," Andromeda repeated.

Sanna sighed. "Some other time, then."

"You're insufferable."

"That's why you're marrying me."

The two exchanged another quick kiss, and Hermione slipped away, unable to stop smiling, even if she was a bit red about the ears, too. She found Bella at the back of the room, blending even more thoroughly into the shadows than she had been before, scowling at the surrounding festivities with great enthusiasm.
"They're perfect for each other, you know." She snagged them each a glass of punch from a passing waiter.

"Yes," Bellatrix snapped. She took a quick sip. "And it's sickening."

Hermione snaked her way under the irritable witch's arm and installed herself firmly by her side. "It's adorable."

"If you wanted adorable, you should have stayed with Andy."

"Not a chance. They're planning a threesome. You know that's not my style."

Bellatrix spewed punch across the nearest two tables. Luckily, both were unoccupied since the dance floor was full. Bella eyed Andromeda and her new wife with an appraising eye. "I didn't think she had it in her."

"With an ex student," Hermione added.

Bellatrix's eyes narrowed further. "She wouldn't."

Hermione shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. Besides—" She stole a quick kiss, taking advantage of her lover's slouch, which put her lips in tip-toe distance despite the heels on Bellatrix's boots. "—you're adorable, too."

Bellatrix growled, but Hermione was already pulling her away from the wall. "Come on. You don't get to hide here all evening. If you say hello to everyone you're related to, then we can go."

"I think I'll just stay in the corner until you pass out if it's all the same."

Hermione pouted, even batting her eyelashes. "Can't have much fun if I'm passed out, can I?"

The threatening, pointed stare she got in return told her just what Bellatrix thought of that excuse, but she didn't fight the tow. Andromeda spotted them halfway around the dance floor. Seeing her stiffen, Hermione almost expected her to flee, but Sanna rested a hand on her forearm, and Andy visibly calmed. It had been a complicated decade, and Hermione never grudged Andromeda's wish to have Bellatrix as far away as possible, but she also knew Andromeda sometimes missed her, at least a little bit. Her Christmas cards always came addressed to both of them, not just Hermione.

With only two sets of tables left between them, Hermione was waylaid by a hand on her elbow.

"Not to bring work into such a festive occasion," McGonagall murmured, low and conspiratorial, "but I just heard there's been movement on representation."

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed, dropping Bellatrix's arm, all designs on family conversations instantly forgotten. "An allocation?" Behind her, she heard the delicate snort of amusement that meant Bellatrix knew she had indeed lost her, for the moment, to work. Out of the corner of her eye, she was pleasantly surprised to see her continue on her way towards Sanna and Andromeda.

McGonagall drew her attention back with a shake of her head. "One seat. Elvish participation in the election only, though." The headmistress appeared regal and relaxed in loose, stately emerald robes, the dark cane in her right hand nearly invisible in the folds of an airy cloak. "They were never going to agree to your quota."

Hermione sighed. "Oh, I could only dream of it, I know. It was a threat more than anything. Still! A seat! That's a start, and it's better than an open election."
She earned a stern glance. "I'd be cautious not to count your hippogriffs before they hatch, Ms. Granger. You know the vote won't come through until tomorrow."

Hermione offered a fierce smile of her own. "I'm counting. This is exactly the opportunity I wanted for Winky."

McGonagall, who also knew the plucky elf, smiled. Hermione had been much surprised when, less than a year into her tenure at the Ministry, an internal memo had arrived bearing the return address of one Harry J. Potter, Auror Division, Level Two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement. In it, she'd found a recommendation for a meeting with a friend of a friend. Part of her had desperately hoped she finally meet the elf she'd been praying for, a revolutionary who truly wanted equality and an end to enslavement at the hands of wizardkind, but what she'd found instead was that the revolutionary had lived, died, and left behind someone else: just that, a friend of a friend. But this was a friend who had been through a long, slow battle with defining her own unwanted freedom, and who felt a debt was owed to the friend she had lost, a friend who had died free.

Winky, Hermione had come to realize, was a far better face for her work than someone like the late and inspirational Dobby might have been. The worst of the wizarding elite could stomach her, deferential and freed against her will from a household of madmen and traitors; other elves understood her, respected her work at Hogwarts, her recovery from post-dismissal depression, her stand in the final battle of the war; and, most importantly of all, she was driven to stand for the value of elvish lives because she had lost one whose life had meant something to her, and whose freedom had meant something to him.

Hermione had spent the past two years trying to get her into the Wizengamot.

"Don't worry," she added. "I won't start helping her draft an announcement speech, but I'm thrilled. Thank you for the heads up."

"Of course." McGonagall returned her hand to Hermione's arm and cast a less-than-subtle glance to her left. "She's not still trying to help, is she?"

Hermione laughed, loud and full, drawing a few stares. "Of course she is!" Bellatrix never stopped trying to insinuate herself in Hermione's projects, no matter how many times she'd been told by Hermione, by McGonagall, even by Modesty, that she wasn't doing them any favors throwing her weight around the small, delicate balance they were working to achieve for elvish justice.

"Do I need to have another word with her?"

Hermione offered a softer chuckle, patting McGonagall's hand. "Probably. No, no, I'll handle it. She's kept out of the debate around representation this far, likely because of the reparations fiasco. I think she has bigger things on her mind. She'll keep offering to make a seat open up, and I'll just keep declining her... kind offer."

McGonagall let out a breath that was part laugh, part long-suffering sigh, and Hermione caught Bellatrix's eye. Her conversation with Andromeda must have been brief, if it had happened at all, as she'd already found herself another nook of shadow to cranny herself into. This time, she was half Bellatrix, half potted plant, leaning against the wall behind a curtain of green leaves. She speared Hermione with a sudden, deadly grin, white teeth sparking in the glow from the fairy lights dangling in an arc above her head.

Hermione recognized impatience in Bellatrix's smile. She stiffened, bracing herself, and turned to give a hasty end to her current conversation. "Speaking of, I seem to have misplaced her. Do you mind if I—"
With a shake of her head and an amused smile, McGonagall waved her away. "Please, go. I'll come by your office Monday to celebrate."

Hermione turned away just in time. She watched Bellatrix's hand curl around her wand, watched her eyes film gold, and became suddenly breathless, trapped in a vortex of incredible power that caressed the very center of her being. Dark eyes probed her mind and laid claim to her limbs. Heat flooded her senses and she ached for long, warm fingers on her skin, hungered for a touch, eager to be devoured. She saw Bella's parted lips flush crimson, the tip of her tongue a just-visible glint between blindingly white teeth. Deaf to the world, she wanted that mouth, wanted it on hers, on her— Gravity became her instinct, pulled her forward, urged her to sink into the shadows, the waiting pleasure.

Knowing the game, Hermione struggled to walk towards her slowly, knowing the compulsion couldn't be fought, knowing she would lose if she tried, but knowing she could go one foot in front of the other, a steady stride, without drawing attention to the flush on her cheeks, the goosebumps all over her skin.

"You called?" she breathed when there was only the plant between them.

Bellatrix laughed. The sound rained across her skin like sunlight, drawing a shiver from the tips of her fingers to the curl of her toes. "Really, pet," she murmured, sliding back into the open, knowing exactly how much harder it would be for Hermione to maintain her reticence without branches in the way.

And just how much harder Hermione would try, now that they would both be in full light.

She ran her fingers over Hermione's arm, grazing them pointedly over the crook of her elbow. "I know you find something compelling about older women," she teased. "But there's older…" She tucked her wand behind her ear, curls pushed back, but her concentration on the spell never broke, and Hermione could feel her presence through her, yearned to be closer. "...and then there's old—"

Hermione glanced left, glanced right, then yanked her into a kiss. Her lips broke the compulsion, sent it scattering through them, showering her in fragmented glimpses of fields, a phantom caress over the surface of her mind, the scent of juniper whirling through her magic. She rested her forehead against Bellatrix's when she needed to breathe, wishing she had her alone. Instead, she struggled to compose a glare. "I don't have a thing."

A snort over Bellatrix's shoulder made her head snap to attention. There, she found Andromeda, hidden in the perfect blind spot behind Bellatrix's head, the hand over her mouth doing very little to hide the chuckle shaking her shoulders. Sanna stood beside her, holding her other hand. She stared at Hermione and Bellatrix with an amused, appraising eye.

Hermione turned ten shades of crimson. "I don't," she muttered, starting to pull away.

Andromeda shrugged as though to say If you say so in the least convinced way possible.

Bellatrix leaned in, whispering in her ear, "I only have seven more years to make you Minister, remember?" She tugged the lobe between her teeth. "You really must be more decorous in public. No flirting with anyone who isn't me, especially the esteemed headmistress of Hogwarts."

Hermione slapped her arm, laughing. "Stop it." She'd forgotten all about her silly demand, thrown away to save face after she'd given in too easily to having her back, given in without extracting a real promise that she wouldn't have to see death at her hands ever again.

Bellatrix's fingers closed over hers, tugged her back into the circle of her arms. "What? Did you think
I'd forgotten?"

Hermione tried to laugh again, but it came out a little strained. "I'd forgotten, myself."

"It's rude to whisper, you know," said Andromeda.

Hermione had almost managed to forget they had an audience. She felt the flush return.

Bellatrix waved a hand, the other still wrapped around Hermione's waist. "Politics."

Andromeda grinned. "Ooh, do tell."

To Hermione's surprise, she could feel Bellatrix's body relaxed against her own, seemingly at ease despite being in sudden conversation with the woman she'd done her best to avoid all night. "This one seems to be under the impression I won't keep my word about a little bargain we made."

"Politics? Hermione?" Andromeda laughed.

It was a kind laugh, but Hermione was indignant despite herself. She straightened. "I'm very politically engaged, I'll have you know. I founded the Institute for Elvish Welfare after less than a year at the Ministry, and we've been listed as one of the most successful mergers of research and charity work in all of Wizarding Britain. I've secured over three billion Galleons in reparations, rewritten the laws which rewarded coercive illiteracy among household elves and replaced them with fully-funded Elvish education, set up a fund for future generations of free—"

"See?" Bellatrix cut in. "You'll donate, yes?"

Andromeda's laugh had turned into a gentle, surprised smile. "Oh, absolutely. Won't we, darling?"

Sanna offered an indulgent smile of her own, kissing Andromeda on the cheek. "Of course. I'll even be able to vote for her, after today."

Andromeda's smile sharpened. "I admit, I lost track of Hermione's career once she stopped show up in the tabloids every week. Will she be starting with an elected undersecretary position or going straight for the Wizengamot?"

"Excuse me?" Hermione spluttered. "I'm right here!"

Rising on tip-toe to rest her chin on Hermione's head, Bellatrix chuckled. "Wizengamot. She's almost ready."

"I'll happily give my endorsement." Hermione turned, stunned, as McGonagall entered their little circle. She smiled kindly. "It would be wonderful to have a few more witches with brains in that chamber."

"Bellatrix hasn't been enough?" Andromeda teased.

McGonagall laughed. "Ms. Black hasn't so much joined the governing of our society as she has yanked it up by the roots." She turned a stern eye on Bellatrix, who seemed thoroughly un-chagrined. More seriously, she continued. "No, the Wizengamot hasn't been the same since poor Amelia passed, bless her. And if it's the stepping-stone I imagine it must be for a witch of Ms. Granger's caliber, well… My endorsement won't expire before Doldrun's turn as Minister does."

Hermione felt rather like she'd become the subject of some large, conspiratorial joke. "I—I'm not—"

"Did you think I wouldn't do it?" Bellatrix said.
"No!" Hermione spluttered. "I didn't! I don't, I—I never actually wanted to—"

McGonagall reached out and patted her arm reassuringly. "And that, my dear, is exactly why you should."

All at once, Hermione had the strangest sensation, as though her life had suddenly caught up to her, and she had only just now started living it.

"They're right, you know."

This time, all heads turned, as did Bellatrix's body, allowing Hermione the full about-face needed to watch the end of Narcissa's slow, measured approach. Until now, Hermione had only seen her from afar, a few passing glimpses of white-blond elegance in a distant seat in the intimate crowd. She shimmered in silver, dark enough to the edge of gray she wouldn't outshine Andromeda's white, but even so, it was a close thing. Her hair had gotten longer, so long it passed her breasts even in a single long, loose plait that curled over her bare left shoulder. Her gown had only one sleeve. Modern and sophisticated; debonair and dangerous.

When she stopped beside Bellatrix, it seemed the gathering was freed from a spell. Collective exhalations pooled in the air. Tonight, Narcissa was radiant in a way that defied speech, drifting as though her feet tread a higher plane. She smiled, and Bellatrix's arms tightened around Hermione's waist.

Shaking her head, smiling her own easy welcome, Hermione slid her hand beneath Bellatrix's, twining their fingers. "Not you, too," she said. Her voice was steady.

Narcissa laughed. "The day you came into my office campaigning on behalf of the ancestors of my last two house-elves, I knew you'd end up in a mess like this." Her voice was soft, whimsical. There had been letters; many, over the years—good times, bad times, setbacks and misunderstandings penned in the wake of one of Bellatrix's less comprehensible rages, old secrets and new truths and unintended enlightenments… Narcissa had shared news with all of them, and with Hermione, had even shared poems: Hermione's silly and sappy and poor or quoted just for the occasion; Narcissa's like the unveiled art of the muses themselves, eerily beautiful French translations her latest work—but this was the first time in eight years that Hermione had heard her voice.

It sounded like the voice of an old, dear friend.

This close, Hermione could see the delighted liaison she'd had with age; she was now four years older than Bellatrix had been at their first meeting, and she'd gained the delicate wisdom of laugh lines beside her eyes, the faintest whisper of bygone smiles beside her lips. Hermione felt her own smile driving a fierce sort of pride into her gaze. She was so, so glad, that Narcissa had been marked by eight years of happiness.

She was so busy basking in the simple sunlight of Narcissa's joy, she forgot to voice another protest. Narcissa matched her smile. "I would offer my support, but I somehow doubt you'll need it."

"She won't," Bellatrix said, voice jarringly sharp.

Hermione frowned, turning towards her, but a shake of Narcissa's head made her pause. "Bella, please." She reached out and took Bellatrix's hand, pulling it gently away from Hermione's stomach. "We're too old to go at each other like children."

Just like that, Hermione felt all the fight go out of the figure at her back, tension she hadn't felt building gone in a blink.
Andromeda's breathy, human laugh fractured what remained. "I'll drink to that," she said, and commandeered a passing tray of champagne. "Anyone else?"

Hermione took two, handing one over her shoulder to Bellatrix without prompting. With a chorus of assents, the tray emptied, and their circle slowly clustered itself into smaller, lighter conversations. McGonagall was offering her own congratulations to the new couple. Bellatrix was whispering her seven-year plan in Hermione's ear like dirty-talk, and really, Hermione had no new designs on the Minister's seat, but she did have a new trail of worry that she might very well end up there, anyway. For now, that was alright. Yes, she'd accomplished everything she'd ever set out to on her own, thank you very much, but did she really want to be limited to fighting for only one set of rights forever? When there were other old laws she'd wanted to unravel for years... when disgusting handfasting ceremonies were still being performed with Dementor witnesses in place of nights like this, full of love and light and mutual consent... Perhaps there was something to be said for governing, after all. She and Bellatrix could have a real conversation later, alone.

*Where you'll end up naked and agreeing to anything.*

Bellatrix gave her a little smile, as though she'd heard the thought. It was entirely possible that she had.

Narcissa drifted half a step beyond them, her back to the circle she'd barely joined. She held her untouched champagne in one hand at shoulder-height, elbow braced on her other wrist which draped across her waist. Her silver-gray gown reflected splashes of light and color from the handful of witches and wizards dancing in the middle of the patio, prancing and spinning upside-down through the liquid in her glass. In one quick, fluid motion, she upended the flute, swallowing back gold and bubbles like a shot of firewhiskey. Banished, the stemware disappeared as she turned, locking eyes with Bellatrix and extending a hand. "Dance with me?" Narcissa asked.

And Hermione watched in stunned surprise as Bellatrix laughed, grinned, and took it.

"Yes. Lets."

They made their way easily to the periphery of the barely-crowded dance floor. The music had strings and high, whistling woodwinds, but it wasn't slow. Bellatrix set a hand on Narcissa's waist, Narcissa's draped over her shoulder, their others clasped together, and they set about in the easy steps and whirls of a cotillion dance, two witches who had learned both to lead and to follow in the cloistered halls where young women were taught everything they could not be and learned exactly how to be all of that and more.

Watching, smiling, Hermione drifted closer. They laughed together, girlish and carefree, taking turns to be the bracing hand, the twirling flourish. Andromeda came up beside her, grinning to herself. "At it again," she murmured, and Hermione imagined this scene fifty years ago, in the midst of a Black family ball, a stolen moment away from endless courtship and the looming threat of the bargaining chips they knew they were destined to become, a moment no one could grudge them in its innocent joy. Hermione felt her smile turning bittersweet. She'd have fallen for her even then, she realized. If her first glimpse was endless waves of midnight curls, stardust skin, airy smile, and dark, secret-keeping eyes... She'd have wanted to tell her all of them, to hide under the covers and whisper late into the night, to fill her with quiet mysteries and never let her walk back out into the keeping of the wolves that waited.

She glanced up at Andromeda, thinking about that temptation, the temptation to stop people from becoming what they needed to be to survive a hostile world.

"Thank you," she said unexpectedly, surprising the both of them.
Andromeda turned towards her, question in her eyes.

Hermione shook her head. "For bringing us all together again," she said.

*For setting me free.*

"Thank you," Andromeda echoed, reaching out to squeeze her hand.

Narcissa's eyes met hers across the stretch of movement and light.

*You're welcome.*

And she knew all had heard what needed to be said.

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